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## The Way Forward for Girls' Education in Afghanistan

By Carolyn Kissane<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

Lack of rights and access to education are problems that have challenged Afghan women throughout the history of their country. True political reform in Afghanistan is contingent upon the solving of these problems, as women's education is essential not only for the development of a more stable government, but also for raising living standards. Women's lack of access to education in Afghanistan is reinforced by beliefs rooted in the religious and familial tradition of community. Although Islamic ideologies have often been distorted and manipulated by leaders to control and subjugate the lives of women, Islam cannot be ignored in the democratization of Afghanistan; it plays too great a role in Afghan society. Therefore, Islam must be respected and invoked as a catalyst to promote women's education and rights. The Islamic Republic of Afghanistan presents a complex landscape in which to examine the gender roles and relations generally, and a woman's access to education specifically, as they are embedded in the country's history and religious ideology. The democratization of education requires a pluralistic education model that involves State and nongovernmental sectors, including secular and non-secular institutions, making itself accessible and acceptable to the greatest number of Afghans possible. Education that teaches and encourages critical thought, *ijtihad*, and introduces concepts of gender equality—supported by Qur'anic scholarship led by Islamic feminists—is imperative. This is a bottom-up approach to education, which centralizes the needs and interests of Afghan women and girls. It is the aim of this chapter to explore the possibilities of education for girls as a motivating influence on democratization and how a pluralistic approach to education can alleviate the historical gender inequities that have hindered the country for centuries.

*Keywords:* Afghanistan, Girls' Education, Pluralistic education, Islamic Feminism

### Introduction

Perhaps there is no clearer route to economic development, political stability, and ultimately peace, than education (Sen, 1999a, 128-9). For girls and women, education has the potential to also unlock the shackles of oppression and subjugation that prevent them from joining and contributing to society and living their fullest lives. In Afghanistan, education remains an elusive dream for most girls and for many boys. As a result of more than 30 years of uninterrupted conflict, many aspects of society remain underdeveloped and stifled by the longstanding instability and fragility of the governance structure

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(Fontini & Semple, 2009). The Islamic Republic of Afghanistan presents a complex landscape in which to examine the gender roles and relations generally, and a woman's access to education specifically, as they are embedded in the country's history and religious ideology. The picture is further clouded by Afghanistan's present political, economic and social transitions. Gender has been and continues to be an integral part of any discussion about the country—from the dehumanization of the female under the Taliban, to the liberatory claims made by invading U.S. and Coalition forces, to the recognition of women's rights in Afghanistan as a cornerstone of the country's political transition—even if that recognition has been more rhetorical than actionable.

Despite reforms since 2001, actual opportunities for women remain limited. This is due in part to security and logistics, but traditional, tribal, and religious considerations also play a role. Meeting the challenges to providing Afghan women and girls with education requires confronting numerous logistical and ideological barriers. Confronting the logistical barriers to education for girls (and boys) requires shifting to a pluralistic education model, which incorporates government, nongovernmental organization (NGO), religious, and hybrid (quasi-governmental) schools that can be responsive to the local context. In the context of modern Afghanistan, this refers to the growing convergence between more conventional governmental intervention in expanding educational access with the additional support of non-state organizations such as NGOs, community- or village-based schools and religious institutions. As international political pressure for the state to strengthen and expand educational access for girls increases, the impetus for alternative educational providers such as nongovernmental organizations becomes even more critical. International nongovernmental organizations, in conjunction with local organizations, are necessary to fill the voids in the ability of the state to address girls' rights and access to education. But the provision of education alone is not enough. The type of education that is given to girls and boys alike is critical to ensuring future stability, economic growth and democracy. Education that teaches and encourages critical thought, *ijtihad*, and introduces concepts of gender equality—supported by Qur'anic scholarship led by Islamic feminists—is imperative. This is a bottom-up approach to education, which centralizes the needs and interests of Afghan women and girls.

Ultimately, this paper posits that for any significant change to take place in Afghanistan's educational arena, the government must work with the nongovernmental sector and recognize that although educational change is critical, it is not only imperative to simultaneously respect the role played by the Islamic religion in every Afghan household but also embrace gender equality through an Islamic context and strive to use that ideology to mobilize – rather than inhibit – change.

### **Establishing Women's Rights: Reform and Regression**

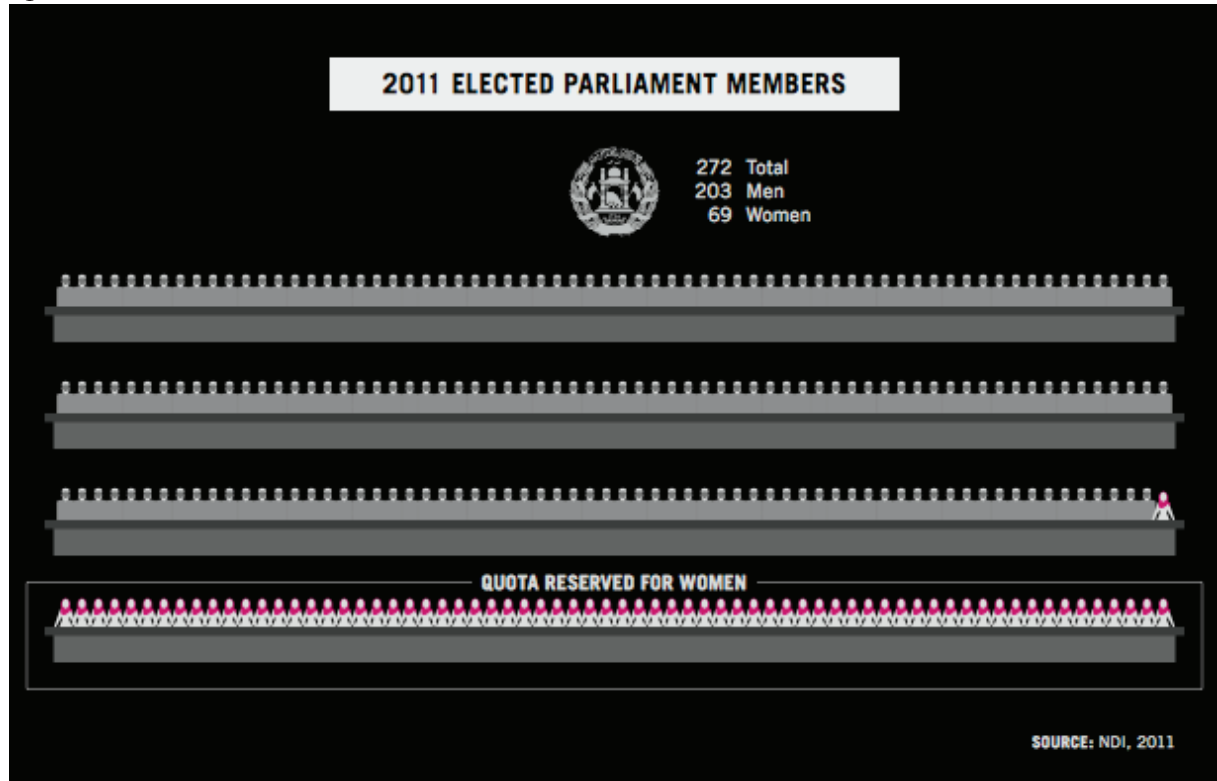
In the fall of 2001, the world watched as the American-led coalition forces toppled the Taliban regime, and took control of Afghanistan's capital, Kabul. Western audiences were presented with images of mothers walking their children to school to signal the success of the campaign, the demise of the Taliban and the dawn of an era of positive change. Provisional tent-schools and 'back-to-school' catch-up programs appeared early in the reconstruction process as a response to the enormous gap between educated and non-educated children (Jones, 2008, p. 278). The media continued to portray women as victims of the Taliban, 'saved' by the international intervention by the

U.S. (US Department of State, 2001). The international community pledged to rebuild the country via the establishment of an interim government and the construction of critical infrastructure like schools and hospitals. Creating opportunities for Afghan women through the promotion and support of basic human rights (including education) was an important indicator of the efficacy of democratization efforts. Just months after the initial invasion, the U.S. declared success in disbanding the Taliban and victory over oppression for the Afghan people.

However, many of the problems that confronted Afghanistan and its people in 2002 persist today. Despite Karzai's arguably lackluster attempts at implementing social reforms aimed at reversing the socioeconomic damage inflicted by the Taliban, Taliban forces are regrouping and launching attacks against women and girls who defy their narrow misinterpretation of Islam—as seen in the recent poisoning of Afghan schoolgirls, allegedly perpetrated by the Taliban (Faiez and Vogt, 2012)<sup>i</sup> and violence is prevalent in many parts of the country. The claim of victory over the Taliban declared in 2001 seems tragically premature. Safety concerns and infrastructure issues continue to prevent the reopening of many schools and these temporary provisions have become permanent tools to allow students – including girls – the opportunity to continue their formal education.

Twenty years of Taliban rule had forced many women's activities underground, but with the coalition-supported government, for the first time in over two decades, some women were able to actively participate in public spaces outside of the home, (temporarily) liberating many women, especially those in urban centers. Seizing these potential opportunities, in December 2003, several hundred female delegates took part in the Constitutional Loya Jirga, inserting significant women's rights provisions into the resulting constitution, including a provision reserving 25% (or 68) of the seats in the Wolesi Jirga (Parliament) for women. In 2011, 69 women were elected to Parliament—one more than the quota reserve (NDI, 2011). Still, the advancement of women in Afghanistan remains tenuous.

Figure 1



### Conceptualizing Women's Education in the Struggle for Afghanistan

Educating girls and women has long been touted within the standard Liberal feminist discourse as the key to dismantling systemic oppression of women based on gender, by providing them with tools that enable them to both succeed outside the domestic sphere economically, but also to challenge the justifications for women's subordination to men. Undoubtedly, the provision of education to the greater population, and to girls specifically, is central to the process of political transformation from authoritarian to democratic systems. The achievement of true political transformation, however, goes well beyond increasing the number of girls who attend school. It involves a more equitable and participatory female representation in politics as well as a more secure environment for the country's citizenry, Afghan women and girls in particular. Moreover, it is equally important that such an increase in female representation at all levels of politics be a cadre of women who are committed to challenging patriarchy; the actual *gender* of those serving in government matters little if their voices echo the status quo. To be sure, education is a vital foundation for the development of a more stable government and for raising living standards of all Afghans, but more importantly, education grounded in notions of *gender equality* is critical if it is to provide tools to empower those who would work to dismantle Afghanistan's endemic patriarchy. What is more, access to education must be widespread and secure in order to reap the potential social, economic and political benefits.

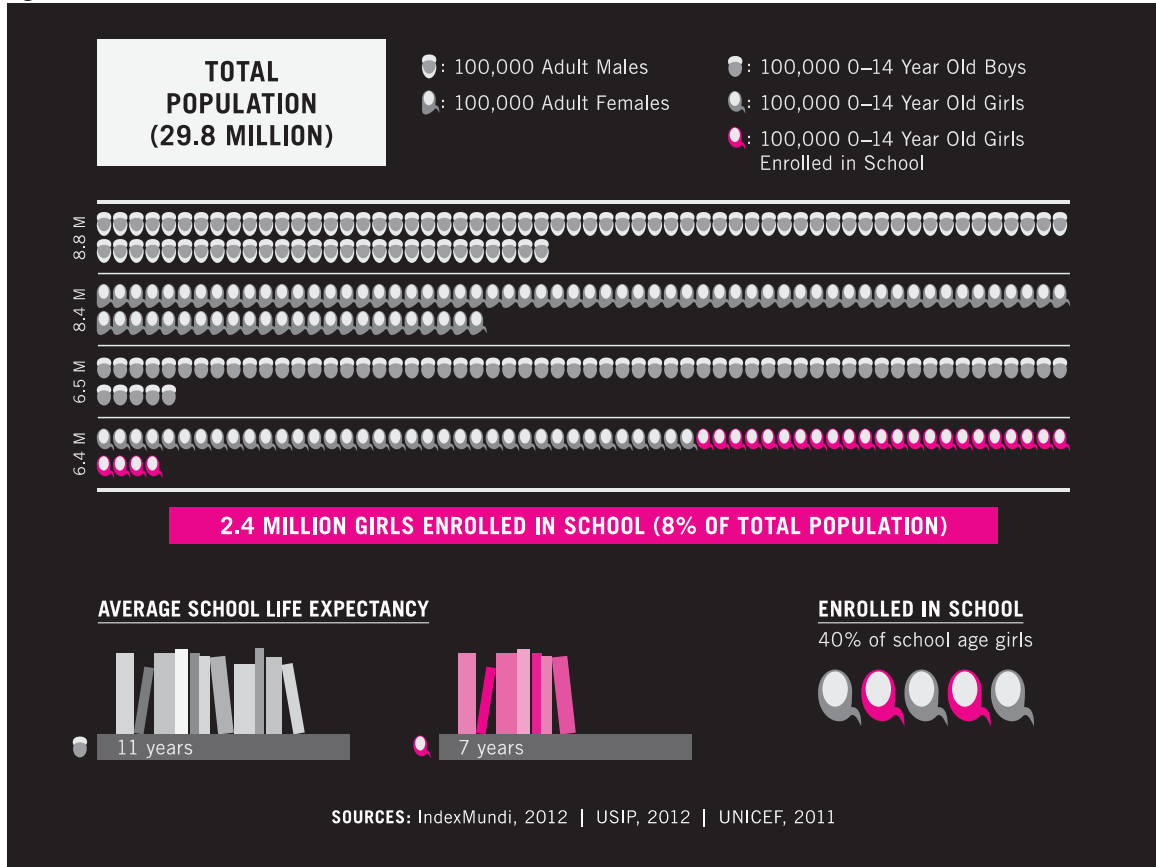
The role of education cannot be overstated in the efforts to transition Afghanistan toward democracy, and the struggle of Afghan women to exercise their political, economic, and social rights goes hand-in-hand with this effort. Indeed, development and human rights scholars like Amartya Sen (1999a, 1999b, 1995) agree: educated women are better able to provide for themselves and their families, contributing to the overall health of their communities and the economic well-being and political stability of the country. They are more likely to guarantee that their children—regardless of sex—attend school, thus perpetuating the positive cycle and benefits of education (Riphenburg, 2004, p. 407). While this is true, it distills women’s role in society down to their gendered roles as wives and mothers, rather than independent agents of social change. In an attempt to build grassroots support for the war effort, U.S. rhetoric portraying the plight of women in Afghan society has been largely negative. Very little media coverage has focused on the agency of Afghan women; Afghan women and girls are seen as objects for intervention rather than subjects driving social change. A comprehensive understanding of the diverse and critical roles that Afghan women play within their communities, tribes, and families is needed to develop a sustainable, responsive, and pluralistic educational system that will best serve all Afghan women and girls as well as the long-term democratic project.

### **Gender and Political Reform: The Critical Role of Girls’ Education**

Developing the educational system became the object of considerable interest from many international actors, including the World Bank and UNICEF. Since 2001, a large contingent of nongovernmental organizations, working in conjunction with the Ministry of Education in Kabul, have directed significant attention and financial assistance towards improving educational opportunities for girls. This collaborative approach toward returning women to educational institutions is an encouraging example of the potential of a pluralistic approach to education provision that is most appropriate for Afghanistan.

According to the Education Law (2008) in Afghanistan’s constitution, education is a basic right for all. Unfortunately, there is a gap between the *de jure* right to education and the *de facto* ability to access it. According to UNICEF (2011), primary enrollment rates have increased by over eightfold for Afghan children since 2001. While this is impressive, aggregate numbers provide a different perspective. Out of the over 8 million children currently enrolled in primary and secondary education, 4.6 million are boys and just over half of that number—2.4 million—are girls (UNICEF, 2011).

Figure 1



Girls’ education in Afghanistan is necessary for both practical and symbolic reasons. If Afghan girls truly achieve universal, equitable access to education, it will signify the dissolution of a great number of barriers (UNICEF, 2005). Furthermore, if they consistently take advantage of that access, it will signify that an important shift in social attitudes has occurred and that more changes are likely on the horizon (Wakefield & Bauer, 2005). For now, though, Afghan women remain largely second-class citizens. While gender equality in Afghanistan depends in part on liberalized attitudes toward women, it is also heavily contingent upon a stabilized security situation. The country has yet to establish an effective political society that supports gender equality and civil liberties. The next phase of progress for women’s rights in Afghanistan depends upon the implementation of gender equality laws. Here, too, educating girls and women promotes peace-building and post-conflict restoration, as well as the development of a stronger civil society, as women’s voices and perspectives are critically needed to advocate for and provide relevant insight into these processes. When women’s voices are left out, it is unlikely that women’s needs will be met.

## **Logistical and Ideological Challenges**

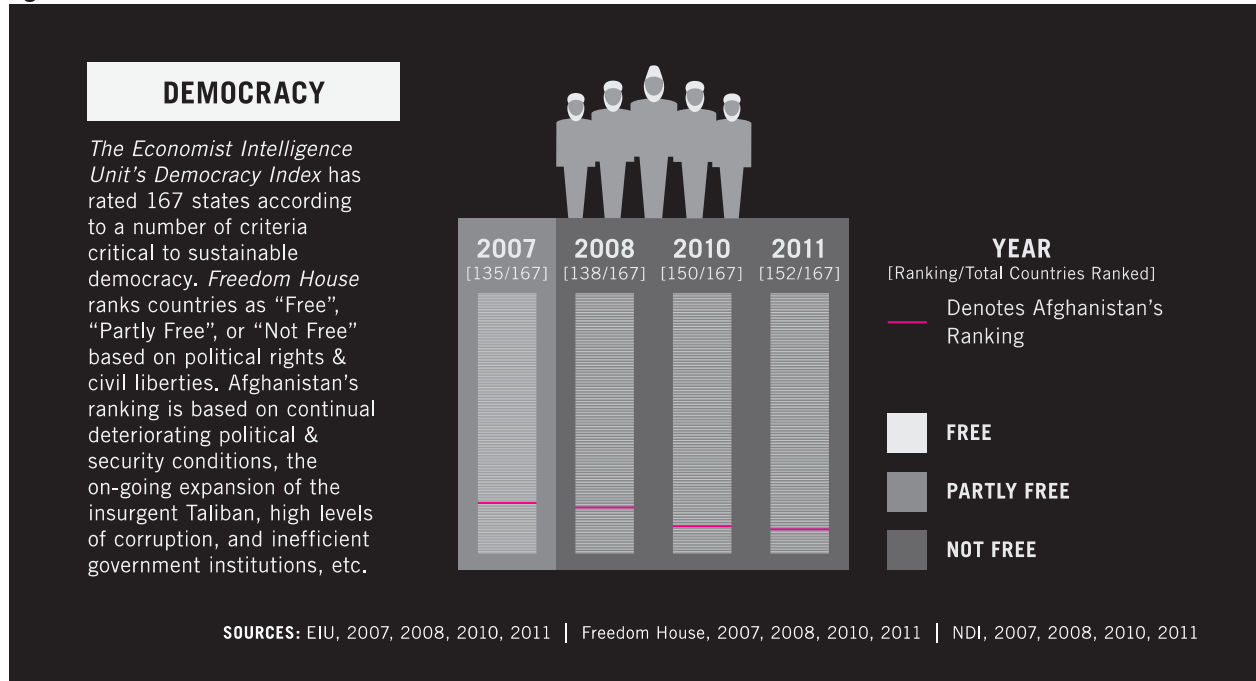
Despite the support of legislation and funding, girls' access to education is limited by powerful factors, including physical and personal security, structural and geographical obstacles, and the country's history of allowing varying interpretations of Islam either to empower or to oppress Afghan women.

Since shortly after the 2001 invasion, human rights and relief organizations have reported that the security situation in many areas is deteriorating. In a joint letter to the international community, a coalition of NGOs wrote "[t]he gains made in improving health and education are increasingly fragile due to insecurity, corruption, and the politicization of aid" (Refugees International, 2010). To be sure, the lack of an effective justice system leaves women subject to ongoing violence, with little provision of recourse. The challenges to fostering democracy under these circumstances are immense; the destabilized environment that Afghan people face makes peace, prosperity, and gender equity seem more like distant dreams than an attainable reality.

A further challenge to the success of political reform is the fact that democratization in Afghanistan has been led largely by external forces like the U.S. government, the UN and international NGOs, a point problematized by Nixon and Ponzio (2007), who suggest that "[d]emocracy promotion by outsiders has inherent limitations...in the longer term highly visible forms of engagement can undermine progress by reinforcing sentiments of detractors who posit that democracy is foreign led, un-Islamic, and hence, un-Afghan" (p. 38). Moghadam agrees and points out that not only has the perception of the infiltration of the 'foreign' ideas of democracy led to an increase of patriarchal and tribal conceptions of Islam, but that "[t]he absence of democratic institutions and the continuing influence of Islamist forces are the major structural constraints to women's political participation and advancement" (2003). In other words, the fact that notions of democratic reforms are automatically held suspect by many of those in positions of formal and informal power within the country is both exacerbated by and exacerbates limited access of education for girls and women. Moghadam continues: "In addition, socio-demographic factors such as the relatively small population of educated and employed women preclude widespread activism by women as women, attenuating the development of feminist activism or a social movement of women. These structural and socio-demographic factors attenuate the formation of a critical mass of politically engaged women who can influence public policy and the direction of social change in the short term" (2003). The emergence of a new power base held and controlled by local warlords is not in line with a democratization program, nor is it conducive to a robust civil society. Moreover, these warlords have little incentive to, and have demonstrated little interest in, embracing education for girls and women as it upends their authority under the current narrow, patriarchal interpretations of Islam that permeate Afghanistan. The resurgence of the Taliban and other anti-Western, radical groups heighten instability; fragmented institutions and tenuous central control of the political and economic situation add to the turmoil. Despite lofty rhetoric around women's rights and some sporadic successes, the women of Afghanistan continue to face an uphill battle for access to education.



Figure 2



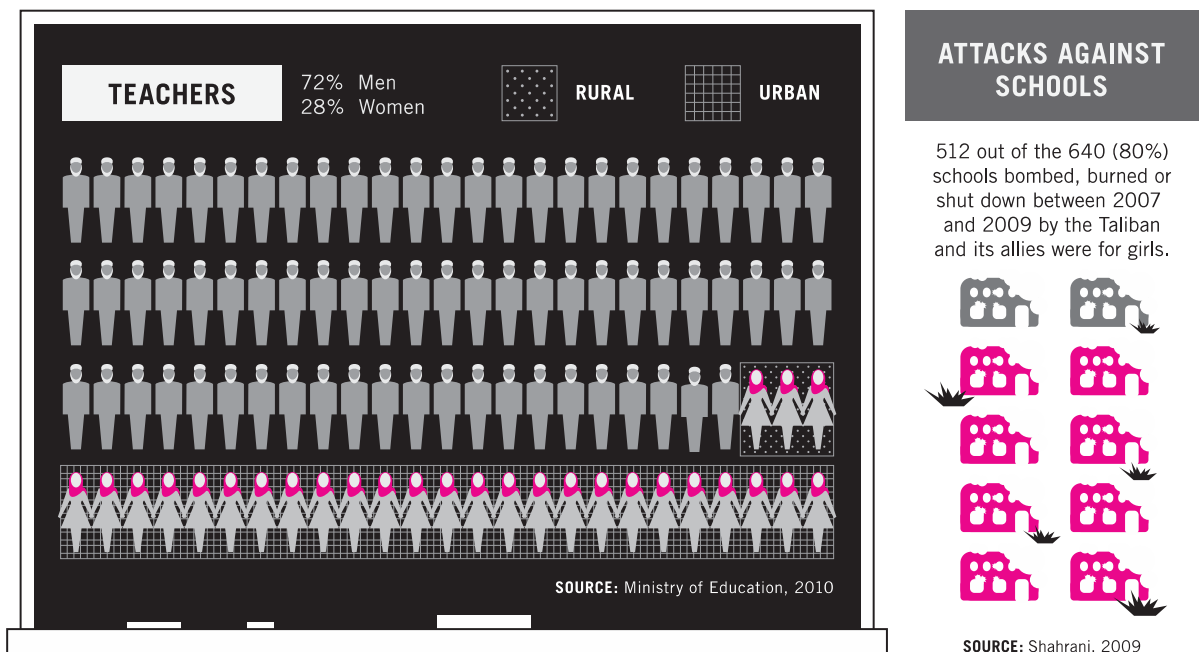
Undoubtedly, the best way to meet these powerful logistical and ideological challenges is by equipping women and girls with both practical skills and knowledge, but also with the tools and analytical skills to meet head-on the arguments meant to keep them subjugated, and to re-conceive Islam as a religion that “aims to recover the notion of gender equality, radical in its day, that the Qur’anic revelation introduced into 7<sup>th</sup> century (C.E.) patriarchal Arabia” (Badran, 2006, para. 3)

### Meeting the Logistical Challenges: A pluralistic approach to providing education

Even though girls have greater access to education than they did prior to 2001, many girls’ schools remain subject to attacks by insurgent groups. Not surprisingly, parents are often afraid to send their children to school, and students are similarly intimidated. Notes the Deputy Minister of Education, Sidiq Patman, “there is no day that goes by when a school related security incident is not reported to the Ministry of Education” (qtd. in Wardak & Hirth, 2009, p. 3). Human rights organizations have also documented the growing levels of violence connected to educational institutions, especially for girls. A study by Burde & Linden (2010) similarly demonstrates that many parents are reluctant to send their children, especially their daughters, to remote government schools because of the tenuous security situation rather than because of ideology.

Between 2007 and 2009, the Taliban and its allies have bombed, burned, or shut down more than 640 schools in Afghanistan, 80% of which were schools for girls; a total of 290 children, teachers, administrators, and support staff have been murdered by insurgents (Shahrani, 2009). Between 2008 and 2010, 453 schools were either damaged or destroyed by insurgent attacks, depriving some 300,000 children of their right to an education (Afghan Ministry of Education, 2010).

Figure 3



Attacks on schools and threats against teachers, students, and principals are common in parts of the country where the Taliban is re-emerging, or was never fully ousted. The ongoing violent attacks against school girls and teachers are chilling reminders of the enormous disparity between the reality on the ground and the equal rights to education that have been, on paper, enshrined in the laws of the country. The Taliban's campaign aimed at demoralizing foreign troops and the civilian population alike is manifested in targeted attacks meant to obstruct local citizens' access to services (Burde & Linden, 2010) and serves as a very powerful deterrent for parents wanting to educate their daughters. Parents are forced to choose between education and the security of their children, and teachers are blocked from using their skills to contribute to stability and growth in Afghanistan's current reconstruction period because of the threats they receive from extremists.

Even if an Afghan girl lives in relative proximity to a school that is structurally sound and operating with essential resources, getting to and from that school presents its own obstacles; hazardous roads and extensive, inhospitable terrain makes Afghanistan's basic geography a major impediment to achieving universal enrollment and gender parity in education. To get to school, an Afghan child might have to walk along narrow and steep paths, while also skirting clashes between NATO-led forces and insurgents. Girls are especially vulnerable on these treacherous routes. Women and girls commuting

between home and school are frequent targets of attacks by those who resent the shift toward greater rights for women in Afghanistan.

For girls who do brave the commute, statistics indicate that few stay in school. In addition to hostile geography and physical security, the dearth of female teachers who can serve as role models and advocates for girls' education contributes further to girls' dropout rates and to the pervasive bias toward preferentially educating boys. According to the Ministry of Education, "245 out of 412 urban and rural districts do not have a single qualified female teacher; 90% of qualified female teachers are located in the nine major urban centers (Kabul, Herat, Nangrahar, Mazar, Badakhshan, Takhar, Baghlan, Jozjan and Faryab)" (2010). Many Afghan parents insist that their daughters be taught by women, but because so few Afghan girls attended school prior to 2001, finding enough female teachers to teach the girls is difficult. To combat this, the Ministry of Education has established teacher-training colleges in all provinces.

Meeting the logistical challenges to girls' access to education is just half of a solution to a very complex problem. In addition to the obstacles on the ground, there are also substantial ideological challenges, which both result from and contribute to the logistical challenges outlined above.

### **Meeting the Ideological Challenges: The role of *Ijtihad* and Islamic Feminism**

The obstacles to girls' education in Afghanistan are representative of the complex relationship between gender and Islam in Afghanistan. In the past, competing interpretations of Islam either strongly supported, or forcefully opposed education for girls. In areas where the clash between moderate and conservative Islam is raging, attacks against schools, teachers, and students are prevalent. Islam's omnipresence in Afghan society means that successful strategies to educate women must integrate Islam, while simultaneously challenging patriarchal Islamic beliefs held by many Afghans.

Deeply rooted Islamic ideologies have been manipulated to control and subjugate the lives of Afghan women—and the men around them. As Maliha Zulfacar points out (2006), the threat of invasive forces—physical or ideological—has historically influenced the policy-making of many Afghan governments. It is then no surprise that various national governments of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan have often held up religion as a shield against unwelcome influences and have been resistant to outside pressures for reform. Islam was first introduced in Afghanistan in the mid-7<sup>th</sup> century as a result of Arab conquest and has reappeared as a significant political and cultural factor at different times throughout history (Helms, 1983). Many scholars posit that ethnic and tribal divisions made way for the rise and stronghold of Islam as a unifying symbol among people of Afghanistan. The role of Islam in the current constitution is a result of many negotiations among Islamic leaders and between Islamic and secular drafters (Goodson, 2004, p. 20) and further evidences the importance of Islam as a source of strength and unity for a people so often ravaged at the hands of outside invaders.

Not surprisingly, after generations of occupation and war, there is a skepticism of outside ideologies being imposed upon Afghanistan, which has resulted in a deep schism between forces of modernization, including democratization of education and gender equality, and forces seeking to preserve cultural practices—practices which may vary among tribal and rural communities, but which nearly universally operationalize a narrow, patriarchal interpretation of Islam to justify practices that impose strict

definitions of appropriate gender roles. Currently in Afghanistan, this schism between modernity and tradition has resulted in a struggle between democratic and anti-democratic movements. Women's rights and the push for girls' education lie within the democratic movement's frame, while the denial of women's rights and their access to education are central tenets of the anti-democratic movement. The anti-democratic forces feel that their way of life, and likely the supremacy afforded them as male heads of household, are threatened by the forces of globalization and modernization. As Moghadam points out, "globalization has also hardened the opposition of different identities. This has taken the form of, *inter alia*, reactive movements such as fundamentalisms, which seek to recuperate traditional patterns, including patriarchal gender relations, in reaction to the 'Westernizing' trends of globalization" (2003, p. 79). In this context, democracy and democratization are seen as Western ideologies, posing a foreign threat to 'traditional' Afghan society. As the democratic movement endorses human rights and universal education (UN Millennium Project, 2005), so then do these anti-democratic forces oppose them as un-Afghan and un-Islamic. Empowering women to employ Islam to counter the current discourse holds tremendous hope for democracy.

### **Islamic Feminism: What it is and the Potential Positive Role it can Play**

Girls have always been excluded from formal Islamic education. After the elementary instruction they get in the Mosque Schools their opportunity to get Islamic education is only through attending the primary school - if there is any and if offered to girls students. Consequently, on strong grounds one can assume that girls and women in Afghanistan have a much more limited Islamic knowledge than boys and men have unless their father, husband or brothers have taught them at home, something which actually is quite common. (Karlsson & Mansury, 2008, p.12)

Islamic feminist scholarship and gender-aware approaches to reframing the contemporary interpretations of Islam throughout Afghanistan may be the most powerful tool to enable credible challenges to arguments against girls' education. Badran defines Islamic feminism as "a feminist discourse and practice that derives its understanding and mandate from the Qur'an, seeking rights and justice within the framework of gender equality for women and men in the totality of their existence" (2006, para. 2). She continues that

Islamic feminism explicates the idea of gender equality as part and parcel of the Qur'anic notion of equality of all *insan* (human beings) and calls for the implementation of gender equality in the state, civil institutions and everyday life. It rejects the notion of a public/private dichotomy (by the way, absent in early Islamic jurisprudence or *fiqh*) conceptualizing a holistic *umma* in which Qur'anic ideals are operative in all space. (Badran, 2006, para. 2)

However, such re-conceptions of Islam are only possible when women and girls are provided adequate education in Islam and access to Qur'anic scholarship, particularly in the tradition of *ijtihad*. Islamic feminists claim that such scholarship returns to the gender-egalitarian roots of Islam, and empowers Muslim women and girls with a full understanding of Islam and the Qur'an. Badran notes that Islamic feminism is a reaction to the ways in which Islam has been manipulated and misinterpreted to justify patriarchal practices which reinforce inequality and the subordination of women to men as Islamic practice (Badran, 2006). Through Islamic feminist scholarship, Badran claims that

Muslim women can “move beyond passive knowledge of religion by engaging in *ijtihad*...and becom[e] new authorities” (2006, para. 15). This is also key to providing generations of girls (and boys) with powerful role models that can challenge powerful religious authorities, but in a way that does not challenge the primacy of Islam itself.

Indeed, Tohidi writes that Islamic feminism is then a negotiation with modernity, accepting modernity (which emerged first in the West) yet presenting an ‘alternative’ that is to look distinct and different from the West, Western modernism, and Western feminism. This is an attempt to ‘nativize’ or legitimize feminist demands in order to avoid being cast as a Western import. (2003, p. 139)

In this way, Tohidi continues, concepts associated with modernizing (gender equality, equal access to education, democracy, etc.) may seem less foreign and “would possibly be more intelligible and persuasive to more traditional classes (and not merely to modern upper and middle classes) and possibly, therefore, they may prove more durable” (2003).

Tohidi cites numerous scholars who “see modern liberal and gender egalitarian reformation of Islam as a requirement for the success of a broader societal and political reform toward democracy, pluralism and civil rights, including women’s rights.” She notes that “[s]uch an approach, therefore, would stress the urgent need for equipping women with the tools (for instance, knowledge of Arabic, the *Quran* [sic] and *fiqh* as well as feminist knowledge) that enables [...] women to ‘turn the table’ on Islamist authorities, to take Islamist men to task about what they preach and practice in the name of Islam” (2003, p. 140). Of course, while engaging in a critical analysis of and dialogue around current interpretations of Islam in Afghanistan may open up additional space for pluralistic thinking, to do so first requires that a social space exists in which to safely engage in this kind of *ijtihad*. The question is, does this space currently exist in Afghanistan? There is precedent for alternative, if not competing, interpretations of Islam in Afghanistan—Sufism is pervasive, as well as the Deobandist and Wahhabist reform movements, and Islamists (espousing political Islam) are gaining traction<sup>ii</sup> (Mendoza, 2008, p. 4-5). To mitigate potential violent responses and to move ahead with dialogue around gender in Islam, it may prove wise to look to the experiences and approaches that established Islamic feminists have employed in their endeavors to open up space for dialogue and reframing of Islam.

### **Drawbacks to a Feminist Ideology Rooted in Religion**

Secularists will no doubt bristle at the notion of women’s liberation through religion, and history has provided ample examples as to contradictions between liberatory doctrine and religious dogma. Certainly, Islamic feminism has skeptics (if not enemies) from both ends of the spectrum; patriarchal, conservative religious authorities are quick to attack anything labeled as ‘feminist’ as a Western tool for moral corruption, while (Western) Liberal feminists point to history in which religion in general, and Islam in particular, has been invoked to oppress, not liberate, women. However, Tohidi (2003) points out that both sides tend to essentialize both women and Islam. Still, there remains a danger for any religious-based ideology to skew dogmatic and essentialist. Indeed, as Tohidi warns, “spiritual feminism and faith-based feminists cannot be much different from religious fundamentalists if they do not respect the freedom of choice and impose their version of feminism on secular, laic and atheist feminists” (2003, p. 143). What is

additionally problematic, according to Tohidi (2003), is the tendency of any singularly ideological strand of feminism towards “sectarianism or totalitarianism” (p. 143). Moreover, just as Western liberal feminists must resist the tendency to dismiss alternative feminisms—particularly those rooted in religion or that veer from the standard Western feminist discourse, so too must Islamic feminists must resist the tendency to frame Islamic feminism as “the only legitimate or authentic voice for all women...negating, excluding, and silencing other voices and ideas among women [...]”(Tohidi, 2003, p. 143).

Despite the drawbacks and inevitable challenges to employing Islamic feminist theory as a counter to patriarchal Islamist interpretations, such an approach offers women, girls, and all those who seek to challenge gender inequality and promote education for Afghanistan’s girls and women the best chance to foment a credible oppositional discourse.

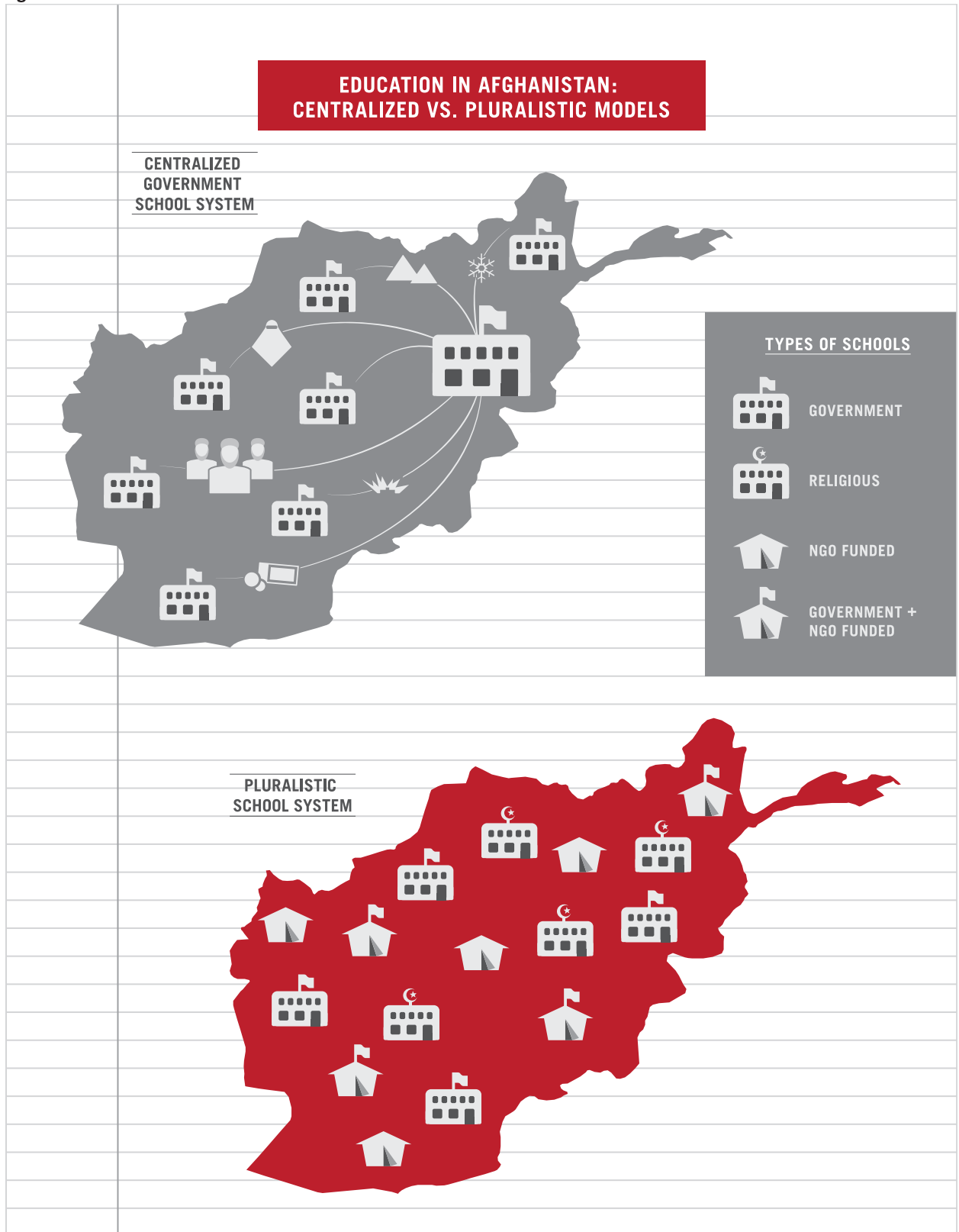
### **Conclusion**

The substantial logistical and ideological challenges to girls’ education outlined in this paper necessitate a robust and comprehensive response on the part of the Afghan government if it is serious about building a strong, democratic state. The dramatic increase in girls’ access to education since 2001 demonstrates the value of collaboration and flexible models for providing education. Slowly, the vision of equitable educational opportunities is gaining momentum in Afghanistan. However, the gains in education are not without setbacks, as the vicious attacks targeting girls and girls’ schools illustrate; the ongoing violence is certain to give rise to questions about the merits of pursuing Western-style gender parity. While there is a core of women in Afghanistan who are willing to fight for the opportunities that are rightfully theirs, many Afghans (both men and women) warily view Western ideals of education and nascent democracy as dangerously foreign. Women’s rights and girls’ education are central to the democratization project in Afghanistan and have the potential to generate a host of positive social and economic changes. The fragile government in a state traumatized by decades of conflict does not have the capacity ensure access to education, but it can use education as a platform for dramatic transformation. It will take many more years – or even decades – of policy change and effective implementation of reforms before Afghanistan’s path is truly democratic. Micro-level transition can be, and almost always is, an extremely lengthy process. “To change a label is easy, but to effect a comprehensive change in practice is very difficult, especially when engaged in a process of transition which has democracy as its aim” (McLeish, 1998, p. 19). Afghanistan’s transition is in progress. The local, grassroots efforts must continue to be supported by financial and ideological commitments from the national government and the international community in order to achieve the democratization of education. In order to succeed, this movement needs to garner full-fledged support from within; it cannot be successful without incorporating Islamic ideology and identifying critical religious organizations as catalysts for change. Establishing a pluralism of educational providers that are able to incorporate Islam and adapt to the disparate conditions around the country will address many of the risk factors that are currently inhibiting the expansion of girls’ education in Afghanistan. But girls’ education must go further to include tools that allow them to engage in *ijtihad* and become a new generation of female Islamic authorities. As Afghan’s girls have already

shown, many of them will continue traverse dangerous streets, brave threats, and subject themselves to physical dangers just to claim their seats in a in a classroom (whatever that may look like).

As the world moves closer to the 2014 draw-down of international forces in Afghanistan, it is imperative that we do not lose sight of women's rights and the importance of girls' access to education. The Afghan government must continue to pursue a flexible, pluralistic system of education—one which allows for and encourages critical thought and embraces gender equality—if the democracy project is to succeed. In terms of what it means to regional and international security and the continued development of Afghanistan towards peace and stability, Afghanistan simply cannot afford to miss the opportunity to educate all of its children. That said, the urge to instrumentalize girls' access to education, prioritizing it only as a means to a greater end must be resisted. Afghan's girls are end enough in themselves for the international community and the Afghan government to continue to work for their access to education and the full exercise of their rights. Empowered by education, Afghanistan's girls and women have unlimited potential to change the course of history—their own and that of this proud, yet ravaged nation.

Figure 5





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<sup>i</sup> The June, 2012 poison attacks are the second series of attacks against girls in school, both attributed to Taliban operatives. The earlier attacks occurred in May, 2012. See, for example: [http://www.usatoday.com/news/world/afghanistan/2010-05-27-afghanistan-girls\\_N.htm](http://www.usatoday.com/news/world/afghanistan/2010-05-27-afghanistan-girls_N.htm). This is following suspected poison attacks in 2010 (see, for example: <http://www.reuters.com/article/2010/04/25/us-afghanistan-school-idUSTRE63O0EN20100425> ) The Taliban have been implicated in other violent attacks against women and girls accessing education over the last several years, including the bombings of Pakistani girls' schools in November, 2011 (see, for example: <http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/11/16/us-pakistan-taliban-schools-idUSTRE7AF0GP20111116>) and again in April, 2012 (see, for example: <http://tribune.com.pk/story/360736/taliban-blow-up-girls-school-in-mohmand/>). In 2009, Taliban operatives attacked schoolgirls in Kandahar, throwing acid into their faces (see, for example: <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/01/14/world/asia/14kandahar.html?pagewanted=all>) Organizations such as RAWA, Canadian Women for Women in Afghanistan, Women for Afghan Women, Women's Views on News and many others also routinely report on violence that awaits girls and women seeking education throughout Afghanistan.

<sup>ii</sup> For an overview of Islam as it is practiced in Afghanistan, see Mendoza (2008).