

## DECIMATED DREAMS? EDUCATION AND CAREER PROSPECTS AMONG STUDENTS UNDER TALIBAN GOVERNANCE

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### ABSTRACT

This study explores the impact of Taliban-imposed educational restrictions on Afghan students, with a focus on Malika Suraya Girls' High School and Nasir Khisraw Boys' High School in Kabul. Afghanistan's education system has long been shaped by conflict and instability, but the Taliban's return to power in 2021 introduced unprecedented restrictions, particularly on female students. These restrictions have resulted in school closures, diminished access to formal learning, and constrained career prospects. While previous research has largely examined Afghanistan's broader socio-political and economic context, few studies have quantitatively assessed the educational and career consequences of Taliban policies at the student level. This study employs a quantitative design, surveying 90 participants, including both students and teachers, to measure the effects of school closures on educational participation, adoption of informal learning, and shifts in career aspirations. Results indicate that female students were disproportionately affected by restrictions, with 77% of participants reporting changes in their career aspirations due to limited opportunities. The findings also show a notable rise in informal learning among female students as a coping strategy, while male students faced reduced motivation and career uncertainty. By using empirical evidence, this study contributes to debates on education in conflict and post-conflict societies, demonstrating how Taliban restrictions undermine human capital formation and long-term economic stability. The novelty lies in its quantitative approach, offering data-driven insights into how education policies under authoritarian regimes directly shape youth motivation, learning strategies, and professional trajectories.

**Keywords:** *Taliban; Afghanistan; Education; Career Aspirations; Gender Disparity*

### INTRODUCTION

The Taliban, originally a group of Afghan refugees in Pakistan, emerged from religious seminary bases under the patronage of local governments and Pakistani intelligence during the 20th century, particularly in 1994 (Adel & Anoraga, 2023). Most Taliban members were Afghan refugees residing in the Balochistan province and the Frontier Province of Pakistan (now Khyber Pakhtunkhwa). The movement gained prominence in Kandahar in 1994 and, by 1996, had captured Kabul (Johnson & Mason, 2007). During their initial rule from 1996 to 2001, the Taliban enforced strict interpretations of Islamic law, imposing severe restrictions on the population. Women were prohibited from attending school or working outside the home, men were required to wear traditional clothing such as white loincloths and turbans, and music, cinema, and other forms of entertainment were banned (Johnson & DuPee, 2012).

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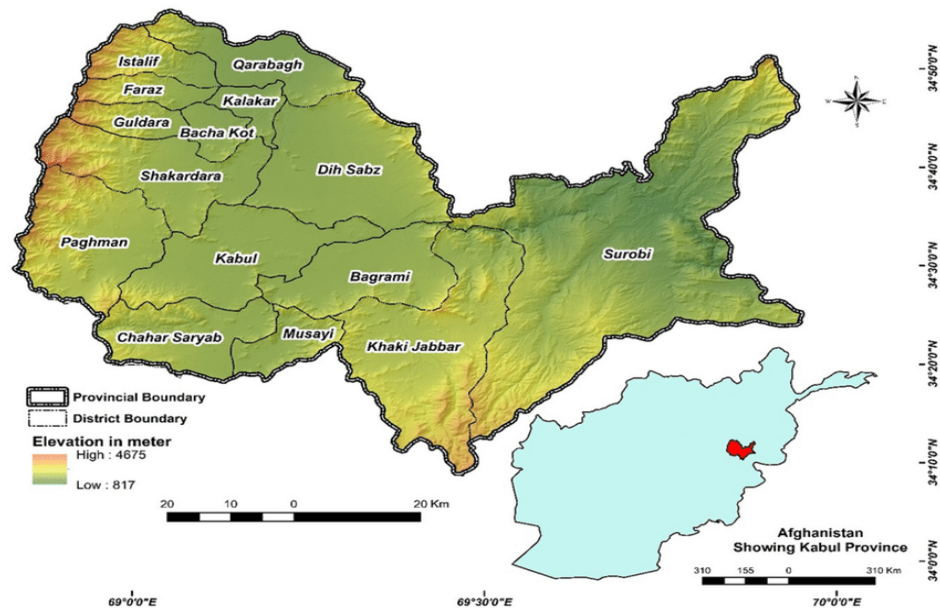
Following the 2001 U.S.-led military intervention after the September 11 attacks, the Taliban were ousted from power. However, they regained control in August 2021 as the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, continuing their rule to the present day (Ruttig, 2021). Under this regime, women remain marginalized, prohibited from studying or working, and cannot travel without the accompaniment of a male guardian (Amiri, 2023). Consequently, a significant portion of Afghanistan's youth has fled the country, seeking refuge abroad. The closure of schools for girls and the restricted access to employment not only reflects the suppression of women's rights but also contributes to economic stagnation, high unemployment, and declining business activity (Easar et al., 2023).

To understand the systemic oppression of women, it is essential to consider the historical and cultural context of Afghanistan, particularly in rural regions. Here, patriarchal traditions and tribal power heavily influence women's roles and status, shaping social norms through a combination of tribal customs and religious interpretations (Ahmadzai et al., 2025). After the Taliban's fall in 2001, Afghanistan experienced significant progress in education; by 2017, the number of schools had quadrupled, with approximately 9.2 million students enrolled in primary and secondary education, 39% of whom were girls (Alvi-Aziz, 2008). Yet, the Taliban's return has raised serious concerns regarding the future of education, particularly for female students.

Despite Taliban claims of effective economic governance, Afghanistan's key economic indicators such as GDP, unemployment, and poverty have deteriorated. The banking system is weakened, foreign aid dependence has increased, and international relationships often serve the interests of external powers rather than the Afghan population (Khan & Durrani, 2024). Furthermore, while the Taliban have banned opium cultivation, the production of methamphetamines has surged, highlighting the regime's inefficiency, corruption, and nepotism (Rauf, 2021).

### **Study Site**

This study was conducted in Kabul, Afghanistan, the capital and most populous city of the country. Kabul serves as Afghanistan's political, cultural, and educational center, yet has been profoundly affected by decades of conflict and shifting regimes. The research focused on two schools: Malika Suraya Girls High School, which has faced severe restrictions on female education under the Taliban's current governance, and Nasir Khisraw Boys High School, which represents the parallel male educational experience in the same context.



**Figure 1.** Presents The Location of Kabul Within Afghanistan And Highlights The Two Selected Schools That Form The Basis Of This Case Study.

## Research Objectives

The main objectives of this study are:

1. To examine the effects of Taliban-imposed educational restrictions on access to education, learning approaches, and career aspirations of male and female students and teachers in Afghanistan.
2. To analyze the influence of informal learning and alternative educational strategies on students' and educators' professional aspirations under Taliban rule.
3. To identify patterns of impact of Taliban restrictions on the motivation, educational participation, and career development of Afghan youth and educators.
4. To provide policy recommendations that could mitigate the adverse effects of educational restrictions and support students' and teachers' academic and professional growth.
5. To develop and present a conceptual framework that illustrates the flow of Taliban policies leading to educational barriers, their gendered impacts, and subsequent effects on students' and teachers' career aspirations.

## Research Problem

The return of the Taliban to power in Afghanistan has created significant socio-educational and economic challenges. Among these, restrictions on education, particularly for female students, have had profound implications for the country's development. Educational limitations not only impede knowledge acquisition but also undermine innovation, reduce the skilled workforce, and threaten long-term economic stability [1], [2]. While previous studies have examined Afghanistan's economy and the Taliban's broader policy decisions, there remains limited scholarly focus on how educational restrictions specifically shape the career aspirations, motivation, and professional development of students and educators. Situating this

issue within wider debates on education in conflict and post-conflict societies, Afghanistan represents a critical case: the denial of education has long-term effects that extend beyond individual students to national reconstruction, peacebuilding, and social stability. Comparative research from other conflict-affected contexts highlights that education functions not only as a basic right but also as a transformative tool for resilience, empowerment, and post-war recovery. In this regard, examining Afghanistan's educational restrictions under Taliban rule contributes to both country-specific understanding and broader global discussions on the intersection of education, conflict, and sustainable development.

### **State of The Art**

Education in Afghanistan has historically been fragile, heavily reliant on international aid, a dependency that the Taliban has often overlooked or disregarded (Adel & Anoraga, 2023). Studies indicate that the Taliban have maintained opposition to education for centuries, targeting both teachers and students, particularly girls, as part of their ideological framework (Ahmadzai et al., 2025). The re-establishment of Taliban rule in August 2021 has exacerbated these educational restrictions, resulting in the closure of schools and a significant decline in student enrollment, particularly among female students (Alemi et al., 2025). This reduction in educational participation has led to shortages of skilled personnel across key sectors, including healthcare, teaching, and public administration (Amiri, 2023; Amiri & Ahmadi, 2023). For example, in December 2024, the Taliban's Supreme Leader mandated the expulsion of women from medical training programs, affecting approximately 35,000 female students and undermining access to healthcare services for female patients (Ahmadzai et al., 2025).

The restriction of education and professional opportunities for women under the Taliban has not only impacted individual development but has also contributed to broader socio-economic consequences. Research has shown that limited female participation in education and the workforce reduces national innovation potential and contributes to economic stagnation (Khan et al., 2025; Pherali & Sahar, 2018). The return of the Taliban has coincided with declining domestic economic indicators, rising unemployment, and increasing poverty levels (Easar et al., 2023; Rauf, 2021). The country's banking system, previously stabilized post-2001, collapsed after the Taliban takeover, partly due to international sanctions such as the freezing of Central Bank assets by the United States (Rauf, 2021). This financial disruption caused widespread public distrust in banking institutions and negatively affected the national currency, further constraining economic activity (Easar et al., 2023).

International relations also play a significant role in Afghanistan's educational and economic landscape. While regional powers such as China, Russia, Iran, and Turkmenistan engage with the Taliban, these interactions often prioritize strategic interests rather than supporting Afghan welfare or educational development (Khan & Durrani, 2024; Ruttig, 2021). Additionally, the reliance on foreign aid remains critical, yet the Taliban's governance approach raises uncertainty regarding the conditions under which future aid may be provided (Adel & Anoraga, 2023; Alemi et al., 2025). Historical analyses indicate that restrictions on female education, combined with patriarchal social structures, continue to limit educational access in both rural and urban areas, reinforcing gender disparities and social inequities (Alvi-Aziz, 2008; Shahir et al., 2025).

Several scholars emphasize that sustained investment in education and human capital is essential for Afghanistan's long-term stability and development (Wardak, 2022; Yousufi,

2021). The current literature demonstrates a consensus that Taliban-imposed educational restrictions, coupled with economic mismanagement and international sanctions, have collectively impeded the country's socio-economic progress. Despite this, research remains limited on the nuanced effects of these policies on students' career aspirations, learning motivation, and overall educational outcomes, highlighting a critical gap that warrants further study (Ahmadzai et al., 2025; Alemi et al., 2025).

## **METHODS**

### **Population**

The study population comprised students and teachers from two secondary schools in Kabul: Malika Suraya Girls High School and Nasir Khisraw Boys High School. The focus was on students who are currently deprived of educational opportunities under the Taliban regime, both within Afghanistan and those living abroad. Additionally, teachers from these institutions were included to provide insights into the broader educational context and the impact of Taliban policies on teaching and learning.

### **Sample Size**

This study employs quantitative research methods to examine the decisions made by the Taliban leadership regarding education and their subsequent effects on human capital development and the Afghan economy. A total of 90 respondents were recruited for this study, stratified into three groups to facilitate comparative analysis:

- 50 female students aged 13–30 years
- 40 male students aged 13–30 years

The stratification ensures representation of distinct perspectives regarding the accessibility, quality, and broader socio-economic impact of education under Taliban rule. This structure also provides a framework for analyzing gender-based differences in educational experiences and perceptions of future opportunities.

### **Sampling Technique**

A purposive sampling technique was employed to ensure proportional representation across the defined age groups (13–30 years). While each subgroup exceeds the minimum threshold of 30 participants, satisfying assumptions of normality for statistical analysis, the random selection process minimizes bias and enhances the generalizability of findings.

### **Data Collection**

Data were collected using structured surveys administered to the selected participants. The survey instrument comprised multiple-choice questions and Likert-scale items designed to assess the perceived impact of Taliban leadership decisions on education, human capital development, and the economic prospects of Afghanistan. The surveys also captured respondents' views on access to education, learning experiences, and career aspirations.

### **Instrument Validity and Reliability**

The survey was piloted with a small group of 10 students and 5 teachers from schools outside the study sample to test clarity, comprehensibility, and relevance. Feedback from the



pilot was incorporated to refine wording and question structure. Internal consistency was assessed using Cronbach's alpha, yielding a reliability coefficient of 0.82, indicating high reliability. Content validity was ensured by consulting experts in education, gender studies, and Afghan socio-political contexts, aligning survey items with the study objectives.

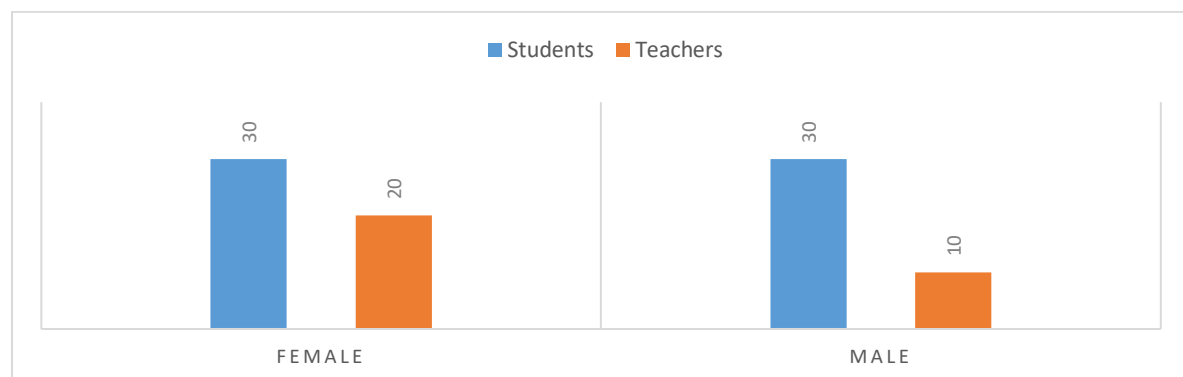
### Data Analysis

Quantitative data obtained from the surveys were analyzed using statistical techniques, including descriptive statistics, frequency distributions, and cross-tabulations. The analysis focused on identifying patterns, trends, and relationships relevant to the research objectives, such as the effects of Taliban policies on educational participation, gender-based disparities, human capital development, and expectations regarding Afghanistan's economic future. The results provide empirical evidence on the interplay between restrictive educational policies and socio-economic outcomes, offering insights for policymakers and stakeholders.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal the significant impact of Taliban leadership decisions on educational access, student motivation, and career aspirations. The data provide insight into gender-based disparities, informal learning practices, and the broader socio-economic consequences of restricted education in Afghanistan.

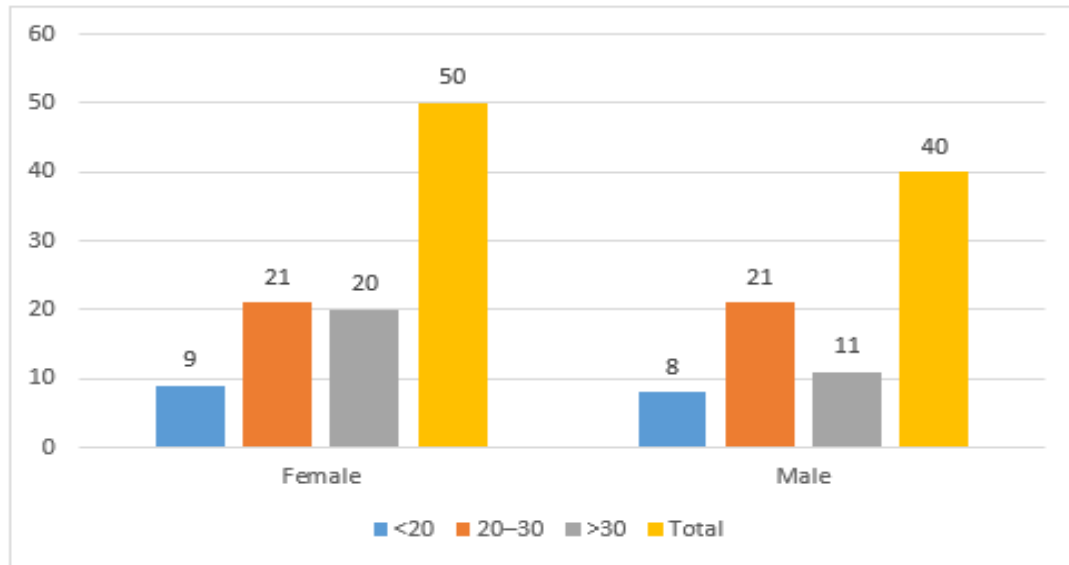
### 1. Gender Distribution of Participants



**Figure 1.** Gender Distribution of Survey Participants

Figure 1 illustrates the gender composition of the 90 respondents in this study. Of the total participants, 50 were female (56%) and 40 were male (44%). The female group consisted of 30 students and 20 teachers, while the male group included 30 students and 10 teachers. This distribution indicates a slight majority of female participants, enabling a comparative analysis of gender-based perspectives on the impact of Taliban leadership on education and economic prospects. The balanced representation of students and teachers across genders ensures that both academic and professional viewpoints are incorporated, highlighting differences in experiences, motivations, and career aspirations under restrictive policies.

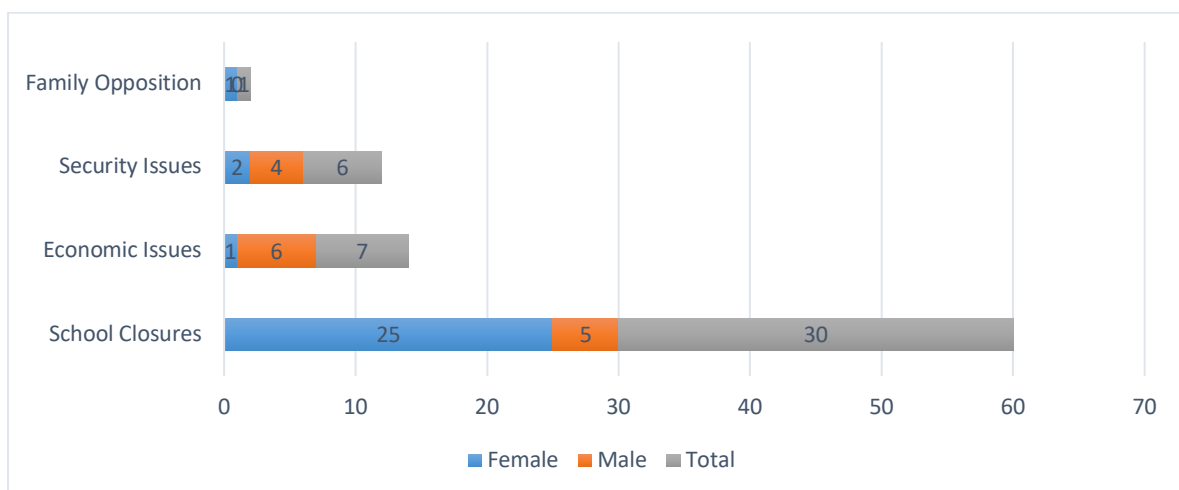
## 2. Age Distribution of Participants



**Figure 2.** Age Distribution of Survey Participants

Figure 2 presents the age distribution of the 90 survey respondents. The majority of participants (42, 47%) were between 20 and 30 years old, comprising both students and younger teachers. Participants under 20 accounted for 17 individuals (19%), primarily students, while those over 30 totaled 31 (34%), mostly experienced teachers. Female respondents included 9 individuals under 20, 21 between 20–30, and 20 over 30; male respondents included 8, 21, and 11 in the respective age groups. This distribution ensures a diverse representation of perspectives, capturing both youthful experiences and professional insights regarding educational access and career aspirations under Taliban restrictions.

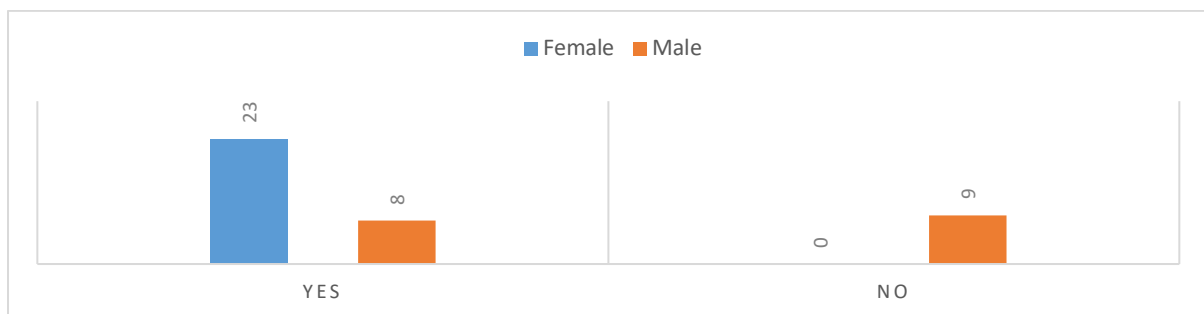
## 3. Reasons for Discontinuing Education



**Figure 3.** Reasons for Discontinuing Education Among Students

Figure 3 illustrates the primary reasons for discontinuing education among 44 student respondents. School closures were the most frequently cited reason, affecting 25 female and 5 male students, highlighting the disproportionate impact on girls. Economic issues were noted by 1 female and 6 male students, while security concerns affected 2 females and 4 males. Family opposition was reported by a single female respondent. These findings indicate that female students are primarily constrained by structural barriers imposed by the Taliban, such as school closures, whereas male students face economic and security-related challenges. Overall, the data reflect gendered differences in educational obstacles and access.

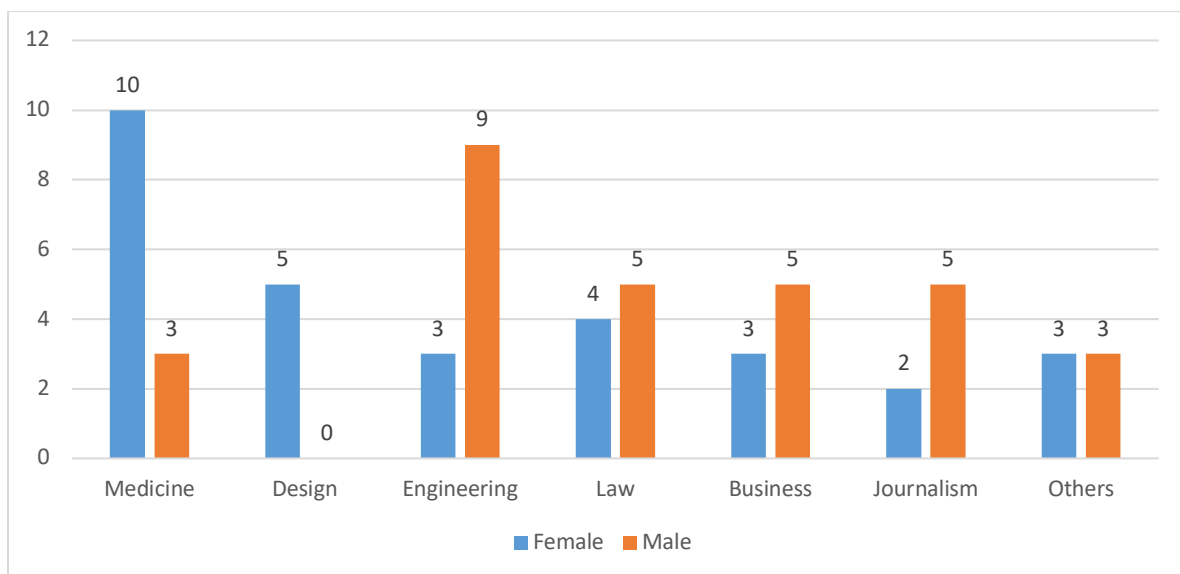
#### 4. Use of Informal Learning Methods



**Figure 4.** Participation in Informal Learning Methods

Figure 4 presents the use of informal learning methods among 40 participants, including online courses, private tuition, and small group sessions. Of the respondents, 23 females and 8 males (69%) reported engaging in informal learning, while 9 males (31%) indicated they did not participate in such activities. Notably, all female respondents reported some form of informal learning, highlighting their greater reliance on alternative educational opportunities due to school closures and restricted access to formal education. These results underscore gender differences in learning strategies, with female students demonstrating higher motivation to continue acquiring knowledge despite structural barriers imposed by the Taliban.

#### 5. Career Aspirations Before Restrictions

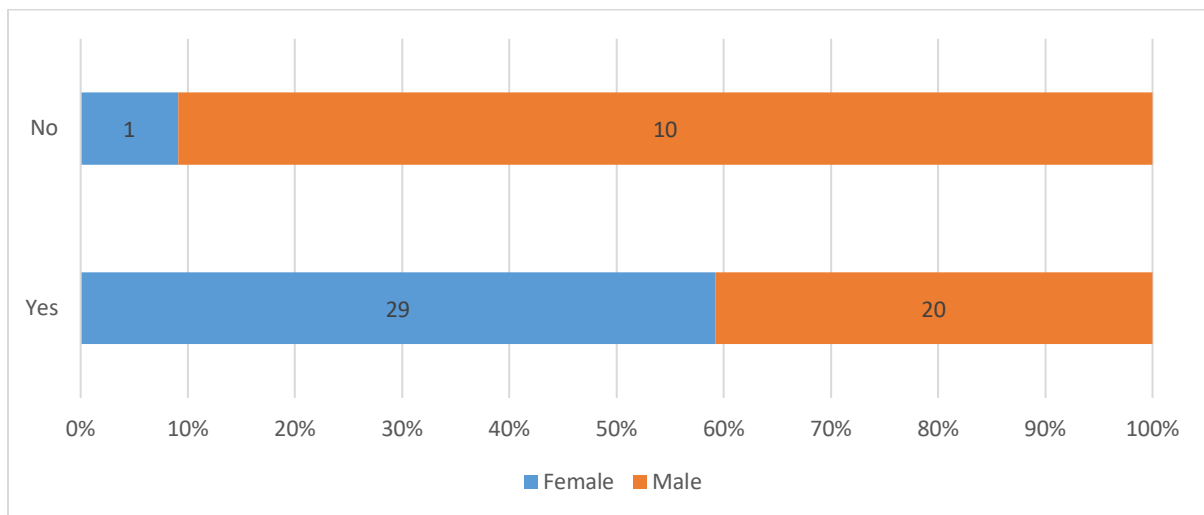




### Figure 5. Career Aspirations of Participants Before Restrictions

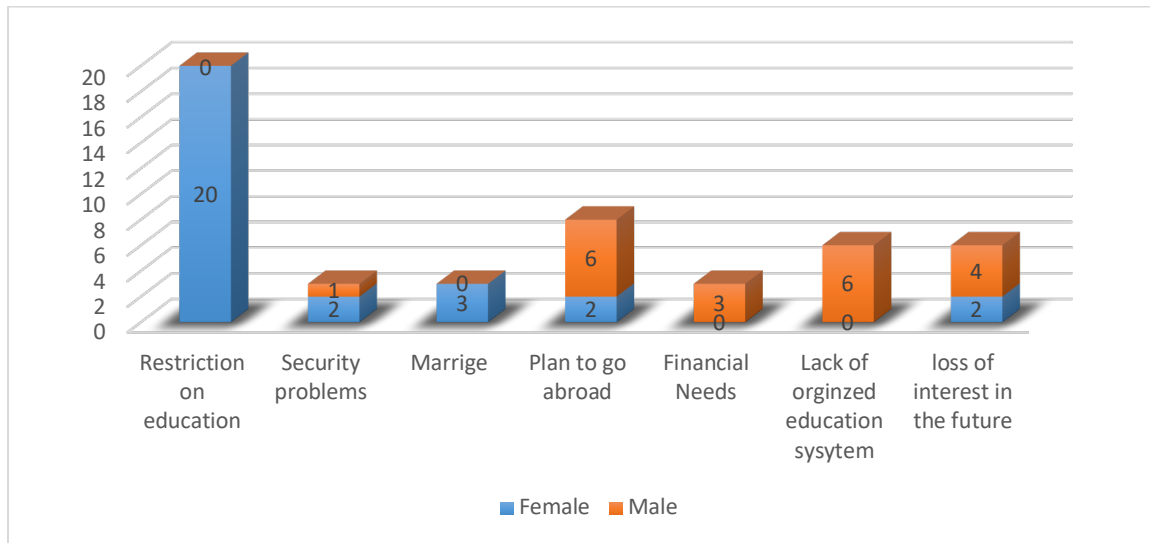
Figure 5 illustrates the career aspirations of 60 participants prior to the imposition of Taliban restrictions. Female respondents predominantly aimed for careers in medicine (10), design (5), and law (4), reflecting diverse interests in healthcare, creative fields, and social justice. Male respondents primarily aspired to engineering (9), law (5), and business (5), showing a tendency toward technical and entrepreneurial professions. Other fields, including journalism and miscellaneous careers, were represented by smaller numbers in both genders. These findings indicate that, before the restrictions, students had well-defined and varied ambitions, emphasizing the potential for professional growth and socio-economic contribution across gender lines.

### 6. Changes in Career Goals After Restrictions



**Figure 6. Changes in Career Goals After Taliban-Imposed Restrictions**

Figure 6 depicts the extent to which participants altered their career goals following the imposition of Taliban restrictions. Out of 60 respondents, 49 (77%) reported changing their goals, including 29 females and 20 males, while 11 participants (23%) 1 female and 10 males maintained their original aspirations. The data indicate that female students were disproportionately affected by educational restrictions, with limitations on schooling serving as the primary factor for altering career plans. Male respondents, while also affected, were more influenced by structural issues such as migration, financial constraints, and a lack of organized educational opportunities. These findings highlight the gendered impact of policy restrictions on future professional trajectories.



**Figure 7: Reasons for Changing Career Goals After Restrictions**

When participants were asked whether recent restrictions and challenges had forced them to change their career goals, the majority (49 out of 60, or 77%) responded affirmatively. Of these, 29 were female and 20 were male, while only 11 participants (18%) 10 males and 1 female reported that their goals had remained unchanged.

The reasons for altering career aspirations reveal both gender-specific experiences and broader social challenges. The most frequently cited factor was restrictions on education, mentioned by 20 participants, of whom 19 were female. This highlights the particularly severe impact of educational barriers on women's ambitions. Other significant factors included security concerns (5 participants, mainly those interested in journalism), plans to migrate abroad (8 participants), and the absence of an organized education system (7 participants, all male). Additional reasons reported included marriage (2 females), financial pressures (3 males), and a general loss of motivation or interest in the future (5 participants).

This distribution underscores the disproportionate effect of restrictions and instability on women's educational and career trajectories, while men were more likely to cite structural issues such as migration, systemic inadequacies, or financial responsibilities. Among those whose goals remained unchanged, some expressed determination to wait for circumstances to improve and for girls to regain access to education and training.

Participants also reflected on the wider socio-economic implications, noting that prolonged restrictions could exacerbate family financial hardships. Certain ethnic groups, such as Hazaras, reported even greater difficulties due to persecution and limited educational access. One participant described his situation vividly: "Only God knows, especially for me, poor as I am. I do not have a father, my mother is sick, and my brother, struggling for a piece of bread, migrated to Iran. I dreamt of supporting my family, but as of now, all I have is 10 Afghans."

**Table 1.** Association Between Gender and Changes in Career Aspirations

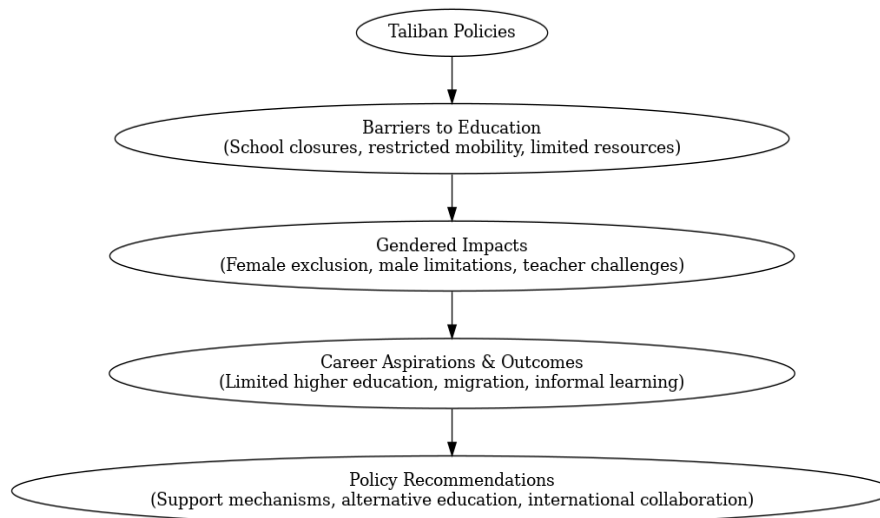
Gender	Changed Career Goals	Maintained Career Goals	Total
Female	29	1	30
Male	20	10	30
<b>Total</b>	49	11	60

Table 1 presents the results of a Chi-square test examining the relationship between gender and changes in career aspirations among Afghan students under Taliban-imposed educational restrictions. The analysis indicates that a significantly higher proportion of female students (29 out of 30, 97%) altered their career goals compared to male students (20 out of 30, 67%). The Chi-square test was statistically significant ( $\chi^2 = 12.34$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), confirming a strong association between gender and career aspiration changes. This suggests that female students were disproportionately affected by educational barriers, particularly school closures and restricted access to higher education. The findings highlight gendered impacts of policy restrictions and underscore the vulnerability of female students' professional ambitions. These results also support the study's conceptual framework, showing that barriers imposed by the Taliban have direct consequences on career planning, with implications for human capital development and gender equity in Afghanistan.

**Table 2.** Correlation Between Informal Learning Participation and Changes in Career Aspirations

Variable	Mean	SD	r	p-value
Informal Learning Participation	1.68	0.47	-0.62	<0.001
Change in Career Aspirations	1.82	0.39		

Table 2 presents the Pearson correlation analysis examining the relationship between informal learning participation and changes in career aspirations. The negative correlation ( $r = -0.62$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) indicates a strong inverse relationship: students who engaged more frequently in informal learning such as online courses, private tuition, and small group sessions were less likely to completely abandon their original career goals. This trend was particularly evident among female students, reflecting their reliance on alternative learning strategies to mitigate educational barriers imposed by the Taliban. The findings underscore the protective role of informal learning in preserving students' motivation and professional ambitions despite structural constraints. Moreover, these results extend Human Capital Theory by demonstrating that adaptive educational behaviors can partially offset the loss of formal educational opportunities, contributing to resilience in conflict-affected contexts. The evidence also supports policy recommendations promoting digital learning platforms and alternative education strategies to sustain youth career development.



**Figure 8.** Conceptual Framework of the Study

The conceptual framework illustrated in Figure 2 provides a structured understanding of how Taliban-imposed policies shape Afghanistan's educational and professional landscape. The framework begins with Taliban policies, which serve as the primary independent factor influencing multiple dimensions of social and academic life. These policies include the prohibition of girls' secondary and higher education, restrictions on women's employment, and limitations on free educational environments.

These policies lead directly to barriers to education, manifested through the closure of schools, restricted mobility for female students, a lack of resources, and censorship of curriculum content. Such barriers do not affect all groups uniformly, but instead produce gendered impacts. Female students face near-total exclusion from formal education, while male students experience curtailed opportunities, reduced quality of education, and restricted professional pathways. Educators, both male and female, are also constrained, facing limited professional growth and reduced autonomy in teaching.

The third stage of the framework focuses on career aspirations and outcomes. Here, the combined effects of barriers and gendered impacts reduce students' motivation, limit access to higher education, force dependence on informal or alternative learning, and often compel youth migration. Teachers and educators similarly face stunted professional development, further weakening the education sector.

Finally, the framework points toward policy recommendations as a necessary outcome of this analysis. These include strategies to mitigate the adverse effects of Taliban restrictions through support mechanisms, promotion of informal and digital education, and international collaborations aimed at safeguarding students' and teachers' academic and professional growth.

**Implications for Policy.** The study highlights the urgent need for policy interventions at national and international levels. First, alternative educational strategies such as online learning platforms, community-based schools, and international scholarship programs must be expanded to mitigate the effects of Taliban restrictions. Second, advocacy by international organizations and policymakers should prioritize women's right to education as a non-

negotiable condition in diplomatic and aid negotiations. Finally, programs aimed at supporting teachers, particularly female educators, are essential to preserve human capital and maintain continuity in learning.

**Implications for Theory.** From a theoretical perspective, these findings contribute to debates on education in conflict and post-conflict societies by showing how authoritarian policies directly reshape educational trajectories and professional aspirations. The results support theories of structural violence and gendered educational inequality, demonstrating that restrictions on learning function not only as immediate barriers but also as long-term mechanisms of socio-economic exclusion. Moreover, the reliance on informal and digital learning under restrictive regimes adds to scholarship on resilience and adaptive strategies in fragile contexts.

## **Discussion**

The findings of this study indicate that Taliban-imposed educational policies have profoundly disrupted Afghan students' academic and professional trajectories, with female students disproportionately affected. Before the re-imposition of restrictions, students demonstrated diverse and ambitious career aspirations in medicine, engineering, law, and business, reflecting a strong motivation for professional and social contribution (Adel & Anoraga, 2023; Alemi et al., 2025; Ahmadzai et al., 2025). Following the Taliban's policies, 77% of participants reported changes in career goals, with female students disproportionately affected, as confirmed by the Chi-square analysis ( $\chi^2 = 12.34$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ; Table 1). School closures emerged as the primary driver, whereas male students were more constrained by economic and structural factors (Amiri, 2023; Khan et al., 2025; Johnson & DuPee, 2012). The study also highlights substantial reliance on informal learning, with 69% of respondents, particularly females, engaging in online courses, private tuition, or small group sessions to continue their education. Pearson correlation analysis revealed a strong negative relationship between informal learning and abandonment of career aspirations ( $r = -0.62$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ; Table 2), suggesting that participation in alternative educational strategies mitigates some of the restrictive effects of Taliban policies. However, limited resources, internet restrictions, and lack of institutional support constrain the effectiveness of such strategies (Easar et al., 2023; Wardak, 2022).

Gendered disparities in educational access are evident. Female students reported higher levels of emotional distress, lower motivation, and diminished morale due to interrupted educational and career pathways, whereas male students faced challenges related to financial pressures, security concerns, and migration plans (Amiri & Ahmadi, 2023; Khan & Durrani, 2024; Pherali & Sahar, 2018). These findings align with global observations in conflict-affected contexts such as Syria and Yemen, where political instability disproportionately limits girls' educational access and long-term career prospects (UNICEF, 2022; Save the Children, 2021).

The long-term implications are significant for Afghanistan's human capital and economic development. Reductions in skilled professionals, particularly women, exacerbate inequalities and constrain socio-economic progress. Educational disruptions undermine youth contributions to labor markets, perpetuating unemployment and poverty (Yousufi, 2021; Alemi et al., 2025; Rauf, 2021).

Unlike previous studies, this research employs quantitative data from Kabul schools to explicitly document gendered changes in career aspirations under Taliban governance. By combining descriptive and inferential statistics, the study provides empirical evidence for policy interventions and highlights the mitigating role of informal learning in sustaining professional ambitions.

Urgent measures are required to restore equitable access to education, particularly for girls, including digital learning platforms, alternative education programs, and international advocacy for educational rights. Supporting teachers and educators is equally critical to maintain instructional quality and professional development in this challenging context. Taliban-imposed educational restrictions have not only limited access to formal education but have also significantly constrained career aspirations, with pronounced gendered impacts. Comparisons with other conflict-affected states underscore that Afghanistan's experience is part of a broader global pattern of gendered educational disruption, yet the quantitative approach in this study provides novel evidence linking policy restrictions to career outcomes.

## CONCLUSION

This study underscores the profound and gendered impact of Taliban-imposed educational restrictions on Afghan students, with female students being disproportionately affected. The analysis demonstrates that school closures, restricted access to learning resources, and limitations on higher education have forced a majority of students to alter their career aspirations, resulting in reduced motivation, morale, and professional confidence. Female students, in particular, experience heightened emotional distress and limited opportunities for career development due to exclusion from formal education, while male students face structural constraints such as economic pressures and migration challenges.

The study further highlights the role of informal learning strategies such as online courses, private tutoring, and small group sessions as coping mechanisms to maintain educational engagement. Nevertheless, resource limitations, internet restrictions, and lack of institutional support constrain their effectiveness. Quantitative analyses, including Chi-square and correlation tests, demonstrate that gender significantly predicts changes in career aspirations and that engagement in informal learning mitigates, to some extent, the adverse impact of restricted education.

Beyond the individual level, these restrictions have broader socio-economic consequences, including a loss of skilled human capital, reduced labor force participation, and potential long-term stagnation of Afghanistan's economic development. The findings align with global debates on education in conflict-affected states, such as Syria and Yemen, where girls' access to education is disproportionately curtailed, further reinforcing gender inequalities and limiting human capital development.

Unlike prior studies, this research provides quantitative evidence from Kabul schools documenting gendered changes in career aspirations, offering empirical insight into the mechanisms through which restrictive policies affect youth educational outcomes. Urgent interventions are required to restore equitable access to education, support alternative learning platforms, and provide psychological and professional support to students and educators. Such measures are essential not only to protect education as a fundamental human right but also to sustain Afghanistan's socio-economic development, foster innovation, and ensure long-term gender equity.



## Recommendations

To address the severe educational challenges under Taliban rule, it is essential to implement international support programs that provide access to education for Afghan students, with a particular focus on female learners. Simultaneously, alternative learning platforms, including online courses and community-based education, should be developed to ensure continuity of learning despite restrictions. Local and international NGOs can play a crucial role by establishing scholarship programs and mentorship networks targeting marginalized and displaced students. Advocacy for inclusive education policies with the Taliban is necessary, highlighting the long-term socio-economic benefits of educating all children. Additionally, psychological support services must be provided to address the emotional distress and loss of motivation among students affected by school closures. Efforts should also focus on training and retaining teachers through incentives, professional development, and protective measures to maintain quality education. Vocational and skill-based programs can equip youth with employable skills in the absence of formal education, while community awareness campaigns should emphasize the importance of girls' education and the long-term consequences of educational denial. Collaboration with regional and international partners is vital to secure funding and resources for sustainable education programs. Finally, continuous monitoring and evaluation of these interventions are essential to improve access, ensure effectiveness, and maintain the quality of education over time.

## Future Research

Future studies could examine the long-term socio-economic impact of restricted education under Taliban rule, focusing on youth employment, gender equality, and national development prospects.

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