



## THE POLITICS OF EDUCATION IN AFGHANISTAN

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**Abstract** The fight for Afghan women against the Taliban was part of the justification of the 2001 invasion of Afghanistan. Under the Taliban, Afghanistan experienced the most repressive gender regime in the Muslim world. International intervention in the country is the clearest rhetorical commitment by Western actors to advancing the rights of Muslim women anywhere. The chief achievement of this intervention has been the dramatic rise in school enrollment by boys and girls. Despite the overall enthusiasm for education, there are some who oppose government schools, even going so far as to physically attack them. The historical legacy of imperialism and civil war has turned schools into gateways to economic opportunity and symbols of often-illegitimate governments. This article examines the progress and pitfalls of the effort to educate and empower Afghan women over the past decade. I focus on the educational sector and the significant gains made in increasing access to school for girls while discussing the ways in which a lack of educational quality and continuing security concerns jeopardize these gains. Despite some caveats, I argue that guarded optimism is appropriate in that the 2001 occupation may yet yield some positive benefit for Afghanistan by creating the infrastructure for women's schooling.

*Keywords:* Afghanistan, politics of education, girls' education, culture, foreign occupation