

Education Policy as a Recursive System of Gendered Power: Evidence from Post-2021 Educational Restrictions in Afghanistan

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how education policy in Afghanistan operates as a system of gendered power following the 2021 policy restrictions, focusing on how these policies shape educational access, lived experiences, and adaptive responses among girls. The study employs a qualitative multi-level design, integrating semi-structured interviews with female students and teachers alongside documentary analysis of policy measures and international reports. Data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis supported by cross-source triangulation. The findings reveal that education policy functions as a recursive system in which institutional inequality and religious legitimation reinforce one another, producing psychological and socio-economic consequences. At the same time, participants demonstrate adaptive and resistant forms of agency, including informal and community-based learning practices. These dynamics indicate that exclusion, experience, and resistance are co-constitutive rather than sequential processes. The study contributes to theory by advancing a multi-level framework linking policy, lived experience, and agency. However, the relatively small sample size and limited access to policymakers constrain broader empirical generalization. This study offers a novel conceptualization of education policy as a recursive system of gendered power. By integrating social justice, community empowerment, and policy analysis, it provides a theoretically grounded and empirically supported framework for understanding educational exclusion in restrictive contexts.

Keywords: education policy, gender inequality, social justice in education, community empowerment, girls' education, qualitative research, Afghanistan.

DOI: [10.70376/jerp.v4i1.436](https://doi.org/10.70376/jerp.v4i1.436)

Received: 2026-01-05; Revised: 2026-03-26; Accepted: 2026-04-16; Published: 2026-04-25.

INTRODUCTION

Educational exclusion remains a persistent global challenge, particularly in conflict-affected and politically restrictive contexts where inequalities are not only reproduced but systematically institutionalized through policy and governance structures.¹ Increasingly, scholars have emphasized that the denial of education—especially for girls—extends beyond issues of access, functioning as a mechanism that shapes subjectivity, limits life trajectories, and reinforces broader systems of social and economic marginalization.² As such, education has become a critical site for examining questions of social justice, human rights, and sustainable development, particularly in contexts where governance structures actively regulate gender roles and participation in public life.

Afghanistan represents one of the most extreme contemporary manifestations of gendered educational exclusion. Since the return of Taliban rule in 2021, a series of policy measures have progressively restricted girls' access to secondary and higher education, alongside broader limitations on women's employment, mobility, and public participation.³ Emerging empirical evidence underscores the severity of these restrictions. For instance, recent studies report that 87.6% of girls excluded from education experience symptoms of depression, with nearly half reporting suicidal ideation,⁴ while international organizations estimate that approximately 1.4 million girls have been barred from secondary education since 2021.⁵ These patterns have led scholars to characterize the current system as a form of gendered educational apartheid, with profound implications for women's rights, wellbeing, and long-term societal development.⁶

Despite a growing body of scholarship on Afghanistan, existing studies tend to approach these dynamics in fragmented ways. Some focus on formal policy frameworks, others

¹ Yuvraj Singh, "The Exclusion of Bahujan Schoolchildren: An Anti-Caste Critique of the National Education Policy 2020, India," *CASTE / A Global Journal on Social Exclusion* 4, no. 1 (May 15, 2023): 54–74, <https://doi.org/10.26812/caste.v4i1.411>; Vidya Diwakar, "Interrogating Dynamic, Intersecting Inequalities in Education Amidst Armed Conflict," *Research in Comparative and International Education* 18, no. 4 (December 30, 2023): 528–46, <https://doi.org/10.1177/17454999231212714>; Tejendra Pherali, "Social Justice, Education and Peacebuilding: Conflict Transformation in Southern Thailand," *Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education* 53, no. 4 (May 19, 2023): 710–27, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03057925.2021.1951666>; Mark Ijov Terlumun and Hemen Terkimbi Manasseh, "Bridging Educational Disparities in Conflict-Affected Regions of Nigeria," *African Multidisciplinary Journal of Development* 5, no. 1 (May 31, 2025): 49–58, <https://doi.org/10.59568/AMJD-2025-13-2-06>.

² Diwakar, "Interrogating Dynamic, Intersecting Inequalities in Education Amidst Armed Conflict"; Vidya Diwakar, "Conflict Trajectories and Education: Gender-Disaggregated Evidence from India," *Defence and Peace Economics* 35, no. 3 (April 2, 2024): 320–38, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10242694.2023.2164913>.

³ Sebghatullah Qazi Zada and Mohd Ziaolhaq Qazi Zada, "The Taliban and Women's Human Rights in Afghanistan: The Way Forward," *The International Journal of Human Rights* 28, no. 10 (November 25, 2024): 1687–1722, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13642987.2024.2369584>.

⁴ Abdul Qadim Mohammadi et al., "Female Education Ban by the Taliban: A Descriptive Survey Study on Suicidal Ideation, Mental Health, and Health-Related Quality of Life among Girls in Afghanistan," *Journal of Public Health* 46, no. 3 (August 25, 2024): e439–47, <https://doi.org/10.1093/pubmed/fdae111>.

⁵ UNESCO, "Afghanistan: 1.4 Million Girls Still Banned from School by de Facto," Press release, 2024, <https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/afghanistan-14-million-girls-still-banned-school-de-facto-authorities>.

⁶ Anonymous author 1, Anonymous author 2, and Nasar Ahmad Shayan, "Challenges and Prospects: Women's Education in Contemporary Afghanistan," *Frontiers in Global Women's Health* 6 (March 20, 2025), <https://doi.org/10.3389/fgwh.2025.1477145>; Abdul Wasi Popalzay, "Gender Apartheid in Education: The Taliban's Educational Restrictions and Their Consequences for Afghan Women and Girls," *Journal of Gender Studies*, June 24, 2025, 1–13, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09589236.2025.2521683>.

examine human rights violations or socio-economic consequences, and still others analyze psychological impacts in isolation. While these contributions are valuable, they often fail to capture how policy, institutional structures, and lived experiences interact within a broader system of power. This fragmentation reflects a wider tendency in education research in conflict-affected contexts to treat policy, inequality, and lived experience as separate domains rather than interconnected processes.⁷ As a result, such approaches limit the capacity to understand how exclusion is simultaneously produced, legitimized, and experienced across multiple levels of analysis. Recent scholarship emphasizes that educational inequality must be analyzed as a systemic and multi-level phenomenon, shaped by the interaction between structural conditions, policy frameworks, and social practices.⁸ Without such an integrated perspective, the complex and recursive nature of educational exclusion remains insufficiently theorized.

Addressing this limitation, the present study examines the convergence between education policy, international documentary evidence, and lived experiences in Afghanistan following 2021. Drawing on semi-structured interviews with female students and teachers, alongside analysis of policy measures and international reports, the study investigates two research questions: (1) To what extent do lived experiences of educational restriction align with Taliban policy measures and international NGO reports? Moreover, (2) How do these policies shape educational access, lived experiences, and adaptive responses among girls? By integrating multiple sources of evidence, the study adopts a multi-level analytical approach that links macro-level policy, meso-level institutional processes, and micro-level lived experiences.

This study makes a distinct theoretical contribution by conceptualizing education policy as a recursive system of gendered power, in which mechanisms of institutional control, ideological legitimation, and lived consequences are dynamically interconnected with forms of adaptive and resistant agency. Unlike existing approaches that treat policy, experience, and resistance as separate domains, this framework demonstrates their co-constitutive and iterative relationships within a single analytical system. In doing so, the study moves beyond descriptive accounts of exclusion and offers a theoretically grounded model that explains how educational inequality is produced, sustained, and negotiated.

Importantly, this perspective also contributes to broader debates on social justice and community empowerment by highlighting how marginalized individuals and communities actively respond to restrictive conditions. While policy structures impose constraints, they also generate localized forms of agency—such as informal learning, digital adaptation, and

⁷ Pherali, "Social Justice, Education and Peacebuilding: Conflict Transformation in Southern Thailand"; Vidya Diwakar, "Interrogating Dynamic, Intersecting Inequalities in Education amidst Armed Conflict," *Research in Comparative and International Education* 18, no. 4 (December 30, 2023): 528–46, <https://doi.org/10.1177/17454999231212714>.

⁸ Fritz Hotman Syahmahita Damanik, "Gender and Education in the Context of Sustainable Development Goals," *Entita: Jurnal Pendidikan Ilmu Pengetahuan Sosial Dan Ilmu-Ilmu Sosial*, May 3, 2025, 251–66, <https://doi.org/10.19105/ejpis.v1i.19186>; Nasrin Jahan Jinia and Mohammed Asaduzzaman, "Gender Inequality and Sustainable Development," 2021, 279–89, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-95882-8_3.

community-based support—that reflect ongoing processes of negotiation and resilience.⁹ By situating these dynamics within a recursive framework, the study provides a more comprehensive understanding of how education operates as both a site of control and a space of contestation, with implications not only for Afghanistan but for other conflict-affected and restrictive contexts globally.

METHOD

This study adopts a qualitative case study design within a critical-interpretive framework to examine how education policy operates as a system of gendered power in Afghanistan. Rather than treating policy as a neutral administrative instrument, the study conceptualizes it as a site of governance through which inequality is produced, legitimized, and experienced. To capture these dynamics, the research employs a multi-level analytical design that integrates macro-level policy structures, meso-level institutional processes, and micro-level lived experiences. Afghanistan is treated as an analytically significant case representing an extreme form of policy-induced educational exclusion. This case enables an in-depth examination of how restrictive policy environments shape educational access, social roles, and individual trajectories in conflict-affected contexts. The study prioritizes analytical generalization over statistical representativeness, aiming to generate theoretically meaningful insights beyond the specific case.

The study draws on two complementary sources of data. The primary dataset consists of 13 semi-structured interviews with eight female university students and five female secondary school teachers who have directly experienced post-2021 educational restrictions. Participants were selected through purposive sampling based on their relevance to the research focus, ensuring rich, context-specific insights. The secondary dataset includes policy measures issued by Taliban de facto authorities after August 2021, as well as reports from international organizations addressing education, gender inequality, and socio-economic conditions. These documents were selected based on relevance, institutional credibility, and empirical depth. Importantly, policy documents and international reports are treated as primary data rather than contextual background, enabling systematic comparison with interview narratives.¹⁰

Interviews were conducted remotely via Zoom and WhatsApp between May and August 2025 to ensure participant safety and accessibility in a politically sensitive environment. Each interview lasted between 45 and 75 minutes and followed a semi-structured guide exploring educational experiences, perceptions of policy restrictions, and adaptive strategies. With participant consent, interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

⁹ John McLean and Maxine Cooper, "Internet Education of Girls and Women in Afghanistan," *Discourse and Communication for Sustainable Education* 16, no. 1 (June 1, 2025): 50–56, <https://doi.org/10.2478/dcse-2025-0005>; M. Habib Qazi et al., "Voices of Resistance: Afghan Women's Lived Experiences under the Taliban's Ban on Education," *Central Asian Survey*, October 21, 2025, 1–17, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02634937.2025.2554216>.

¹⁰ Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, "Conceptual and Design Thinking for Thematic Analysis," *Qualitative Psychology* 9, no. 1 (February 2022): 3–26, <https://doi.org/10.1037/qp0000196>.

Table 1. Key Post-2021 Education Policy Measures Affecting Girls and Women in Afghanistan

Authority	Date	Policy Measure	Policy Focus
Taliban De Facto Authorities	September 17, 2021	Ban on girls' secondary education	Restriction of access to secondary schooling ¹¹
Taliban De Facto Authorities	March 23, 2022	Enforcement of school closure for girls	Reinforcement of education restriction ¹²
Taliban De Facto Authorities	May 2022	Gender-based mobility regulations	Restrictions on women's movement and public presence ¹³
Taliban De Facto Authorities	December 20, 2022	Ban on women's higher education	Restriction of access to universities ¹⁴
Taliban De Facto Authorities	December 24, 2022	Ban on women's employment in NGOs	Restriction of economic participation ¹⁵

This table summarizes major policy measures issued by Taliban de facto authorities that restrict girls' and women's access to education, mobility, and employment, serving as the documentary basis for triangulated analysis.

The use of virtual interviewing methods is consistent with recent methodological guidance that highlights their effectiveness in accessing participants in sensitive or restricted contexts while maintaining flexibility and participant comfort.¹⁶ Documentary data were collected from official institutional websites and publicly accessible repositories, including publications from UNESCO, UNICEF, Human Rights Watch, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), and the World Health Organization (WHO). Table 1 presents key policy measures and corresponding documentary sources, serving as an analytical entry point for subsequent triangulation.

¹¹ Human Rights Watch, "World Report 2024: Afghanistan | Human Rights Watch," Report, 2024, <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2024/country-chapters/afghanistan>; International Committee of the Red Cross, "Afghanistan: People Suffer as Spending Capacity Shrinks and Prices Rise," 2022, <https://www.icrc.org/en/document/afghanistan-people-suffer-spending-capacity-shrinks-prices-rise>; UN Women, "Afghanistan Crisis Update: Women and Girls in Displacement Factsheet II-September 2022," 2022, https://data.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/documents/Publications/Asia_Pacific/Afghanistan-crisis-updateSept2022.pdf#:~:text=adding to existing restrictions on,2; World Health Organization, "Afghanistan Emergency Situation Report," 2023, <https://www.emro.who.int/images/stories/afghanistan/emergency-situation-report-August-2023.pdf>.

¹² UNESCO, "Afghanistan: 1.4 Million Girls Still Banned from School by de Facto."

¹³ UN Women, "Afghanistan Crisis Update: Women and Girls in Displacement Factsheet II-September 2022."

¹⁴ UNESCO, "Afghanistan: 1.4 Million Girls Still Banned from School by de Facto"; Human Rights Watch, "World Report 2024: Afghanistan | Human Rights Watch."

¹⁵ International Committee of the Red Cross, "Afghanistan: People Suffer as Spending Capacity Shrinks and Prices Rise"; World Health Organization, "Afghanistan Emergency Situation Report."

¹⁶ Danielle T. Just et al., "Navigating the Virtual Landscape: Methodological Considerations for Qualitative Research in Long-Term Care," *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 23 (January 29, 2024), <https://doi.org/10.1177/16094069241244859>.

Data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis, following a systematic and iterative process of coding, categorization, and theme development.¹⁷ The analysis began with inductive open coding of interview transcripts, followed by the refinement of codes into categories and themes through constant comparison.¹⁸ This approach enabled the identification of patterns that were grounded in the data while remaining theoretically informed. To strengthen analytical depth, the same coding framework was applied to documentary data, allowing for cross-source comparison and integration. This process aligns with recent approaches to qualitative analysis that emphasize the development of conceptual models through thematic synthesis.¹⁹ All coding was conducted using QualCoder 3.8, which facilitated transparent data organization, consistent coding, and traceability across multiple data sources.²⁰ The software facilitated systematic comparison between interview and documentary data, enhancing analytical rigor.

The study employs cross-source thematic triangulation by comparing patterns across three sources: policy measures, international reports, and interview data. Convergence is established when themes are supported across at least two sources and demonstrate analytical coherence.²¹ This approach enables the study to move beyond descriptive comparison and to identify recursive relationships between policy structures, lived consequences, and adaptive responses.

The study ensures trustworthiness through multiple strategies. Credibility is strengthened through data triangulation across interviews and documentary sources. Dependability is supported by maintaining a clear audit trail in QualCoder 3.8, documenting coding decisions and analytical procedures. Confirmability is enhanced through reflexive memoing, which makes the researcher's interpretive process transparent. Transferability is supported by providing detailed descriptions of context and participants. These strategies align with contemporary frameworks for rigor in qualitative research, which emphasize transparency, reflexivity, and the systematic validation of findings.²² The relatively small sample size is appropriate for qualitative inquiry, prioritizing depth of analysis and analytical generalization rather than statistical representation.

¹⁷ Sirwan Khalid Ahmed et al., "Using Thematic Analysis in Qualitative Research," *Journal of Medicine, Surgery, and Public Health* 6 (August 2025): 100198, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.glmedi.2025.100198>.

¹⁸ Ahmed et al.

¹⁹ Muhammad Naeem et al., "Demystification and Actualisation of Data Saturation in Qualitative Research Through Thematic Analysis," *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 23 (January 2, 2024), <https://doi.org/10.1177/16094069241229777>.

²⁰ Alexios Brailas, Elena Tragou, and Konstantinos Papachristopoulos, "Introduction to Qualitative Data Analysis and Coding with QualCoder," *American Journal of Qualitative Research* 7, no. 3 (April 29, 2023): 19–31, <https://doi.org/10.29333/ajqr/13230>.

²¹ Naeem et al., "Demystification and Actualisation of Data Saturation in Qualitative Research Through Thematic Analysis."

²² Sirwan Khalid Ahmed, "The Pillars of Trustworthiness in Qualitative Research," *Journal of Medicine, Surgery, and Public Health* 2 (April 2024): 100051, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.glmedi.2024.100051>.

Ethical considerations guided all stages of the research. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection, and anonymity was ensured through the use of pseudonyms and the removal of identifying information. Given the sensitive political context, particular attention was paid to minimizing risk and protecting participant safety. Interviews were conducted remotely, and participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any time without consequence.²³ All data were stored securely on password-protected devices accessible only to the researcher.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

1. Convergence Across Data Sources

The analysis demonstrates strong convergence across three sources of evidence: policy measures, international reports, and interview data. Rather than producing divergent interpretations, these sources consistently reinforce one another, indicating a coherent empirical pattern of educational restriction and its consequences. Policy measures outline the formal structure of exclusion, international reports quantify its scale and impact, and interview data reveal how these dynamics are experienced in everyday life.

Table 2. Cross-Source Triangulation of Findings

Theme	Policy Evidence	International Reports	Interview Evidence
Psychological Control	Closure of girls' secondary and higher education (2021–2022)	UNESCO/UNICEF: millions of girls excluded from schooling	"Our future is covered with black clouds." (S5); "We do not know what will happen to our future." (S3)
Institutionalized Gender Inequality	Restrictions on girls' education and women's participation in public life	UNESCO: 1.4 million girls banned; decline in female teachers	"Both boys and girls should have the same rights." (T2); "Women have no voice in these rules." (T4)
Religious Legitimation	Policies framed through morality, modesty, and gender norms	Human Rights Watch: restrictions extend to mobility, work, and public roles	"They say this is required by religion." (S2); "They say it protects honor and modesty." (S6)
Socio-economic Consequences	Education and employment bans (university, NGO work restrictions)	World Bank/ICRC: economic contraction, rising household vulnerability	"Girls are forced into early marriages." (T1); "Girls depend on others." (S4)
Grassroots Resistance and Adaptation	Absence of formal pathways for girls' education	WHO/UNICEF: community-based systems sustain limited access	"We continue learning through online classes." (S7); "Some girls study secretly at home." (S8)

As shown in Table 2, all themes identified in the analysis are supported across multiple data sources, demonstrating high analytical consistency. This convergence strengthens the

²³ Ruth Naughton-Doe et al., "Ethical Issues When Interviewing Older People about Loneliness: Reflections and Recommendations for an Effective Methodological Approach," *Ageing and Society* 44, no. 7 (July 1, 2024): 1681–99, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0144686X2200099X>.

validity of the findings and confirms that lived experiences are not isolated accounts but reflect broader structural conditions.

2. Psychological Control as a Lived Consequence of Policy Restriction

The findings indicate that educational restrictions operate not only as structural barriers but also as mechanisms of psychological control. Participants consistently describe anxiety, uncertainty, and a diminished sense of future possibility. Teachers report that students repeatedly question whether they will be able to continue their education, while students express feelings of fear and emotional exhaustion. These experiences are not limited to individual perception but reflect broader patterns documented in international reports, which highlight large-scale exclusion and its impact on mental wellbeing. The convergence of evidence suggests that policy restrictions shape not only access to education but also the psychological orientation of affected individuals, narrowing their expectations and constraining their sense of agency.

3. Institutionalization of Gender Inequality

The second theme demonstrates that gender inequality is structurally embedded within the education system. Participants describe unequal access to schooling, restrictions on curriculum content, and the absence of women in decision-making processes. These accounts are consistent with policy measures that explicitly limit girls' participation in education, as well as with international reports documenting declining female participation and systemic barriers. This pattern indicates that gender inequality is not incidental but institutionalized through governance structures. Policy measures do not merely restrict access; they redefine the conditions under which education is available, thereby reinforcing gendered hierarchies at both institutional and societal levels.

4. Religious Legitimation as a Mechanism of Governance

Participants frequently report that educational restrictions are justified through religious and moral narratives. These narratives frame exclusion as necessary to maintain social values such as honor and modesty, thereby positioning compliance as a moral obligation. At the same time, participants express skepticism toward these justifications, describing the policies as unfair and inconsistent with their aspirations. This tension suggests that religious framing functions as a mechanism of legitimation rather than a universally accepted belief system. International reports further indicate that such framing extends beyond education into broader forms of gender regulation, reinforcing its role in sustaining policy authority. The findings therefore highlight the importance of ideological discourse in normalizing and maintaining exclusion.

5. Socio-economic Consequences of Educational Exclusion

Educational restrictions are also associated with significant socio-economic consequences. Participants describe increased pressure to marry early and heightened economic dependency resulting from limited access to education and employment. These experiences align with international evidence documenting economic contraction, reduced public services, and increased household vulnerability. The findings suggest that educational exclusion operates as a mechanism for reproducing long-term inequality. By limiting

educational opportunities, policy measures constrain economic participation and reinforce dependency, thereby shaping life trajectories beyond the immediate context of schooling.

6. Grassroots Adaptation and Resistance

Despite restrictive conditions, participants report actively pursuing alternative strategies to sustain learning. These include online education, informal or hidden study practices, and support from families and communities. These adaptive responses demonstrate that individuals and communities do not passively accept policy restrictions but actively negotiate them. This pattern is consistent with international reports highlighting the role of community-based systems in maintaining access under constrained conditions. While these strategies do not fully replace formal education, they represent forms of agency that operate within the limits imposed by policy structures.

7. A Recursive System of Gendered Power

Taken together, the findings reveal a coherent analytical structure in which policy restrictions, institutional inequality, lived consequences, and adaptive responses are interconnected. Educational exclusion produces psychological and socio-economic effects that, in turn, shape how individuals respond to and navigate restrictive conditions. Importantly, the analysis also identifies recursive relationships across these dimensions. Policy structures shape lived experiences, while adaptive responses reflect ongoing negotiation within the system and may influence how policies are experienced and interpreted. This dynamic interaction supports conceptualizing education policy as a recursive system of gendered power rather than a linear process of restriction.

Discussion

Building on triangulated findings derived from interview data and documentary sources, this study reconceptualizes education policy not merely as a mechanism regulating access, but as a recursive system of gendered power that actively reproduces structural injustice. Rather than functioning as a neutral administrative framework, education policy in this context operates as a form of governance that shapes social hierarchies, restricts opportunities, and normalizes inequality. This perspective aligns with intersectionality-based approaches that emphasize how systemic inequities are produced through overlapping structures of power, including gender, class, and institutional authority.²⁴ In this sense, the findings extend social justice-oriented analyses by demonstrating how educational policy actively sustains marginalization in conflict-affected contexts.

From a theoretical standpoint, the findings challenge conventional models that treat policy, lived experience, and resistance as separate domains. Instead, the analysis shows that these elements are co-constitutive and dynamically interconnected. Institutional inequality and religious legitimation mutually reinforce mechanisms that construct and maintain policy authority. These mechanisms operate not only at a structural level but also through discursive

²⁴ James Joseph Scheurich and Madeline Mason, "An Intersectionality-Based Research Framework and Methodology That Emphasizes Systemic Inequities in Public Schooling, Including Racism, Sexism, and Classism," *Cultural Studies ↔ Critical Methodologies* 24, no. 5 (October 31, 2024): 319–30, <https://doi.org/10.1177/15327086241254815>.

processes that frame exclusion as morally justified. This resonates with recent scholarship highlighting how educational inequalities are experienced not only as material deprivation but also as moral and political questions of legitimacy within unequal systems.²⁵ The findings therefore suggest that policy operates simultaneously as a structural and ideological system of control.

The analysis further demonstrates that the consequences of educational exclusion extend beyond immediate access to schooling. At the level of lived experience, policy restrictions produce psychological control and socio-economic marginalization, shaping individuals' perceptions of their future and limiting their capacity for participation in social and economic life. These findings are consistent with research showing that education plays a critical role in psychological wellbeing, particularly for women and girls affected by structural and gender-based inequalities.²⁶ By linking macro-level policy to micro-level experience, the study underscores the need to understand education as a multidimensional site of power that shapes both material conditions and subjective realities.

Importantly, the study moves beyond dominant narratives that portray affected individuals as passive recipients of policy constraints. The findings highlight the emergence of grassroots agency as a form of community empowerment. Practices such as informal education, online learning, and family-supported study illustrate how individuals and communities actively negotiate restrictive conditions. These forms of agency should not be understood merely as coping strategies, but as situated practices through which individuals reinterpret and resist policy constraints. In doing so, participants demonstrate the development of critical awareness regarding the legitimacy of educational restrictions. This interpretation is supported by research showing that alternative learning systems—particularly digital and community-based initiatives—function as meaningful forms of agency and resilience in restrictive environments.²⁷

To clarify these relationships, Figure 1 presents a simplified conceptual model of how policy structures, lived consequences, and adaptive responses interact within a recursive system. The figure illustrates how institutional inequality and religious legitimation interact to shape gendered education policy, which in turn produces lived consequences, including psychological and socio-economic effects. These consequences generate adaptive and resistant forms of agency that feed back into the policy environment, creating a recursive system in which control, experience, and response are dynamically interconnected.

The identification of these dynamics supports the study's central theoretical contribution: the conceptualization of education policy as a recursive system. The findings show that policy structures shape lived consequences, while adaptive and resistant responses

²⁵ Yau Yu Chan and Hei-hang Hayes Tang, "Student Voices About Educational Inequalities and Justice: Problematizing a Neoliberal Education System," *Education and Urban Society* 57, no. 3 (March 23, 2025): 299–322, <https://doi.org/10.1177/00131245251314135>.

²⁶ Nomisha Kurian, Basma Hajir, and Kevin Kester, "Protecting and Supporting Children and Women Affected by Gender-Based Violence: The Role of Education in Survivor Wellbeing," *Journal of Peace Education* 21, no. 3 (September 27, 2024): 285–312, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17400201.2024.2323467>.

²⁷ McLean and Cooper, "Internet Education of Girls and Women in Afghanistan."

simultaneously reflect and influence how these structures are experienced and negotiated. This recursive relationship challenges linear models of policy implementation and instead emphasizes the dynamic, iterative interplay between control and agency.²⁸ As illustrated in Figure 1, education policy operates through continuous feedback processes in which exclusion and resistance are mutually constitutive rather than sequential.²⁹

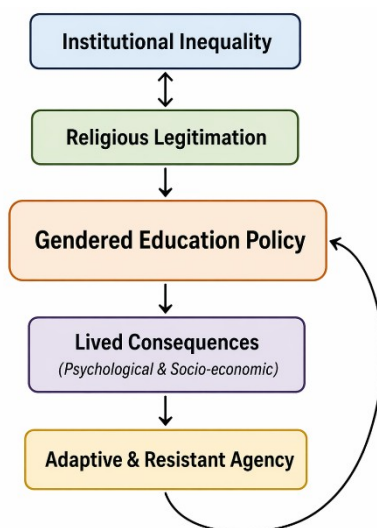


Figure 1. Conceptual model of education policy as a recursive system of gendered power in Afghanistan.

The implications of this analysis extend beyond the Afghan context. While grounded in a specific case, the patterns identified—particularly the interaction between institutional control, ideological legitimation, and grassroots agency—reflect broader dynamics observed in restrictive and conflict-affected settings across the Global South. These findings contribute to a growing body of scholarship emphasizing that educational inequality must be understood as a systemic and contextually embedded phenomenon rather than an isolated issue.³⁰ In such contexts, education systems are deeply intertwined with structures of power, governance, and social stratification, shaping both opportunities and constraints for marginalized populations.

In addition to its theoretical contributions, the study has important implications for policy and practice. Addressing gender inequality in education requires moving beyond access-oriented interventions toward approaches that engage with underlying structures of

²⁸ Dewiana Novitasari et al., “Higher Education Leadership and Policy Implementation: A Qualitative Exploration of Strategic Decision-Making,” *Indonesian Journal of Management and Economic Research (IJOMER)* 2, no. 01 (June 29, 2025): 75–82, <https://doi.org/10.70508/5ndrqs04>.

²⁹ Sebastian Anselmann and Veronika Anselmann, “Using a Non-Recursive Model with Feedback Loops to Identify Barriers to Learning as a Dynamic Construct in Workplace Learning,” *Vocations and Learning* 19, no. 1 (December 19, 2026): 3, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12186-026-09382-z>; Nicolò Pagan et al., “A Classification of Feedback Loops and Their Relation to Biases in Automated Decision-Making Systems,” in *Equity and Access in Algorithms, Mechanisms, and Optimization* (New York, NY, USA: ACM, 2023), 1–14, <https://doi.org/10.1145/3617694.3623227>.

³⁰ Pherali, “Social Justice, Education and Peacebuilding: Conflict Transformation in Southern Thailand”; Arifatul Karimah and Hera Susanti, “Gender Inequality in Education and Regional Economic Growth in Indonesia,” *Jurnal Ekonomi Pembangunan* 20, no. 1 (August 5, 2022): 1–14, <https://doi.org/10.29259/jep.v20i1.17841>.

power and legitimation.³¹ Policies must account for the socio-cultural and ideological frameworks that sustain exclusion, while also recognizing the role of community-based initiatives in maintaining educational participation. Supporting such initiatives may strengthen local capacity and foster resilience in marginalized communities, particularly in conflict-affected settings where formal systems are disrupted.³² This suggests that effective policy responses should integrate structural reform with community empowerment strategies, enabling more inclusive and sustainable forms of educational development.³³

Furthermore, the study underscores the importance of education for sustainable development. Educational exclusion contributes to long-term socio-economic marginalization, limiting women's participation in the workforce and reinforcing intergenerational inequality. These findings are consistent with research demonstrating that girls' education is closely linked to social capital, empowerment, and broader development outcomes.³⁴ Ensuring equitable access to education, therefore, is not only a matter of rights but a foundational condition for sustainable and inclusive development.

Despite these contributions, the study has several limitations. The relatively small sample size limits the breadth of empirical findings, although the study prioritizes analytical depth and theoretical insight, consistent with qualitative research approaches that emphasize saturation over generalizability.³⁵ The absence of direct access to policymakers constrains understanding of internal decision-making processes, reflecting common challenges in researching governance structures within restrictive environments.³⁶ Additionally, the sensitive political context may have influenced participants' responses and restricted access to a broader range of perspectives, as participants may exercise caution when discussing politically sensitive issues.³⁷ These limitations reflect broader challenges in conducting research in conflict-affected and politically constrained settings, where access, safety, and data reliability remain ongoing methodological concerns.

Future research could expand on these findings by including a wider range of stakeholders, including policymakers and male participants, to provide a more comprehensive understanding of gendered power dynamics. Longitudinal studies would be particularly valuable in examining how educational exclusion shapes life trajectories over

³¹ Hira Amin, Alina Zaman, and Evren Tok, "Education for Sustainable Development and Global Citizenship Education in the GCC: A Systematic Literature Review," *Globalisation, Societies and Education* 24, no. 2 (March 4, 2026): 359–74, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14767724.2023.2265846>.

³² Maria Bou Zeid and Kamal Abouchedid, "Reconceptualizing Education System Resilience through Inclusive Participation in Conflict-Affected Societies," *International Journal of Educational Research* 133 (2025): 102751, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijer.2025.102751>.

³³ Friedrich W. Affolter and Anna Azaryeva Valente, "Learning for Peace: Lessons Learned from UNICEF's Peacebuilding, Education, and Advocacy in Conflict-Affected Context Programme," 2020, 219–39, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-22176-8_14.

³⁴ Sheng-Hsiang Lance Peng, "An Intergenerational Comeback: Girls' Education, Development, and Social Capital," *Policy Futures in Education* 22, no. 8 (November 1, 2024): 1709–28, <https://doi.org/10.1177/14782103241237320>.

³⁵ Naeem et al., "Demystification and Actualisation of Data Saturation in Qualitative Research Through Thematic Analysis."

³⁶ Michelle D. Young, Sarah Diem, and Carrie Sampson, "The Vital Necessity of Critical Education Policy Research," *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis* 46, no. 2 (June 25, 2024): 397–405, <https://doi.org/10.3102/01623737241239985>.

³⁷ Naughton-Doe et al., "Ethical Issues When Interviewing Older People about Loneliness: Reflections and Recommendations for an Effective Methodological Approach."

time. Comparative studies across different contexts could further refine the conceptual framework proposed in this study.

This study demonstrates that education policy in restrictive contexts should be understood not as a static structure of exclusion, but as a dynamic and recursive system in which mechanisms of control, lived consequences, and forms of agency are continuously co-produced. By integrating social justice, community empowerment, and policy analysis within a single framework, the study offers a theoretically grounded and empirically supported contribution to understanding how educational inequality is produced, experienced, and contested.

CONCLUSION

This study reconceptualizes education policy in Afghanistan as a recursive system of gendered power, moving beyond linear accounts of access restriction toward a multi-level understanding of how exclusion is produced, legitimized, and experienced. By integrating policy measures, international reports, and lived experiences, the analysis demonstrates that institutional inequality, ideological legitimation, and lived consequences are dynamically interconnected with forms of adaptive and resistant agency. In doing so, the study advances a theoretical contribution by showing that exclusion, experience, and resistance are co-constitutive processes rather than sequential outcomes. This framework challenges conventional models of policy implementation and offers a more nuanced understanding of how education systems operate in restrictive and conflict-affected contexts.

From a social justice perspective, the findings highlight that educational exclusion functions as a mechanism that reproduces structural inequality while constraining long-term opportunities for girls and women. At the same time, the emergence of community-based agency underscores the potential for empowerment through localized practices of learning, adaptation, and resistance. These dynamics carry significant implications for sustainable development, particularly for economic participation, social resilience, and intergenerational equity. Addressing educational inequality, therefore, requires policy approaches that move beyond access-oriented solutions and engage with the underlying structures of power and legitimation that sustain exclusion, while also supporting community-driven pathways for inclusive and equitable development.

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