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Gendered Disruptions in Human Development: Women's Educational Exclusion and HDI Trends in Afghanistan, 1990–2023

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Abstract
Women's education is widely recognised as a core condition of human development, yet its developmental effects remain fragile where educational rights are politically contingent. This article examines how shifts in women's access to education correspond with Afghanistan's Human Development Index (HDI) trajectory from 1990 to 2023. Methodologically, it adopts a qualitative longitudinal case study combining descriptive HDI trend analysis with process tracing and documentary evidence from UN agencies, the World Bank, and international human rights organisations. The analysis shows that Afghanistan's HDI rose from 0.284 in 1990 to 0.480 in 2014, reflecting partial development gains during periods of educational expansion and post-2001 reconstruction. However, these gains remained fragile. Following the 2021 political rupture, HDI declined to 0.473, while mean years of schooling fell from 3.0 in 2021 to 2.5 in 2022–2023. Although HDI partially recovered to 0.496 in 2023, with expected years of schooling around 10.8 and life expectancy reaching 66.0 years, this apparent stabilisation did not indicate substantive recovery in women's capabilities. Instead, continued restrictions on secondary and higher education suggest a widening gap between aggregate development indicators and gendered access to agency, human capital formation, and public participation. The article argues that women's education should be understood as a structural condition of sustainable human development in fragile and conflict-affected contexts.

1. Introduction

Women's education is widely recognised as a central condition of human development. From a Human Development perspective, education is not only a route to employment or income generation, but also a capability that expands agency, social participation, health awareness, and the ability to make meaningful choices. This interpretation is consistent with the capability approach, which evaluates development according to what people are effectively able to do and to be, rather than only by income or aggregate welfare [1]. Human Development scholarship likewise treats education as part of a wider framework of agency, rights, and public action, rather than as a narrow sectoral input [2]. When women are excluded from education, the consequences therefore extend beyond schooling itself. Educational exclusion restricts women's ability to participate in the labour market, access public institutions, influence family and community decisions, and transmit human capital across generations. In fragile and conflict-affected contexts, these effects are especially severe because educational access is often dependent on political authority, security conditions, and institutional continuity rather than being protected as a durable right.

Afghanistan represents one of the clearest contemporary cases of this problem. Since the early 1990s, women's access to education has expanded and collapsed repeatedly in response to political instability, regime change, ideological governance, and prolonged conflict [3]. Research on Afghanistan's post-2001 education sector shows that access and equity improved after the fall of the first Taliban regime, but that girls' education remained constrained by conservative social attitudes, security concerns, teacher shortages, regional disparities, and weak state capacity [4], [5]. Under the first Taliban regime, girls' schooling and women's participation in public life were systematically restricted. After 2001, international engagement and reconstruction efforts supported a major expansion of schooling, including girls' education, teacher recruitment, and institutional rebuilding. Yet these gains remained uneven and politically fragile. Following the Taliban's return to power in 2021, girls and women were again excluded from secondary and higher education, while restrictions on employment, mobility, and

public participation further narrowed women's social and economic opportunities [6], [7], [8]. This repeated stop–start pattern makes Afghanistan an analytically important case for examining what happens to human development when women's educational access is repeatedly disrupted.

Existing studies and reports have documented important aspects of this trajectory. Research on Afghanistan has examined the historical politicisation of women's rights and education, the effects of Taliban restrictions, the post-2001 expansion of schooling, and the collapse of women's public participation after 2021 [4], [5], [3], [9], [7], [10], [11]. Recent empirical work has also shown that girls' secondary education in Afghanistan is shaped not only by enrolment access but also by household decision-making, teacher education, mentoring, school attendance, and intergenerational effects of maternal education [12]. Human Development scholarship, meanwhile, has shown that education, health, income, agency, and empowerment are mutually reinforcing dimensions of development, and that gender inequality limits the expansion of national capabilities [2], [13], [14], [1], [15]. However, these strands of literature are often treated separately. Studies of Afghan girls' education tend to focus on access, rights, or policy restrictions; studies of Taliban rule often emphasise political control and gender governance; and studies using HDI frequently discuss aggregate development outcomes without systematically connecting them to gendered educational disruption. As a result, less attention has been given to how repeated interruptions in women's education correspond with Afghanistan's long-term HDI trajectory across different political periods.

This article addresses that gap by offering a gender-sensitive reading of Afghanistan's Human Development Index (HDI) trajectory from 1990 to 2023. It asks: how have shifts in women's educational access corresponded with Afghanistan's human development trajectory, as reflected in HDI trends? The study does not claim that women's education alone statistically determines HDI change. Rather, it examines how changes in women's educational access correspond with broader human development patterns and how these patterns can be interpreted through the capabilities approach. In this sense, HDI is used not as a complete measure of gender equality, but as a longitudinal indicator through which the relationship between educational access, capability formation, and development fragility can be examined.

The timeframe of 1990–2023 is selected for both empirical and analytical reasons. Empirically, 1990 marks the beginning of the available UNDP HDI series, making it the earliest point from which Afghanistan's long-term human development trajectory can be systematically traced. Analytically, the period captures several distinct political and educational phases: pre-Taliban instability in the early 1990s, the first Taliban regime from 1996 to 2001, the post-2001 reconstruction and educational expansion period, the fragile stagnation that followed the reduction of international engagement after 2014, and the post-2021 reversal under renewed Taliban rule. This timeframe therefore allows the study to examine not only whether development indicators improved or declined, but also how these movements corresponded with changing political authority over women's education.

Taliban authority over women's education policy is central to this analysis because the restriction of girls' and women's education has not been merely a social consequence of conflict, but a deliberate instrument of governance. Recent human-rights scholarship argues that the Taliban's post-2021 practices directly contradict Afghanistan's obligations concerning women's education, employment, political participation, health, and equality before the law [7]. Similarly, recent gender studies scholarship characterises the post-2021 education restrictions as systematic gender-based exclusion with educational, psychological, socio-economic, and developmental consequences [9]. In both periods of Taliban rule, education policy became a mechanism through which women's public presence, mobility, employment, and agency were regulated. By closing or restricting access to secondary schools and universities, the Taliban did not only interrupt schooling; they also weakened the institutional pathways through which women accumulate skills, enter professions, participate in civic life, and contribute to national development. This makes women's education a key site through which broader human development gains can be expanded, stalled, or reversed.

At the same time, the post-2021 data environment requires caution. The collapse of the previous government, the restructuring of state institutions, and the limited transparency of de facto authorities create potential gaps and uncertainties in official reporting. For this reason, the study treats recent HDI figures as indicators requiring contextual interpretation rather than as self-sufficient evidence of recovery or decline. Post-2021 trends are triangulated with evidence from UNESCO, UNICEF, the World Bank, UN Women, Human Rights Watch, and Amnesty International in order to assess whether numerical movements in HDI correspond with substantive changes in education, livelihoods, institutional capacity, and women's agency.

The article contributes to Human Development scholarship in three ways. First, it links women's educational disruption to Afghanistan's longitudinal HDI trajectory rather than treating education policy and development indicators as separate issues. Second, it clarifies how aggregate development indicators may show limited stabilisation even when women's capabilities continue to contract. Third, it demonstrates that in fragile and conflict-affected contexts, development gains are not automatically cumulative; they remain reversible when women's access to education depends on political tolerance rather than legal and institutional protection. The article proceeds by outlining the theoretical and methodological framework, analysing Afghanistan's HDI trajectory across political periods, and discussing the implications of gendered educational disruption for sustainable human development.

1.1. Theoretical Framework: Human Development and Gender

Human Development theory emerged in response to development models that treated economic growth as the primary indicator of progress. Earlier approaches largely equated development with rising income levels or increases in gross domestic product. Amartya Sen challenged this view by reframing development as the expansion of substantive freedoms—people's real opportunities to live lives they have reason to value [16]. Later scholarship clarifies that the capability approach is a broad normative framework for evaluating individual well-being, social arrangements, policy design, and social change, with a particular focus on the distinction between means and ends and between achieved functionings and substantive freedoms [1]. This shift altered not only how development is measured, but how development success itself is understood.

Rather than prioritising economic outputs, Human Development theory centres on capabilities, substantive freedoms, equity, and overall well-being. Development failure, from this perspective, is not limited to economic stagnation. It also occurs when individuals are systematically prevented from acquiring or exercising basic capabilities, including education, health, and social participation.

Education occupies a distinctive position within this framework because it expands capabilities directly while enabling other forms of functioning. Sen conceptualises education and health as "social opportunities"—institutional arrangements that enhance individuals' substantive freedom to live better lives [16]. Fukuda-Parr [2] further emphasises that the Human Development paradigm contains both an evaluative dimension, concerned with assessing improvements in human lives, and an agency dimension, concerned with people's ability to achieve such improvements through public action, rights, and participation. These opportunities shape not only private well-being, such as health and longevity, but also individuals' ability to participate effectively in economic and political life. Illiteracy, in this sense, operates as a structural barrier, limiting economic participation and constraining democratic engagement [16]. When access to education is restricted, the resulting loss extends across multiple dimensions of human development.

Human Development theory places choice at the centre of analysis. Development is understood as a process of enlarging people's choices [15]. Education matters not only because it raises productivity or income, but because it expands individuals' capacity to make informed decisions and pursue their own aspirations. Policies that restrict educational access therefore undermine the core logic of human development itself.

1.2. Human Development Index as an Analytical Tool

The Human Development Index (HDI) was introduced by the United Nations Development Programme in 1990 as an alternative to development assessments centred primarily on income. Earlier approaches relied heavily on indicators such as gross domestic product, often treating economic growth as a proxy for social progress. HDI challenged this assumption by translating Human Development theory into a measurable framework that places human well-being—rather than economic output alone—at the centre of development assessment [2], [15]. The index captures development across three core dimensions: education, health, and standard of living. Education is assessed using expected and mean years of schooling, capturing both access and attainment. Health is measured through life expectancy at birth, reflecting the capacity to live a long and healthy life. Standard of living is measured by gross national income per capita adjusted for purchasing power parity, indicating access to material resources [15].

These components are combined into a composite index ranging from 0 to 1. The analytical value of HDI lies less in the precision of any single indicator than in the interaction among dimensions. Education, health, and income reinforce one another, such that deterioration in one dimension is rarely isolated from decline in the others. This interdependence reflects a core insight of Human Development theory: development outcomes cannot be meaningfully understood in isolation [15].

For longitudinal analysis, HDI is particularly useful because it allows researchers to track development trajectories over time and to identify deviations from long-term trends. At the same time, the HDI must be interpreted cautiously because it captures only a limited subset of human development; Ranis, Stewart, and Samman [14] show that many important dimensions of human development are not fully represented by HDI alone. The Human Development Report 2023/24 documents how recent global shocks and political instability have altered development paths, with the first sustained global decline in HDI values occurring during 2020–2021 [17]. By moving beyond income-based measures, HDI captures broader changes in human well-being that persist beyond short-term economic fluctuations. In contexts marked by repeated disruption, including conflict and institutional instability, this multidimensional perspective is especially valuable, provided that HDI is read together with qualitative and gender-sensitive evidence rather than as a self-sufficient measure [14], [17].

1.3. Education as a Capability Multiplier

Within the capabilities approach, education functions as a dynamic multiplier that determines an individual's ability to convert resources into substantive freedoms. Rather than a mere social input, education enhances the conversion factors required for agency, with empirical research linking higher attainment to improved health outcomes, more robust labour market participation, increased productivity, and heightened political engagement [16]. In Afghanistan, this multiplier effect is especially visible because girls' educational outcomes are shaped by family decision-making, household responsibilities, female teacher availability, school quality, security, and local access barriers [4], [12]. These benefits are not only individual but intergenerational; educated parents are more likely to invest in the health and schooling of their children, creating a compounding developmental effect that accumulates over time [12]. At the societal level, this process underpins long-term economic resilience, social cohesion, and institutional capacity, with cross-national data showing consistent associations between long-run educational attainment and key outcomes such as economic growth, inequality reduction, and political freedom [18].

However, Human Development theory cautions that education's role as a multiplier is contingent upon qualitative outcomes rather than mere quantitative enrolment. Conventional metrics often fail to capture disparities in learning quality and skill acquisition, which are the true drivers of developmental value [19]. Empirical evidence demonstrates that schooling expansion yields negligible developmental impact if it is not accompanied by improvements in cognitive skills; once educational quality is accounted for, years of schooling lose much of their explanatory power for long-run economic growth [19]. Thus, in fragile contexts, education that is not translated into real skill acquisition or agency fails to fulfil its role as a structural determinant of development.

1.4. Gender Equality and Development Outcomes

Gender inequality operates as a structural constraint on the formation of national capabilities rather than a peripheral social concern. Access to core freedoms, such as education, employment, and political voice, is mediated by institutional arrangements and social relations that systematically restrict women's agency and choice. Kabeer's framework is especially useful here because it defines empowerment through the interrelationship between resources, agency, and achievements, while also warning that access to education alone does not automatically become empowerment unless women can convert that resource into meaningful choices and social participation [13]. The developmental cost of exclusion is stark: while expanding women's education generates disproportionately high social returns, the barriers preventing girls from completing a full twelve-year schooling cycle result in an estimated global loss of between US$15 trillion and US$30 trillion in lifetime productivity and earnings [20].

From a capabilities perspective, gendered exclusion constitutes a fundamental failure of agency, reducing women to passive recipients of policy rather than active agents of change. When denied access to education, women are constrained in their ability to make informed choices, express preferences, and participate in collective decision-making. These deprivations are cumulative and intersectional; as Kabeer [13] demonstrates, educational and institutional exclusions shape entire life trajectories and reproduce inequality across generations. Ultimately, these disparities are rarely incidental but are actively produced and reinforced by social norms, power imbalances, and deliberate policy choices embedded within institutional structures [21]. For fragile states, this implies that development can never be sustainable if its foundational capabilities are systemically withheld from half the population.

1.5. Why HDI is Used Instead of GDI/GII as the Main Longitudinal Measure

This study uses the Human Development Index (HDI) as its main longitudinal measure while recognising that HDI is not, in itself, a direct measure of gender inequality. HDI captures average national achievement in three core dimensions of human development: health, education, and standard of living. It therefore cannot show the full distribution of development gains between women and men, nor can it capture all gendered restrictions on agency, mobility, employment, or public participation. For this reason, HDI is used cautiously in this article and is not presented as a comprehensive gender-equality indicator.

The reason for using HDI as the central measure is that the article examines Afghanistan's long-term national human development trajectory from 1990 to 2023. HDI provides a consistent annual series across this full period, allowing the analysis to identify broad patterns of development, stagnation, decline, and partial recovery across successive political periods. This longitudinal continuity is essential for the article's central question: how repeated disruptions in women's access to education correspond with Afghanistan's wider human development trajectory over time.

Gender-specific indices such as the Gender Development Index (GDI) and the Gender Inequality Index (GII) are important and relevant, but they are less suitable as the main index for this particular analysis. GDI measures gender gaps in the same basic dimensions used in HDI, while GII focuses on reproductive health, empowerment, and labour-market participation. These measures provide useful gender-sensitive context, yet they do not offer the same long, consistent annual series for Afghanistan across the full 1990–2023 period. Moreover, critical scholarship on gender composite indices warns that their construction, functional form, and combination of different types of indicators can complicate interpretation, especially for low-income countries [22]. Therefore, while GDI and GII are analytically relevant, they are not used as the principal longitudinal measure in this article.

For this reason, GDI and GII are treated as contextual and supplementary evidence where available rather than as the core longitudinal measure. They help illuminate the gendered nature of Afghanistan's development crisis but cannot replace the HDI timeline used to trace national development movement across the full period. This decision is also consistent with broader HDI scholarship, which emphasises that HDI is useful for tracing basic long-term development trajectories but incomplete as a

comprehensive account of human development [14]. The study therefore uses HDI cautiously, while relying on gender-sensitive documentary evidence to interpret what aggregate indicators cannot show directly.

At the same time, HDI remains analytically meaningful for a gender-sensitive reading of Afghanistan because women's exclusion from education is explicit, institutionalised, and large-scale. In such a context, changes in HDI's education components, particularly expected years of schooling and mean years of schooling, are not gender-neutral in their implications. They reflect a development environment in which half the population is legally and institutionally constrained from accumulating human capital and exercising agency. Thus, while HDI cannot measure gender inequality directly, its education dimension becomes highly relevant when interpreted alongside documentary evidence on girls' and women's exclusion from schooling, higher education, employment, and public life.

Accordingly, this study uses HDI as a cautious longitudinal indicator of national human development, not as a complete measure of gender equality. The gendered interpretation does not come from HDI alone; it comes from reading HDI trends together with qualitative evidence on education policy, Taliban restrictions, institutional withdrawal, labour-market exclusion, and capability loss. This approach allows the article to retain HDI's longitudinal comparability while avoiding the overclaim that aggregate HDI values fully capture women's lived experience or the depth of gendered deprivation in Afghanistan.

1.6. Operational Analytical Framework

This study applies Human Development theory by treating women's education as a core capability that enables wider forms of agency, participation, and human capital formation. The framework does not assume a simple or direct causal relationship between women's education and HDI change. Instead, it uses HDI trends and documentary evidence to examine how periods of educational inclusion, exclusion, and institutional disruption correspond with broader patterns of capability expansion or contraction. In this sense, the theoretical concepts guide the interpretation of HDI components, particularly expected years of schooling, mean years of schooling, life expectancy, and GNI per capita, while qualitative evidence helps explain the mechanisms behind these movements. Table 1 summarises this operationalisation.

Table 1. Operational analytical framework for interpreting women's educational exclusion and HDI trends

Theoretical concept	Meaning in this study	Empirical indicator/evidence	Expected implication for HDI/human development
Capability expansion	The enlargement of women's real opportunities to learn, work, participate, and make life choices.	Expansion of girls' schooling, women's return to universities, increased enrolment, rising schooling indicators, women's participation in public institutions.	Associated with improvement in HDI, especially through education indicators and longer-term effects on income, health, and participation.
Capability deprivation	The denial or restriction of basic opportunities necessary for human development.	School closures, bans on girls' secondary education, restrictions on women's university access, mobility limits, and exclusion from employment.	Associated with stagnation or decline in human development because women are prevented from accumulating and using human capital.
Education as a capability multiplier	Education strengthens other capabilities, including health awareness, labour-market participation, income security, civic	Expected years of schooling, mean years of schooling, female literacy, enrolment patterns, teacher availability, and evidence	Improvements in education are expected to support broader development gains, while disruption weakens the

Theoretical concept	Meaning in this study	Empirical indicator/evidence	Expected implication for HDI/human development
	voice, and intergenerational development.	on women's employment and public participation.	foundations of future HDI progress.
Gendered institutional exclusion	The use of law, policy, or institutional practice to restrict women's access to education and public life.	Taliban education bans, removal of women from public institutions, restrictions on female teachers and lecturers, exclusion from employment and civic participation.	Suggests that development decline is not only economic or conflict-driven, but also produced through gendered institutional barriers.
Reverse development / capability erosion	The loss of previously accumulated development gains when rights, institutions, and access are withdrawn.	Post-2021 reversal of girls' education, decline in mean years of schooling from 3.0 in 2021 to 2.5 in 2022–2023, institutional withdrawal, and professional out-migration.	Indicates that development gains are reversible when they are not legally and institutionally protected.
Survival recovery without agency recovery	A situation where aggregate indicators improve slightly while substantive freedoms remain restricted.	Post-2021 partial HDI recovery, life expectancy reaching 66.0 in 2023, continued exclusion from education and employment, income insecurity, and restricted public participation.	Suggests that HDI stabilisation may reflect survival-related improvements rather than genuine recovery in women's capabilities or agency.

2. Research Method

This study adopts a qualitative longitudinal case study design supported by descriptive Human Development Index (HDI) trend analysis and process tracing. The purpose of the study is not to test a statistical model, estimate causal effects, or measure the independent impact of women's education on HDI through econometric techniques. Rather, it examines how shifts in women's access to education correspond with Afghanistan's broader human development trajectory across successive political periods between 1990 and 2023. The methodological logic is therefore qualitative and interpretive: HDI data are used to identify patterns and turning points in national human development, while documentary evidence is used to explain the political and institutional mechanisms through which women's educational inclusion or exclusion shaped capability formation over time.

The qualitative character of the study lies in its case-study orientation, periodised historical analysis, and documentary interpretation of policy change. Afghanistan is examined as a longitudinal case in which women's education was repeatedly expanded, restricted, and politicised across different regimes. This makes it possible to analyse development not as a single outcome, but as a process shaped by institutional arrangements, political authority, conflict, and gendered access to social opportunity. The study therefore focuses on mechanisms rather than statistical regularities. It asks how educational access was enabled or withdrawn, how these changes affected women's ability to build and exercise capabilities, and how these processes were reflected in HDI components such as expected years of schooling, mean years of schooling, life expectancy, and income.

HDI data are used descriptively rather than econometrically. The annual HDI series provides a longitudinal indicator of Afghanistan's human development trajectory and allows the study to identify broad movements, including periods of improvement, stagnation, decline, and partial statistical recovery. These data are not treated as sufficient evidence of causality on their own. Instead, they

function as a descriptive structure for the analysis, showing when development indicators changed and which HDI components were most affected. The interpretation of these changes depends on contextual evidence from policy documents, United Nations agencies, World Bank reports, UNESCO and UNICEF education data, and international human rights documentation.

Process tracing is used to connect policy shifts to observed HDI fluctuations. Following within-case process-tracing logic [23], the analysis proceeds in five steps. First, the study identifies major turning points in Afghanistan's HDI trajectory between 1990 and 2023. Second, these turning points are compared with key political and educational-policy events, including the Taliban's first period of rule, the post-2001 reconstruction phase, the slowdown after 2014, and the post-2021 restrictions on girls' and women's education. Third, documentary evidence is examined for indicators of mechanisms linking educational access to human development, including policy-driven exclusion, institutional withdrawal, restrictions on women's employment and mobility, erosion of female human capital, and cumulative capability loss. Fourth, HDI components are interpreted in relation to these mechanisms, with particular attention to whether changes in education, income, and life expectancy reflect substantive capability expansion or only limited statistical stabilisation. Fifth, rival explanations such as conflict intensity, aid dependence, economic contraction, migration, and post-2021 data reliability constraints are considered in order to avoid reducing HDI change to education policy alone.

Qualitative documentary evidence is therefore not used merely as background information. It provides the interpretive basis for linking changes in women's educational access to broader development outcomes. For example, a decline or stagnation in schooling indicators is interpreted alongside evidence of school closures, bans on secondary and higher education, restrictions on women's employment, and institutional erosion within the education sector. Similarly, post-2021 HDI stabilisation is assessed cautiously by comparing improvements in life expectancy with continued educational exclusion, income insecurity, and restrictions on women's public participation. This triangulation allows the study to distinguish between numerical recovery in aggregate indicators and substantive recovery in capabilities.

The study does not claim strict statistical causality. Given the single-case design, the use of aggregate HDI data, and the complexity of Afghanistan's political and humanitarian context, it would be methodologically inappropriate to claim that changes in women's education alone caused specific HDI fluctuations. Instead, the study makes a more limited and theoretically grounded claim: shifts in women's access to education correspond with, and help explain, changes in Afghanistan's human development trajectory through identifiable institutional and capability-based mechanisms. This approach is consistent with the article's Human Development framework, which understands development as the expansion or contraction of substantive freedoms rather than as a purely numerical outcome.

2.1. Analytical Procedure

The analysis followed a periodised longitudinal procedure. First, an annual HDI timeline for Afghanistan was constructed for the years 1990–2023, including HDI value, expected years of schooling, mean years of schooling, life expectancy, and GNI per capita. Second, major political and education-policy turning points were identified, particularly regime changes, the expansion or restriction of girls' and women's education, and moments of institutional disruption. Third, the timeline was divided into analytically justified periods according to these political and educational shifts rather than by HDI movement alone. Fourth, changes in HDI and its components were compared across these periods to identify patterns of improvement, stagnation, decline, or partial recovery. Fifth, the numerical trends were triangulated with documentary evidence from UNESCO, UNICEF, the World Bank, UN Women, Human Rights Watch, and Amnesty International in order to interpret the social and institutional conditions behind the indicators. Finally, process tracing was used to identify plausible mechanisms linking women's educational access to human development outcomes, including policy-driven exclusion, institutional withdrawal, brain drain, labour-market exclusion, and cumulative capability loss. The study avoids causal overclaiming: changes in women's education are described as

corresponding with, being associated with, or suggesting shifts in human development rather than as statistically proven causes of specific HDI fluctuations.

2.2. Data Sources

The primary empirical material consists of Human Development Index data published by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), covering the period from 1990 to 2023 [24]. These data provide longitudinal measures across education, health, and income, enabling analysis of development trajectories across distinct political contexts. To contextualise and interpret shifts in HDI indicators—particularly those related to women's education—the study draws on secondary sources from the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the World Bank, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), and international human rights organisations (e.g., Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International). These sources are used to interpret HDI trends rather than generate independent outcome measures, providing evidence on education policy, enrolment patterns, gender-based restrictions, and institutional practices shaping women's access to schooling. Triangulating indicators with qualitative documentation strengthens the analysis and reduces reliance on any single source. Primary data collection was not undertaken. Following the Taliban's return to power in 2021, direct research involving women entails significant ethical and security risks. Under these conditions, reliance on established international datasets and credible secondary reporting is methodologically appropriate and ethically responsible.

Post-2021 HDI figures are interpreted with caution. The collapse of the previous Afghan government in August 2021 and the subsequent shift to de facto Taliban authorities created risks of data gaps, reporting inconsistencies, institutional discontinuity, and delayed measurement. Accordingly, this study does not treat the 2021–2023 HDI values as perfectly precise or fully transparent measures of social conditions. Rather, they are used as indicative estimates produced through international datasets and are interpreted alongside corroborating evidence from UNDP, the World Bank, UNESCO, UNICEF, UN Women, Human Rights Watch, and Amnesty International. The analysis therefore places greater weight on broader directional patterns than on small year-to-year fluctuations. In particular, post-2021 trends are read in relation to schooling decline, income contraction, institutional exclusion from education and employment, and a limited statistical recovery driven partly by improvements in life expectancy rather than by substantive recovery in women's capabilities. This data constraint is acknowledged as a limitation of the study and is addressed through triangulation rather than ignored.

2.3. Case Selection: Why Afghanistan?

Afghanistan is selected as an extreme case of institutionalised gender-based educational exclusion. The purpose of this case selection is not to treat Afghanistan as statistically representative of all fragile or conflict-affected states. Rather, the case is analytically valuable because the speed, scale, and legal-institutional character of reversals in women's education make the relationship between gendered educational access and human development unusually visible. Across the period examined, women's education in Afghanistan was not only affected by insecurity or poverty; it was repeatedly expanded, restricted, and dismantled through political authority and institutional policy.

The Afghan case allows the study to observe several distinct phases within one long HDI timeline: severe capability deprivation and educational exclusion during the 1990s, post-2001 educational expansion and partial development recovery, stagnation after 2014, and renewed reversal after the Taliban's return to power in 2021. This temporal variation makes Afghanistan especially useful for examining how development gains can accumulate, stall, and unravel when women's access to education remains politically contingent rather than legally and institutionally protected.

As an extreme case, Afghanistan does not provide a basis for broad statistical generalisation. Its value lies instead in theory-building. The case makes visible a mechanism that may also matter in other fragile contexts: when women's education is treated as negotiable policy terrain, capability formation becomes unstable and human development gains remain vulnerable to reversal. Afghanistan therefore offers an

analytically instructive setting for understanding fragile human development, gendered capability loss, and the conditions under which educational gains fail to consolidate into durable development.

2.4. Limitations

This study has limitations that warrant acknowledgement. The absence of primary data restricts direct engagement with Afghan women's lived experiences and limits micro-level analysis. Access to official documents was also constrained, as many records have been destroyed, restricted, or remain under the control of de facto authorities. In addition, the HDI relies on national aggregates and lacks gender-disaggregated indicators, which may obscure gender-based and regional inequalities.

These constraints reflect both the research context and the study's analytical focus. The analysis prioritises long-term institutional change and macro-level development outcomes rather than individual trajectories. Within this scope, HDI remains informative where women's exclusion from education is explicit, legally enforced, and widespread. To mitigate the limits of aggregated data, HDI trends are interpreted alongside qualitative evidence from reputable international sources. While this approach cannot remove all constraints, it enables a theoretically grounded and ethically responsible analysis of gendered development dynamics in a highly restricted research environment.

3. Results and Discussion

This section analyses Afghanistan's HDI trajectory from 1990 to 2023 through four analytically defined periods: 1990–2001, 2002–2014, 2015–2020, and 2021–2023. These periods are not divided by HDI movement alone, but by major political and education-policy shifts that shaped women's access to schooling and public participation. The analysis therefore combines descriptive HDI trend analysis with process tracing, linking changes in HDI and its components to documentary evidence on educational expansion, restriction, institutional capacity, conflict, and gendered exclusion. The central argument is not that women's education statistically caused each HDI fluctuation, but that shifts in women's educational access correspond with and help explain broader patterns of capability expansion, stagnation, and reversal.

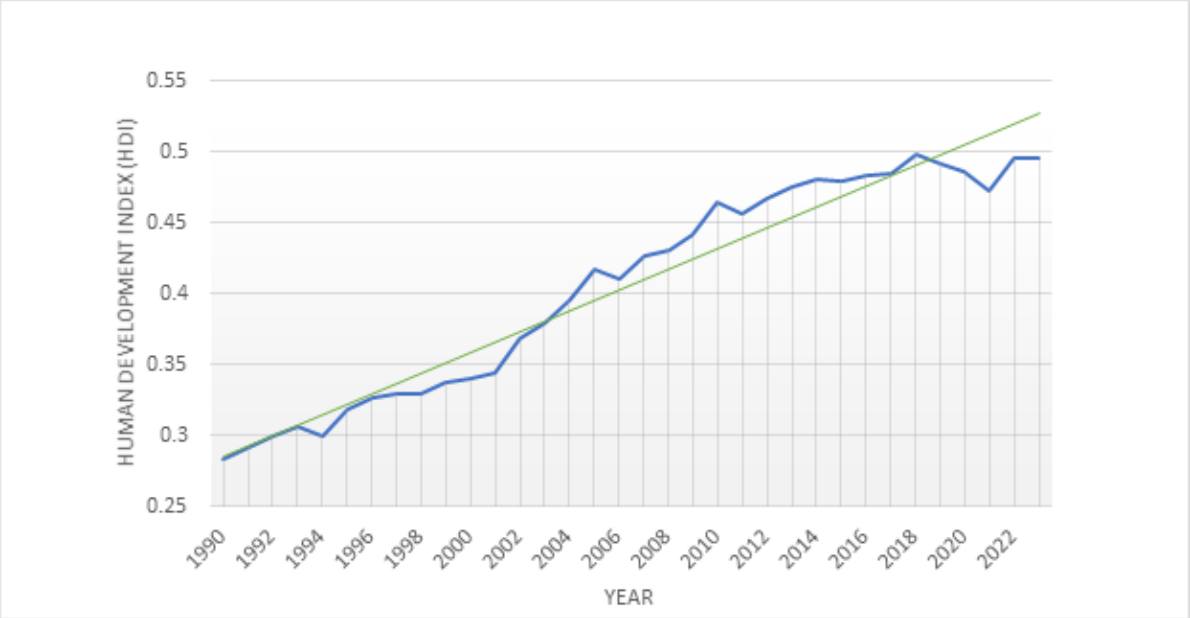

Figure 1. Afghanistan's Human Development Index (HDI), 1990–2023. The solid line shows observed HDI values; the dashed line represents a descriptive linear trend illustrating the long-term trajectory. Data source: UNDP [24]; author's visualization.

3.1. 1990–2001: Baseline Deprivation and Gendered Exclusion

The period from 1990 to 2001 represents the baseline of Afghanistan's contemporary human development trajectory. In 1990, Afghanistan's HDI stood at 0.284, with life expectancy at 46.0 years, expected years of schooling at 2.9, mean years of schooling at 0.9, and GNI per capita at US$3,116 [24]. These indicators show severe capability deprivation across the three core dimensions of human development: health, education, and income. Educational deprivation was particularly pronounced, indicating the weak institutional foundations upon which later development efforts would depend.

The early 1990s were marked by political fragmentation and conflict, conditions that weakened public institutions and limited the state's capacity to sustain education. Women's education was already vulnerable during this period, but the Taliban's rise to power in 1996 marked a more explicit shift toward institutionalised gender exclusion. Under Taliban rule, girls' schools were closed, women were restricted from public life, and access to formal education and employment was systematically curtailed [25], [26]. This was not simply a failure of educational provision; it was a gendered reorganisation of public life in which women's access to learning, work, mobility, and civic participation was actively constrained.

HDI movement during this period should be interpreted carefully. Afghanistan's HDI increased from 0.284 in 1990 to 0.344 in 2001, while life expectancy rose from 46.0 to 55.8 years and expected years of schooling increased from 2.9 to 6.1 [24]. However, mean years of schooling remained extremely low, rising only from 0.9 to 1.3 across the same period. This divergence suggests that limited improvements in survival indicators and expected schooling did not translate into broad-based capability expansion, particularly for women and girls. From a Human Development perspective, the exclusion of women from education weakened the social foundations through which development gains could become cumulative. Improvements in life expectancy did not remove the deeper structural problem: half the population was denied meaningful access to education and public participation.

This period therefore establishes a key baseline for the article's argument. Afghanistan entered the post-2001 period with extremely low human development, weak educational attainment, and a recent history of institutionalised gender exclusion. The later expansion of schooling must be understood against this background of accumulated deprivation.

3.2. 2002–2014: Capability Recovery and Educational Expansion

The period from 2002 to 2014 was characterised by post-Taliban reconstruction, international assistance, and the reopening of educational opportunities for girls and women. Afghanistan's HDI increased from 0.368 in 2002 to 0.480 in 2014, the highest level recorded up to that point in the dataset [24]. Life expectancy rose from 56.5 to 62.5 years, expected years of schooling increased from 6.4 to 10.5, and mean years of schooling rose from 1.4 to 2.1. These changes suggest a phase of partial capability recovery after the severe deprivation of the 1990s.

Educational expansion was central to this recovery. Following the fall of the Taliban in 2001, girls' schools reopened, women returned to universities, and education became a major focus of reconstruction. Jones [4] shows that the post-2001 education agenda in Afghanistan placed strong emphasis on access and equity, but also faced persistent challenges related to conservative attitudes, security risks, weak data, teacher recruitment, and regional disparities. Kissane [5] similarly argues that girls' education in Afghanistan required not only school provision but also context-sensitive approaches capable of addressing ideological, logistical, and social barriers. This expansion helps explain why, between 2002 and 2014, expected years of schooling rose from 6.4 to 10.5, while mean years of schooling increased from 1.4 to 2.1. These improvements indicate that the education component of HDI responded strongly to the reopening of institutional pathways for girls and women.

The broader development environment also improved. Women re-entered parts of the public sector, including health, education, civil service, and political representation. By 2021, women held 27% of parliamentary seats, although these gains were lost after the Taliban's return to power [27], [28], [29].

These developments are consistent with the capabilities approach, which treats education not only as an outcome but as a multiplier that enables other forms of participation, agency, and social opportunity.

At the same time, the post-2001 gains remained fragile. Much of the expansion depended on external funding, international security arrangements, and uneven institutional rebuilding. Rural areas, conflict-affected provinces, and conservative social environments continued to face barriers to girls' education. UNESCO's Education for All Global Monitoring Report notes that expanded access does not automatically produce meaningful learning when teacher availability, quality, and deployment remain weak [30]. In Afghanistan, this limitation was particularly important because girls' access to schooling often depended on the availability of female teachers, family security concerns, and local acceptance.

Thus, the 2002–2014 period shows both capability recovery and incomplete consolidation. HDI improved, and education indicators expanded, but these gains did not become institutionally irreversible. Women's educational access increased substantially, yet it remained vulnerable to political reversal because it was not fully protected by durable legal, institutional, and social guarantees.

3.3. 2015–2020: Fragile Progress and Stagnation

Between 2015 and 2020, Afghanistan entered a period of fragile progress and stagnation. HDI remained broadly stable but showed little sustained improvement, standing at 0.479 in 2015 and 0.486 in 2020 [24]. Expected years of schooling remained around 10.5–10.8, while mean years of schooling increased from 2.1 in 2015 to 3.0 in 2020. Life expectancy fluctuated, reaching 60.4 years in 2020, and GNI per capita stood at US$2,152 [24].

This period suggests that the expansionary momentum of the post-2001 years had slowed. The drawdown of international troops, reduced aid flows, political instability, contested elections, and continued insurgent violence weakened state capacity and affected the delivery of public services. Although there was no nationwide formal ban on girls' education during this period, progress toward gender parity remained uneven. Women's labour force participation stayed low, and improvements in female literacy and secondary education remained constrained by insecurity, poverty, and social norms [31].

The stagnation of this period is analytically important because it shows that women's education can be formally permitted while still remaining fragile in practice. Access to school did not necessarily mean secure, high-quality, or socially accepted education. Attacks on schools, especially girls' schools, continued to disrupt attendance and generate fear [32]. Conservative resistance, family safety concerns, and shortages of female teachers limited many girls' ability to remain in school, particularly at the secondary level. These conditions suggest that educational inclusion remained partial and uneven.

From a Human Development perspective, 2015–2020 can be understood as a period in which capability gains existed but did not deepen sufficiently. HDI did not collapse, but it also did not show strong consolidated progress. This stagnation supports the article's broader argument that development gains are vulnerable when they depend on unstable security conditions, external support, and incomplete institutional protection. By 2020, Afghanistan had achieved measurable improvement compared with the 1990s, but the foundations of these gains remained exposed to political rupture.

3.4. 2021–2023: Rupture, Brain Drain, and Statistical Recovery Without Capability Recovery

The Taliban's return to power in August 2021 marked a structural rupture in Afghanistan's development trajectory. HDI fell from 0.486 in 2020 to 0.473 in 2021, while GNI per capita declined sharply to US$1,534 [24]. This downturn coincided with renewed restrictions on girls' secondary education, the later ban on women's university education, and wider limits on women's employment, mobility, and public participation [33], [34], [6], [8]. The post-2021 period therefore represents not only an economic or political crisis, but a renewed institutionalisation of gendered capability deprivation.

The education sector was directly affected. Girls and women were excluded from secondary and higher education, while restrictions on employment reduced women's participation in schools, universities,

public administration, and civil society. Qazi Zada and Qazi Zada [7] locate these restrictions within a wider pattern of violations affecting women's education, employment, health, political participation, mobility, and equality before the law. Popalzay [9] further describes the post-2021 education bans as systematic gender-based exclusion with long-term consequences for women's learning, employment, mental health, poverty, and national development. The significance of the 2021 rupture therefore lies not only in the immediate closure of schools and universities to women, but in the interruption of capability formation across an entire generation.

The apparent HDI recovery in 2022–2023 must therefore be disaggregated. After falling to 0.473 in 2021, Afghanistan's HDI rose to 0.495 in 2022 and 0.496 in 2023 [24]. On the surface, this appears to indicate recovery. However, the component indicators suggest a more limited and uneven pattern. Life expectancy increased to 65.6 in 2022 and 66.0 in 2023, while expected years of schooling remained around 10.8. By contrast, mean years of schooling fell from 3.0 in 2021 to 2.5 in 2022–2023 [24]. This means that the post-2021 HDI increase was not driven by an improvement in actual educational attainment. Rather, it appears to reflect a survival-led statistical recovery, especially through life expectancy, while education and income-related capabilities remained deeply constrained.

This divergence is central to the article's argument. A rising aggregate HDI value does not necessarily indicate substantive capability recovery, particularly when women remain excluded from secondary and higher education. The increase in life expectancy may reflect reduced large-scale conflict and changes in mortality patterns, but this does not mean that women's agency, education, employment, or public participation recovered. In this sense, the post-2021 period can be described as statistical stabilisation without capability recovery. The HDI trend improves slightly, but the institutional conditions for women's human development continue to deteriorate.

The fall in mean years of schooling from 3.0 in 2021 to 2.5 in 2022–2023 also requires careful interpretation. This decline is consistent with several overlapping processes, including interrupted schooling, exclusion from higher education, institutional collapse, and educated-professional outmigration. It is also consistent with recent evidence that losses in girls' education have intergenerational implications, because maternal education and household decision-making are linked to girls' attendance and schooling outcomes [12]. The mental-health effects of the ban further reinforce the capability interpretation: Mohammadi et al. [35] found high levels of depression symptoms and suicidal ideation among Afghan girls and women prohibited from attending secondary schools, high schools, and universities. However, the available evidence does not allow the decline in mean years of schooling to be attributed to brain drain alone. It should instead be interpreted as the combined outcome of policy-driven exclusion, institutional disruption, migration, and weakened educational continuity.

Economic indicators reinforce this cautious interpretation. Afghanistan's economy contracted sharply after 2021, with the World Bank reporting a 20.7% contraction in 2021–22 [36]. Household deprivation remained severe, with 62% of households unable to meet basic consumption needs and 37% reporting income insufficient even for food [36]. These conditions indicate that the partial HDI recovery did not correspond to broad-based economic recovery or improved livelihood security. Restrictions on women's employment further reduced household income potential and weakened women's ability to convert education into economic and social participation.

Taken together, the 2021–2023 period demonstrates the limits of interpreting aggregate HDI values without gender-sensitive contextual analysis. The post-2021 HDI increase suggests partial statistical recovery, but the decline in mean years of schooling, continued exclusion from education, institutional withdrawal, income insecurity, and restrictions on women's public participation suggest ongoing capability erosion. This supports the article's wider claim that development gains are not automatically cumulative. Where women's education is politically contingent rather than legally and institutionally protected, human development can stabilise numerically while substantive freedoms continue to contract.

Table 2. Strategic HDI turning points in Afghanistan, 1990–2023

Year	HDI	Life exp.	Schooling*	GNI per capita	Interpretive note
1990	0.284	46.0	2.9 / 0.9	US$3,116	Baseline capability deprivation
1996	0.326	53.2	4.7 / 1.1	US$1,468	First Taliban takeover begins
2002	0.368	56.5	6.4 / 1.4	US$1,364	Post-2001 reopening phase
2014	0.480	62.5	10.5 / 2.1	US$2,222	Peak reconstruction gains
2021	0.473	62.0	10.7 / 3.0	US$1,534	Regime rupture and economic shock
2023	0.496	66.0	10.8 / 2.5	US$1,972	Survival recovery, schooling weakness

Note: *Schooling is presented as expected years of schooling / mean years of schooling. The full annual HDI series is provided in Supplementary Table S1.

3.5. Synthesis: Gendered Educational Disruption and Fragile Human Development

Across the four periods, Afghanistan's HDI trajectory reveals a repeated pattern of expansion, stagnation, and reversal. The 1990–2001 period shows baseline deprivation under conditions of conflict and gendered exclusion. The 2002–2014 period demonstrates that educational expansion can correspond with measurable improvements in human development. The 2015–2020 period shows that such gains can stagnate when institutional capacity, security, and gender equality remain fragile. The 2021–2023 period then illustrates how quickly development gains can be undermined when women's education is again removed from the institutional framework.

The findings support a central claim of Human Development theory: education is not merely a sectoral policy outcome, but a foundational capability that enables other forms of agency and participation [16]. In Afghanistan, women's education functioned as a capability multiplier during periods of relative inclusion and as a site of capability destruction during periods of institutionalised exclusion. This interpretation is consistent with Robeyns's distinction between achieved outcomes and substantive freedoms [1], Fukuda-Parr's emphasis on the agency dimension of Human Development [2], and Ranis et al.'s warning that HDI must be read alongside broader evidence of human freedom and social conditions [14]. The post-2021 period is therefore best understood not as simple underdevelopment, but as a process of gendered capability loss produced through policy, institutional withdrawal, and exclusion from public life.

The Afghan case is therefore analytically significant as an extreme case of institutionalised gender-based educational exclusion. It does not represent all fragile states statistically, but it makes visible a mechanism that may operate in other contexts: when women's access to education depends on political tolerance rather than institutional protection, capability expansion remains vulnerable to reversal. The post-2021 HDI pattern is especially revealing because it shows that aggregate recovery can coexist with gendered capability erosion. Life expectancy-driven statistical improvement does not compensate for the loss of educational access, professional participation, and agency. Sustainable human development requires not only survival, but also the protected ability to learn, work, participate, and exercise choice.

4. Conclusion

This study asked what happens to human development when women's access to education is repeatedly disrupted. The Afghan case shows that such disruption makes human development reversible, shallow, and survival-based rather than capability-based. When women's education is expanded, human development indicators may improve; but when that access remains politically contingent rather than legally and institutionally protected, those gains do not consolidate into durable development. They can stagnate, weaken, and reverse when political authority withdraws women's right to learn, work, and participate in public life.

The longitudinal HDI trajectory from 1990 to 2023 demonstrates this pattern clearly. After 2001, the reopening and expansion of girls' and women's education corresponded with measurable improvements in Afghanistan's HDI and schooling indicators. After 2014, progress became increasingly fragile as insecurity, aid dependence, weak institutions, and uneven access limited further capability formation. After the Taliban's return to power in 2021, the exclusion of girls and women from secondary and higher education marked a structural rupture, reversing core elements of the post-2001 development settlement.

The article's theoretical contribution is to show that women's education is not a social add-on to development, but a structural condition of capability formation. Education enables women to accumulate human capital, access employment, participate in public institutions, improve family and community well-being, and exercise agency. When women are excluded from education, the loss is therefore not confined to schooling. It weakens the broader foundations through which human development is built and transmitted across generations.

This also changes how Afghanistan's post-2021 HDI movement should be interpreted. The limited stabilisation of HDI in 2022–2023 is potentially misleading if read as substantive recovery. Life expectancy improved, helping lift the aggregate index, but mean years of schooling declined and women's access to education, employment, mobility, and public participation continued to contract. This suggests a form of statistical recovery without capability recovery: survival indicators may improve while agency, human capital formation, and substantive freedoms remain deeply restricted.

The policy implication is clear. Human development gains cannot become durable where women's educational rights depend on regime tolerance, donor priorities, or temporary political conditions. For development to move beyond fragile recovery, women's access to education must be protected through enforceable legal guarantees, resilient institutions, and social conditions that allow education to translate into work, participation, and agency. Without such protection, development remains vulnerable to reversal, even when aggregate indicators appear to stabilise.

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