Eighteen months later: female undergraduates' reflections on education since the 2021 regime change in Afghanistan

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About the Jigsaw Learning Brief Series
The Jigsaw Learning Brief Series provides an open-access contribution to building evidence for education. Each brief focuses on a different issue in education and research in low- and middle-income countries, sharing insight and thought leadership to help shape the sector.

Key messages

- This multiple-case study of three female undergraduates' experiences since the August 2021 Afghanistan regime change highlights the way in which, in settings of conflict and displacement, education can be both a channel for persecution and a powerful determinant of hope and opportunity.
- While these young Afghan women have not lost their desire to complete a university education, the regime change has had a severe impact on their mental health, due to the emotional toll of restrictions to women's rights and of continued insecurity.
- Educational institutions, both in neighbouring countries and globally, should mobilise to provide access and pathways to higher education opportunities for young Afghan women in response to the regime change and its consequences for Afghan women's education.

Introduction

In the last 18 months, the education landscape for women and girls in Afghanistan has changed dramatically. A series of education policies, brought in since the regime change of August 2021, first restricted girls' experience of, then entire access to, post-primary education. Furthermore, the December 2022 ban on women working for local and international NGOs promises to severely hinder access to female populations that male Afghans cannot reach. For the last four years, the Jigsaw team (which includes two female Afghan researchers with lived experience of forced migration, who have co-authored this brief) have been studying the positive impact of post-primary education for Afghan refugees (see the Voices of Refugee Youth website). The recent policies preventing Afghan women and girls from progressing in their education will derail this progress and have a catastrophic impact for Afghan women, and the wider Afghan community, both in Afghanistan and in Afghan refugee host-countries.

One of the core aims of Jigsaw's Learning Brief Series is to prioritise the amplification of under-represented voices and the sharing of rapid, real time learning and insights on time-critical emerging issues. We want to ensure that, while conducting large-scale research may be challenging in certain contexts, there is still an opportunity for the voices of experts by experience to be heard. Amid the scale of the ban on girls' post-primary education and the speed at which the international community has had to respond to the Taliban's successive retracted promises, it can be easy to lose sight of the impact of these changes on individual lives. This brief provides a multiple-case study of young Afghan women—in Afghanistan and in neighbouring Pakistan—whose lives and futures have been affected by the Taliban's new policies. It begins with an overview of the state of girls' education in Afghanistan over the last three decades, tracking the policy changes which have been implemented. The brief then centres on three narratives of young Afghan women: one who was pursuing a degree in medicine in Afghanistan during the regime change; one who fled Afghanistan after August 2021 and was therefore unable to continue her degree in law; and one who has lived as a refugee in Pakistan for many years, now pursuing a degree in psychology at a Pakistani university. The brief then concludes by reflecting on these narratives, highlighting the central themes across all three womens' experiences and considering the way that education research can continue to amplify the needs and priorities of young women in contexts like Afghanistan.

Context overview: girls' education in Afghanistan, 1990s–Present

Across the last three decades, sustained conflict has continued to impede and impair Afghanistan's education system. Girls and young women have disproportionately borne the impact. Following the regime change of August 2021, female learners have again been denied their right to access post-primary education by the Taliban leadership, as happened over 25 years ago. However,

the educational landscape of Afghanistan has significantly changed since the 1990s. The following section outlines the policy changes which have taken place during this period, particularly with respect to the impact on girls' education.

1990s–2001

When the Taliban came to power in 1996, there was no well-established education system in Afghanistan. In his analysis of the development of modern education in Afghanistan in the twentieth century, Samady (2001) outlines the way in which ongoing conflict led to a lack of any national policy or unified curriculum in the 1990s, as well as widespread damage to school infrastructure and limited facilities, including teachers and textbooks.

The Taliban's core objective when they took power in the 1990s was to restore Islamic 'purity' and values, and education was viewed as a means by which to achieve this reform. While the Taliban government did attempt to devise a strategy for education in the provisional constitution, there was little capacity to run the education sector (Amiri & Jackson, 2021). Girls were almost completely excluded from education, with the gross enrollment rate at 0% for girls in primary school by the end of the Taliban's rule in 2001 (World Bank, 2021, cited in Albrecht, Rude & Stitteneder, 2022). The Taliban insists that there was never a ban on girls' education, with the draft constitution stating that the "education of women is regulated within the limits of the Islamic sharia by a special law" (quoted in Strick van Linschoten and Kuehn, 2018, cited in Amiri & Jackson, 2021). However, the vast majority of girls' schools were closed during this period, and many restrictions on womens' participation in public life, including teaching, were imposed (Amiri & Jackson, 2021).

2001–2021

Following the attacks of 11th September 2001 and the Taliban's refusal to hand over al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden, the United States and its close allies instigated an invasion of Afghanistan. The Taliban government was subsequently overthrown in December 2001, and Hamid Karzai appointed first as leader of the Afghan Interim Administration, then as President of the Afghan Transitional Administration in July 2002, and subsequently as the first democratically-elected leader of Afghanistan in 2004.

The two decades from 2001 to 2021 saw the integration of humanitarian aid and development work within military strategy in Afghanistan, building on assumptions that investment in development is essential to the promotion of stability in conflict-affected settings (Royall, 2013). The Ministry of Education received significant investment, both from the national government and international community. In part, this had a positive impact on educational attainment. A 2021 UNESCO report highlighted an increase from around one million to 10 million enrolled learners from 2001 to 2018, and a 58% increase in the number of teachers. Girls' right to education was enshrined in the 2004 Constitution—"education is the right of all citizens of Afghanistan" (Article 43, 2004, cited by UN Women)—and progress was made: the female literacy rate rose from 17% to 30%, the number of girls in primary school increased from almost zero to 2.5 million, and the number

of young women in higher education increased from around 5,000 to 90,000 between 2001 and 2018 (UNESCO, 2021).

The national and international investment in Afghanistan's education system, however, did not eradicate inequalities in education. For instance, in 2021, 5% of women were attending a tertiary education institution compared to 15% of men (World Bank, 2021, cited in Albrecht, Rude & Stitteneder, 2022). A 2017 Human Rights Watch report also highlighted that insecurity and the increased disengagement of international donors had stalled progress in girls' education access, and the system still discriminated against young women by providing them with fewer accessible schools than their male counterparts. A 2019 perception poll of 17,812 Afghans (The Asia Foundation, 2019) suggested that attitudes towards girls' education continued to climb from four years previously: 87% strongly or somewhat agreed that women should have the same opportunities as men in education in 2019, compared to 78% in 2015, although attitudes were still below a high of 91% recorded in 2006.

The close relationship between aid and security in Afghanistan has also been criticised for the way in which the counterinsurgency's political and military goals were enacted through education strategy. Royall (2013) argues that the securitisation of education in Afghanistan placed schools on the frontline of the conflict, making them politically contentious sites which exacerbated existing conflict. Furthermore, Lutz & Desai (2014) argue that US spending in Afghanistan was focused on furthering the United States' security interests and that it set the foundation for continued violence and poverty. Focusing specifically on the US investment in Afghanistan's education system, they conclude that: "aid funds in this area might have had much stronger impact were the focus placed on education itself rather than on the counterinsurgency strategy and the need to spend large amounts of money and show concrete results."

An assessment of the Taliban's stance towards education during this period highlights the way in which schools were made a site of contestation and conflict. A series of rules in the Layha—a code of conduct for the Taliban—between 2006 and 2011 highlight the evolution and formalisation of the Taliban's attitudes. Amiri & Jackson (2021) suggest that the Taliban's initial post-2001 stance on education was that schools were "a symbol of foreign occupation". This is apparent in the 2006 Layha, which decrees that "it is forbidden to work as a teacher under the current state[...] because this strengthens the system of the infidels", and that any teacher "who refuses to give up his job" after a warning, "must be beaten", and "if teacher or mullah [who] continues to instruct contrary to the principles of Islam, the district commander or group leader must kill him" (Article 24 and 25 of the 2006 Taliban Layha, trans. Clark, 2011). However, Amiri & Jackson (2021) detail that, over time, the Taliban's attitude to government schools shifted. First, the 2009 and 2010 Layha gave less clear rules about adhering to the Islamic Emirates' education policies, and did not condone attacks on teachers. Instead, the Taliban began to "co-opt" government schools as it gained territory, seeking to correct perceived state failures by ensuring that only Islamic curriculums

were taught and Taliban rules were observed. This strategy, Amiri & Jackson (2021) suggest, was a means "to demonstrate that [the Taliban] can govern better than it did in the 1990s and do a far better job than the current government".

Amiri & Jackson (2021) also provide an overview of the Taliban's overarching education policy (obtained by the authors in 2019) which further highlights the evolution of the Taliban's vision for education since the 1996–2001 government. The policy emphasises two core objectives: "a pressing need to educate the holy teachings of Islam and modern knowledge" (Chapter 1, cited in Amiri & Jackson, 2021). The policy, however, provided little clarity on the Taliban's stance on girls' education: one of the policy's articles stated that prepubescent girls should be taught in a madrasa, school or community-based home school; the other suggested that the development of education of women (presumably post-puberty) will take place "when the ground is prepared" and "in line with Islamic principles".

2021–Present

As the US-led coalition of foreign troops left Afghanistan in August 2021, the Taliban advanced on Kabul and forced the collapse of the democratically-elected government of Ashraf Ghani. The Taliban initially suggested that women would be able to access education, albeit under changed circumstances. Spokesperson Zabihullah Mujahid gave a press conference on 17th August 2021, where he stated "We are going to allow women to work and study. We have got frameworks, of course. Women are going to be very active in the society but within the framework of Islam" (Aljazeera, 2021). Higher Education Minister Abdul Baqi Haqqani also indicated in September 2021 that women would be allowed to study at university, but would be segregated by gender and instructed to observe a new dress code. He insisted that this would not exclude women: "It all depends on the university's capacity"—ie. the number of female teachers available to teach single-sex—but "we can also use male teachers to teach from behind a curtain, or use technology" (BBC, 2021).

The following 18 months, however, saw a reversal of these statements. While primary schools continue to operate for girls and boys, a series of official notices banned girls first from secondary school, then from university. Firstly, in September 2021, the Taliban ordered that, for grades 7–12 at secondary school, "all male teachers and students should attend their educational institutions" (Guardian, 2021). This enabled boys to return to secondary school after a one-month closure, while girls were effectively banned. At that time, the Taliban's Deputy Minister of Information and Culture, Zabihullah Mujahid, stated that a "procedure" to allow girls to return to secondary school was being developed. However, in March 2022—one week after announcing schools would open for all students, including girls—the education ministry released a notice which stated: "We inform all girls' high schools and those schools that [have] female students above class six that they are off until the next order" (BBC, 2022). The notice added that the reopening would depend on a decision regarding school uniforms. External relations and donor representative, Waheedullah Hashmi, confirmed that "the leadership hasn't decided when or how they will

allow girls to return to school" (Guardian, 2022). To date, no decision has been announced, effectively banning girls from middle and high school.

Further declarations limited women's rights in the country. On 7th May 2022, the Taliban's supreme leader Hibatullah Akhunzada ordered women to wear a chadori (head-to-toe burqa), covering their faces in public (Aljazeera, 2022); then on 10th November 2022, women were banned from parks, gyms and other recreational facilities, with the justification that the hijab was not observed (Aljazeera, 2022). In a major reversal on previous statement, the Taliban then announced an indefinite ban on university education for women on 20th December 2022, with a letter signed by the minister for higher education, Neda Mohammad Nadeem: "You all are informed to implement the mentioned order of suspending education of females until further notice" (Guardian, 2022). Analysts suggested that the issue of a more tolerant stance towards university education for women had been a factional divide for the Taliban all year, but the announcement represented the views of the hardline inner leadership, superseding those of more moderate officials (BBC, 2022). Thus, since the end of 2022, all girls and young women aged 13 and above have been and remain unable to access formal education in Afghanistan.

Decades of insecurity and political turmoil have also led to a high level of internal displacement and refugees leaving Afghanistan. In 2021, internal displacement increased for the 15th consecutive year, with 777,400 Afghans forcibly displaced, 80% of whom were women and children (USA for UNHCR, 2023). Afghans also represent the third-largest refugee population worldwide (USA for UNHCR, 2022), with Pakistan hosting the largest proportion: as of January 2022, there were an estimated 1.8 million Afghan refugees in Pakistan (UNHCR, 2022), while estimates also suggest the country hosts a further 775,000 undocumented Afghans (UNHCR, 2022). This too has implications for girls' education. A 2019 Global Education Monitoring Report collated data from the last 13 years of refugee education in Pakistan, showing inequalities in enrollment and learning outcomes. In 2011, the primary net enrolment rate of refugee girls in Pakistan was half that of refugee boys (17% vs 39%); while in 2016, female refugees were found to have a literacy rate of 8%, well below the 33% rate of Afghan refugees overall. This highlights the way in which girls who have fled Afghanistan are disproportionately disadvantaged in their education. The impact of conflict and the denial of educational rights in Afghanistan has implications beyond its borders.

Education during the regime change: three narratives from female Afghan undergraduates

The following three narratives offer in-depth insight into the experiences of three young Afghan women, each of whom was enrolled on a university degree programme at the time of the August 2021 Afghanistan regime change. The case study methodology which underpins this brief draws on the understanding that

case studies allow research "to focus in-depth on a "case" and to retain a holistic and real-world perspective" (Yin, 2018). Each narrative therefore provides a chronological overview of a female Afghan undergraduate's experiences during the regime change, as well as her reflections of its impact on her past, present and future.

In recognition of the diverse experiences of Afghan girls during this period, this multiple-case study purposively selected three participants: one female undergraduate who has lived in Afghanistan throughout 2021–2022 and remains their to date; one female undergraduate who was enrolled in an Afghan university before the regime change but sought refuge in Pakistan after August 2021; and one female undergraduate who is a long-term Afghan refugee in Pakistan and enrolled in a Pakistani university before August 2021. The final participants were identified via the personal contacts of two co-authors of this brief, both of whom are Afghan refugees in Pakistan.

Initial interviews took place with each participant in November 2022 (two remotely via phone call and one in-person), while a second round of shorter interviews took place in January 2023, following the Taliban's ban on university education for women (all conducted remotely). A narrative research approach informed the structure of the interviews: participants were first encouraged to tell the story of their university experiences before, during and after the regime change; the second half of the interview then facilitated the participant's interpretation of their own story. This research approach is grounded in the understanding that narratives are a way through which people understand, communicate and give meaning to their lives (Ntinda, 2018). The narratives below, constructed out of the participants' own storytelling and personal interpretation during the interviews, therefore offer a detailed insight into the experiences, beliefs and reflections of three young Afghan women—each of whom lived the last three years in a different context, but all of whom have been affected by the regime change in their home country. All three interviewees have been given pseudonyms, to protect their identity.

Shehzadi's story: attending university in Kabul during Afghanistan's regime change

Shehzadi lives in Kabul, Afghanistan, with her parents, siblings and wider family. Her brothers are also university graduates, but her sister had to drop out of her Bachelor's degree due to family financial issues. She recognises that, even before the regime change, life in Afghanistan was uncertain at times, with the ongoing threat of violence. However, she felt overall that her life was good, with few restrictions over girls and their education.

Shehzadi began a higher education degree in the field of medicine at a university in Kabul in 2020. It had always been her aspiration to get to university and become a doctor. While she belongs to a family who adopt many Afghan cultural norms regarding women's roles, her father was nonetheless a big supporter of her education. She passed her first semester

with excellent grades and was in her second semester, in August 2021, when there were rumours around the country that the Taliban were taking over the country. This began a very chaotic period, during which she and those around her were confused about what their personal and national future would be.

Initially, following the Taliban's takeover of the country, Shehzadi's university closed for almost a month, along with all other educational institutions. When the university re-opened, it was under the rules of the Taliban, including a ban on co-education. This meant that students attended the university on alternate days due to a lack of building space, and the usual five month semester stretched to eight months. Even when the university reallocated classroom space so that all students could attend everyday, the lack of labs in a second building meant that students had to alternate practical and theoretical classes.

Shehzadi feels that one of the biggest impacts of these changes was on the quality of teaching and learning. Teachers were only allowed to teach students of their gender, with only a few older teachers allowed to teach all students. The teaching staff also almost halved in number due to many leaving the country in response to the regime change, and their replacements were not equally qualified. This meant that both male and female students were prevented from benefiting from the specialist expertise of female or male teachers.

Shehzadi also experienced the impact of curriculum changes on her and her coursemates' learning. Before the regime change, more credit hours were given to core medical subjects such as surgery, physiology, anatomy and general physician training. However, the Taliban reduced the hours for core subjects and increased them instead for Islamic Shariyah and culture-related subjects in every degree programme. Shehzadi found that this was preventing students from being able to complete their course content each semester.

During this period, from around October 2021 to November 2022, Shehzadi believed that the Taliban were trying to introduce restrictions over girls' education to the effect that girls themselves would end up dropping out of education. Some of her coursemates left Afghanistan altogether, and she heard stories of girls being specifically denied access by Taliban members, including a girl at university in Kabul who was prevented from sitting her exams for wearing a dark maroon headscarf, rather than a black one. Even so, there was a greater number of new female admissions to her university in 2022 compared to male admissions. Shehzadi herself did not want to give up on her education, but felt her hope for the future decrease. She was considering changing her career goals from surgery to gynaecology—something she expected to be more possible for women—even though she doesn't like this field of work. All of this had a negative impact on her mental wellbeing:

> **"You can't imagine how hard it is until you have experienced it yourself. And when you have to deal with these [changes] on a daily basis then ultimately it affects you mentally."**

Then, on the final day of Shehzadi's exams, she saw on social media that the

Taliban were closing universities and telling female students not to attend classes. Shehzadi was in shock, confused and unable to concentrate on her revision. She decided to go to university but, on arrival, found some Taliban members standing in front of the building and denying female students entrance. After waiting there with other students for several hours, she was sent back home.

Later in the day, Shehzadi received a call informing her that she could come and sit her final exam. She learnt that, since her university had complied with all of the Taliban's previous rules, they had granted a one day extension so that students could complete their exams. It also seemed that the university had been aware of rumours that the Taliban would ban university education for women, and had therefore condensed the one-month exam schedule into two weeks. As a result of this, and the Taliban's grant of one extra day, Shehzadi finished her final exam. Female students at many other universities were only halfway through their exams and were unable to return to complete them.

Shehzadi now feels stuck as to what she should do and where she should go. She has questioned whether she should completely give up on her education, or try to move to another country to complete her degree, but she knows that the latter option is not easy. She says that she would willingly follow the Taliban's rules, if only they would re-open universities. Her goals are still the same: she still wants to complete her education and become a surgeon. However, she feels like time has passed in vain and the uncertainty of her current situation has left her with no clear options.

"I would like to say that if anyone can hear our voices through this or any other means, I would like to request that they should try to do something for people of Afghanistan especially for girls and their education."

Meena's story: fleeing Afghanistan and unable to continue at university

Meena has lived in both Mazār-i-Sharīf and Kabul in Afghanistan. Before the regime change, Meena was studying law at a single-sex university in Afghanistan, with the aspiration to become the first lawyer in her family. She had experienced many disruptions before this point, particularly during Covid-19, when teachers did not have access to or familiarity with the technology required for remote teaching during university closures. When campuses were open, Meena's father would accompany her to university due to the level of harassment experienced by girls in the streets. Nonetheless, she describes the period during which she was studying at university, making new friends and having the space to learn new life lessons, as the best months of her life so far.

As the regime change began in August 2021, the first media coverage of a possible Taliban takeover suggested to Meena that the Taliban would allow girls to continue in education and employment. Furthermore, she found that one of the first things the Taliban did was to stop the harassment of girls and women in the streets. However, Meena's university was

closed, along with all other education institutions, and many people were remaining at home for days at a time. Meena began to feel scared for her and her family's safety. Despite wearing a headscarf, a Taliban member approached her in the street and told her to hide her face, or they would put her brother and father in jail. The combination of the lack of education and threat to safety was extremely stressful for Meena, and made her feel depressed.

Afraid for their lives and worrying about Meena's studies and future career, her family decided to leave Afghanistan in September 2021, a month into the regime change. Her older brother, who was living overseas, advised them to move to Tajikistan as soon as possible. Finding this option difficult, they instead left for Peshawar, Pakistan. Meena felt that there was no option left to them other than the unappealing but necessary decision to leave:

"No one likes leaving everything they have behind and going to another country."

Now in Pakistan, Meena has found no way to continue her university education. Not only is the education system different, but she would have to undertake different entrance tests and apply for an international student university place, which is very expensive. She also does not have the required documents. Some family friends who had sought refuge already in Pakistan told her about skills development training courses for refugees, so she has joined a course in beauty therapy. However, she does not consider it to be an equivalent to her previous education.

She and her family are also financially dependent on her siblings who live overseas, as she has found that refugees struggle to find work or are paid far less than Pakistani nationals.

Meena heard about the December 2022 ban on university education for women from her father, who was watching the news. It made her feel sad and hopeless, as her friends and cousins are still in Kabul. She expressed that she would now not be surprised if the Taliban were also to ban primary education for girls, as they have closed every other kind of education centre for women. As a result, she feels that her only option in the future is settling in another country where she has the opportunity to study and work. Her aim for the future is to secure a visa and restart her university in the US, having attained Band 7 in her IELTS test. The prospect of this move helps her feel hopeful for her future: although she has fled her home and dropped out of university, her goals for the future have not changed. However, she knows that she will have to start over from the beginning, rebuilding her education elsewhere. Yet the experience of the last year has shown her that hope and fear can be felt simultaneously.

Meena believes that education improves society and can provide a pathway to a better future, but its absence can lead to poverty. She thinks that the Taliban disregard girls' education because they do not see women as equal, but as illogical, emotional beings, and that the leadership want to portray education as less important to encourage women to focus exclusively on raising children. Meena believes that this attitude, and the rules the Taliban are imposing, are not

consistent with Islam nor the culture of the Afghan people. She emphasises that this can lead to hopelessness and trauma for women:

"When there are no women's rights and no access to education it can have an impact on mental health, on physical health and it makes women feel they are less than their male counterparts."

Sahar's story: pursuing a university degree as an Afghan refugee in Pakistan

Sahar was born in Peshawar, Pakistan, and although her family returned briefly to Kabul when she was very young, they decided that it was too insecure and she has therefore lived as a refugee in Pakistan since she was around four years old. She lives with her mother, and some of her siblings. As well as the barriers to education imposed by her refugee status, multiple events in Afghanistan have affected Sahar's journey to university and wellbeing.

Neither of Sahar's parents gained a university degree, yet were very supportive of their children receiving a full education, despite living in a society in which girls' education is often considered taboo. Sahar believes her father was smart to educate and empower his daughters.

Sahar studied at an Afghan school in Peshawar. She hoped to follow her older sisters in going to university, and in 2015 decided to return to Kabul to attend a university there. However, around this time, she heard the tragic news of a bomb attack in Kabul, which took the lives of several of her family members. Fearing that a return to Kabul would put her life at risk, she and her parents decided that she should not pursue university in Afghanistan. However, in Pakistan Sahar found it difficult to get admission to university. The process is lengthy, especially for students who have graduated from an Afghan school. During this period, Sahar's family was facing increased financial insecurity, so she had to find work and contribute to her family's income.

After three years of working, Sahar decided to return to Kabul to pursue an alternative pathway to university: applying for the Allama Muhammad Iqbal Scholarship, a scheme offered by the Pakistani government for Afghan students, and for which she needed to return to Afghanistan to be eligible. The Kabul she returned to was different than before: she observed that women were working, able to study and contribute to society in the way that they chose. She felt that Kabul looked alive.

Having received the scholarship, she returned to Pakistan to begin her Bachelor's degree in psychology. She loved learning, despite not being at a well-known university as she had hoped. However, a series of other big life changes affected her experience and wellbeing while studying. Firstly, her father was diagnosed with a serious medical condition, leading to severe financial challenges as their entire savings were spent on his treatment. Her father eventually passed away, and she, her mother, her widowed sister and her younger brother—still at school—were left shattered and alone, with no relatives and

few friends. Sahar found that grieving her father's loss and facing financial challenges harmed her mental health, but she did not want to give up and continued to study.

The regime change in Afghanistan also had a negative impact on her wellbeing at university. At the time that the Taliban were taking over the country in August 2021, Sahar's second year of studies, it seemed to her that everyone—including her teachers, students and other staff—were talking about the fall of Kabul. She found that some Pakistani nationals were bullying Afghan refugees in response to the news, while others, including teachers and those across her social media feeds, were celebrating the new Islamic government. Although the hostility reduced over time, with teachers becoming supportive of refugee students, hearing of the events in Afghanistan further harmed Sahar's mental health:

"Other refugees and I were depressed about losing our rights yet another time after two decades of work happening in Kabul for the freedom and safety of women."

In addition to the impact on her own wellbeing, Sahar noticed that the education policies in Pakistan became stricter for Afghan refugees after the regime change in Afghanistan. Proof of Registration (POR) cards became less useful, as universities started to require refugees to provide passports and student visas. Banks were also not allowing refugees to open accounts. While Sahar was already enrolled and had her Afghan passport, many of her friends had to return to Kabul and undertake the lengthy process of applying for a passport. Some of those who had returned to Afghanistan were then stuck when the Pakistani-Afghan border closed and aeroplane tickets increased from $200 to $1100. They were therefore trapped in Afghanistan without access to online classes, and subsequently missed classes for several months.

As well as feeling devastated by the lack of access to education for girls in Afghanistan, Sahar is also worried about the damage caused to boys' education through the regime change. Relatives have told her that many male teachers have resigned because they are scared of persecution, having been employed in the previous government's schools, and that mostly the Taliban are employed as teachers. She is afraid that they will indoctrinate young learners and promote violent and terrorist ideologies. She also does not understand the claim that the schools have not previously been Islamic. She does not believe that either her culture, or her faith, allows the banning of women from education and work.

During this time, Sahar went to UNHCR to file an asylum case for her family in another country. However, the available immigration visas were only for refugees who had newly arrived from Kabul, not for those who had been there for many years. Instead, Sahar is still studying while also working as a translator at a hospital to support her family. One of her sisters lives abroad and also financially supports the family, as Sahar struggles to do this alone. Her younger brother is still at school and they want him to be able to study. Moreover, her mother is not well and is unable to work.

When the Taliban banned university education for women in December 2022,

Sahar was not shocked, but heartbroken. It felt to her as though history was repeating itself. Although it has not prevented her from continuing her degree in Pakistan, it has compounded her mental trauma. She knows that other Afghan students will struggle to access education and work in Pakistan, especially as the country has a high unemployment rate and many Pakistani citizens cannot access education either. She does not know whether, in her lifetime, her generation will be able to go to Afghanistan to work. Instead, in the future, Sahar wants to go to a European country to study, work and access other opportunities.

"If I want a better future for myself and my family, I must move to another country. There are no other options left for us."

Reflections: where do we go from here?

The three narratives of this multiple-case study highlight the power of education in a context of conflict, insecurity and political transition. While these young Afghan women have had different experiences over the last eighteen months, their stories all point to what has been identified in the literature as the 'two faces of education' in conflict settings (Saltarelli & Bush, 2021): it can be both a source of hope and a source of persecution. Pursuing an undergraduate degree was a central focus of each narrative: the young women spoke of their university education as a way to achieve their goals and something which, although it had not always been easy, gave them a huge amount of enjoyment and motivation for the future. However, their stories also show how education can be co-opted as a means to repress, dishearten and enact violence. Whether through the changing of curricula to politicise and inhibit learning, the barring of women from university, the discrimination and abuse of Afghan students, or the impact of increased financial and security pressures on young women's ability to learn, the impacts of the 2021 regime change have reverberated throughout education institutions in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

These narratives also highlight the severe impact of the last eighteen months on the mental wellbeing of young Afghan women. Each spoke of the emotional toll of constant policy changes, restrictions of women's rights and threats to their safety. This is an area which demands more attention. While much of the international rhetoric around the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan has focused on the denial of human rights, it can be easy to forget that the systematic denial of rights is not an abstract concept, but that it has a deeply personal impact. This is an important reminder to the research, evidence building and policy communities to ensure that the personal testimonies of those experiencing conflict and persecution remain at the heart of and lead our work. In light of the Taliban's ban on women working for local and international NGOs in Afghanistan—severing channels of direct communication and contact with Afghan women across the country—this is a priority which cannot not be forgotten: researchers, aid organisations and the international community must find a way to ensure Afghan women are still being heard and leading conversations about their own future.

Recommendations

Education research needs to continue attending to the catalytic potential of education both to facilitate and hinder young women's goals for the future, in recognition that, especially in contexts of conflict and insecurity, education can be a powerful determinant of opportunity and exacerbate existing inequalities.

A number of strategies are required to provide access to higher education opportunities for young Afghan women in the wake of the regime change. Drawing on the experiences and hopes of the case study participants, this brief recommends the following:

1. **Education institutions globally should consider opportunities to provide subsidised online learning opportunities for female Afghan undergraduates in Afghanistan.** In light of the ban on university education for women, online courses present a valuable opportunity to continue learning in spite of government-imposed restrictions. While the costs associated with these courses (both fees and associated internet costs) need to be carefully considered, they offer a source of continuity and of hope in a time of disruption, fear and uncertainty.

2. **The Higher Education Commission in Pakistan should work with the relevant higher education institutions to improve access policies and establish a more administratively streamlined route for refugee students to participate in higher education.** Pathways should be established for newly-arrived female refugees in Pakistan who have previously been enrolled on university courses in Afghanistan, so that they can continue their studies. Furthermore, access barriers need to be addressed to provide routes for secondary school graduates to study at Pakistan university, such as removing requests for unattainable documentation (including passports or PoR cards).

3. **Third country education pathways should be developed and expanded for Afghan women.** In light of the ban on university education for women in Afghanistan, and the socio-economic challenges faced by neighbouring host countries including Pakistan, moving to a third country to study offers refugees the chance to build the skills they need to support themselves and reach sustainable and durable solutions.