

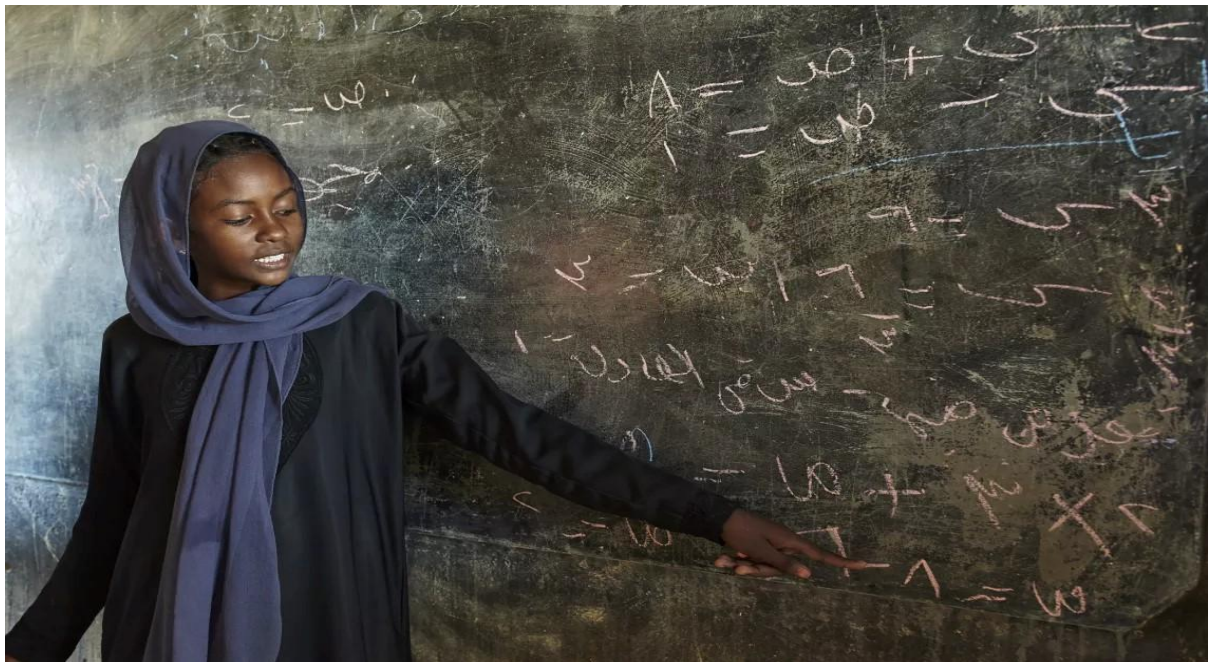
Half the sky, Half denied: Rethinking Girls' Education Policies in India, Nigeria & Afghanistan

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Introduction

In much of the Global South, education remains an unrealised dream for millions of girls². This policy brief examines the ongoing crisis of girls' education in India, Nigeria, and Afghanistan, three contexts that reveal distinct yet interconnected manifestations of the same systemic injustice. ³Despite international

¹ <https://www.unicef.org/education/girls-education>

² (UNESCO, 2023, p. 14).

³ (Plan International, 2024).

commitments and decades of national reform, patriarchal norms, economic deprivation, insecurity, and political neglect continue to obstruct girls' access to education. ⁴Education is not a gift; it is a fundamental human right and a precondition for equality, agency, and social justice.⁵ For many girls, schooling remains conditional, granted when convenient and withdrawn when culture demands conformity.⁶ This policy brief argues that girls' education should no longer be approached as a development goal but as an act of justice and human dignity. The right to learn must be treated as non-negotiable, and governments must confront the cultural and institutional barriers that sustain exclusion.⁷

Problem Statement

Despite decades of national and international commitments, girls' education remains obstructed in India, Nigeria, and Afghanistan due to intersecting barriers of poverty, patriarchy, insecurity, and institutional failure. The core problem is not merely insufficient access but the systemic denial of education as a fundamental right. This policy brief examines why existing interventions remain ineffective and identifies the structural causes behind the persistent exclusion of girls from schooling.

Background: The Unseen Crisis

Across the Global South, approximately 122 million girls remain out of school. ⁸Behind these statistics lie silenced aspirations and lives shaped by structural inequality. The denial of education is not accidental; it is the outcome of systems that normalise exclusion and disguise discrimination as tradition. ⁹In countries like India, Nigeria, and Afghanistan, girls face multiple layers of disadvantage: poverty, restrictive gender norms, and inadequate safety mechanisms. ¹⁰These factors reinforce each other, creating what UNICEF describes as an “*ecosystem of deprivation*.” ¹¹ While international commitments such as CEDAW and Sustainable Development Goal 4 affirm every girl's right to free, safe, and equal education, the lived realities in India, Nigeria, and Afghanistan reveal a persistent gap between global norms and local practice. The rationale for addressing this

⁴ (UNICEF, 2023, p. 7; Human Rights Watch, 2024).

⁵ (UNESCO, 2023, p. 5).

⁶ (Nussbaum, 2011, p. 33).

⁷ (UNICEF, 2023, p. 10).

⁸ (UNESCO, 2023, p. 14).

⁹ (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 52).

¹⁰ (UNICEF, 2023, p. 7).

¹¹ UNICEF (2023, p. 11)

crisis transcends economic growth. Education is foundational to achieving gender equality, reducing poverty, and ensuring democratic participation. The failure to educate girls is thus not only a social or developmental lapse but a violation of human rights. As UNESCO notes, each year of schooling increases a girl's future earnings and health outcomes while contributing to national stability. Still, patriarchal resistance often outweighs such evidence, resulting in what this paper identifies as “culturalized denial, a process through which structural inequality is justified as tradition.”¹² These structural patterns reveal why policy interventions often fail: they address surface-level obstacles like infrastructure or enrolment but ignore the deeper ideological and cultural resistance that restricts girls' autonomy. Understanding this context is essential for designing policies that confront, not merely accommodate, the forces that sustain educational exclusion.

Case Study 1: India - Promises and the Weight of Reality

India's policy landscape for girls' education is one of ambitious legal guarantees coexisting with persistent social resistance. Article 21A and the Right to Education Act lay a strong constitutional foundation, yet the everyday realities of girls' lives reveal a much more complicated picture.¹³ The causes are ordinary yet devastating: a lack of toilets, inadequate menstrual hygiene facilities, early marriage, and persistent fears of harassment.¹⁴ Cultural expectations play a significant role. In many rural households, educating girls is still perceived as an “*investment with no return*.”¹⁵ The National Family Health Survey reports¹⁶ that one in four Indian girls is married before the age of eighteen, often leading to permanent school dropout. At the secondary level, nearly 30% of Indian girls drop out of school, compared to 22% of boys, reflecting the widening gender gap as girls grow older.¹⁷ The gap between legal guarantees and lived realities complicates India's progress narrative, creating a disconnect between constitutional promises and on-ground experiences.¹⁸ Although government initiatives like Beti Bachao Beti Padhao and Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya have improved enrolment rates, they still fall short of addressing the root of the crisis: deeply embedded patriarchal belief systems.¹⁹ As feminist scholar

¹² (Sen, 2001, p. 53).

¹³ (UNICEF, 2023, p. 12).

¹⁴ (Human Rights Watch, 2024).

¹⁵ (Nussbaum, 2011, p. 35).

¹⁶ The National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5)

¹⁷ (UNESCO, 2023).

¹⁸ (International Institute for Population Sciences [IIPS], 2022).

¹⁹ (Ministry of Women and Child Development, 2021).

Nussbaum argues, development policy that ignores entrenched gendered attitudes risks becoming performative rather than transformative.²⁰ For instance, while school infrastructure has improved, gender-based harassment, domestic responsibilities, and community pressure continue to discourage secondary education for girls. Moreover, gender-insensitive curricula and limited access to digital tools deepen disparities. During the COVID-19 pandemic, girls were 1.5 times more likely than boys to lose access to online learning.²¹ Consequently, although India's policy framework appears progressive on paper, enforcement and cultural transformation remain inconsistent. Overall, India's policy framework demonstrates good design but weak implementation. Most programmes expand access without shifting household-level gender norms, meaning laws exist, but social permission does not. As a result, progress remains uneven and often symbolic rather than transformative.

Case Study 2: Nigeria - Poverty, Patriarchy, and the Price of Silence

In Nigeria, the gender gap in education emerges from the interaction of conflict, poverty, and entrenched patriarchy. Rather than a single dominant cause, it is this layering of risks that continuously pushes girls out of school, especially in the northern states. The Boko Haram insurgency, whose name translates to “Western education is forbidden,” epitomises the ideological resistance to girls' learning.²² The 2014 abduction of the Chibok schoolgirls created an enduring climate of fear that continues to affect school attendance.²³ Parents, fearing for their daughters' safety, often choose domestic confinement over education. Beyond conflict, entrenched cultural practices reinforce exclusion. The north–south divide remains stark: only 29% of girls in northern Nigeria attend secondary school, compared to over 65% in the south.²⁴ Female genital mutilation (FGM), still prevalent in several Nigerian states, serves as both a rite of passage and a mechanism of control.²⁵ Girls subjected to FGM are frequently withdrawn from school and married early, marking an abrupt end to their education. However, recent policy efforts show progress. The Adolescent Girls Initiative for Learning and Empowerment (AGILE), supported by the World Bank, has provided conditional cash transfers, constructed separate toilets, and trained female

²⁰ Nussbaum, M. C. (2011). *Creating capabilities: The human development approach*. Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.

²¹ (UNESCO Institute for Statistics [UIS], 2023, p. 8).

²² (Human Rights Watch, 2015).

²³ (World Bank, 2023a).

²⁴ (UNICEF, 2022).

²⁵ (UNICEF, 2023, p. 15).

teachers. As of 2024, the program had reached over **8.6** million girls.²⁶ The contradiction becomes even sharper in Nigeria, where the formal commitment to girls' education collides with the lived consequences of insurgency, poverty, and deeply rooted social expectations. Ebonyi State noted, *"You can build a classroom, but if her father still believes school makes her disobedient, she will never sit inside it."*²⁷ This statement reflects how cultural norms can neutralise even the best-designed interventions. Thus, while Nigeria's education crisis is shaped by poverty and insecurity, it is sustained by social norms that equate obedience with virtue and learning with rebellion. Notably, several Islamic scholars and reformist movements in Nigeria actively argue that girls' schooling is fully compatible with Islamic teachings, countering extremist narratives that weaponize religion to restrict education. Nigeria's policy efforts illustrate how insecurity and cultural norms can neutralise even well-funded interventions. Without long-term community ownership, gender-responsive monitoring, and sustained political will, programmes such as AGILE improve indicators temporarily but cannot transform social attitudes. This gap between donor-driven design and local realities continues to limit policy impact.

Case Study 3: Afghanistan - Learning as Resistance

Afghanistan's education landscape is defined entirely by political ideology. With the Taliban's 2021 takeover, the state converted schooling for girls into a prohibited act, not a neglected entitlement.²⁸ This prohibition has erased decades of progress. Over 1.4 million girls have been forced out of schools and universities, reversing gains achieved between 2001 and 2020.²⁹ For Afghan women, education once represented a fragile form of liberation; now, even the act of reading is seen as political dissent. In Afghanistan, the gap between international norms and political reality is not a matter of weak implementation but of outright ideological rejection. Here, education for girls is not merely neglected—it is systematically criminalised. Across rural provinces, underground networks of women teachers conduct secret classes in basements, often by candlelight. Their courage underscores what Human Rights Watch describes as the *"moral frontier of education"*, where learning itself becomes a protest against oppression.³⁰ The Taliban's justification that these bans are rooted in religion has

²⁶ (World Bank, 2023b).

²⁷ (World Bank, 2023, para. 6).

²⁸ (UNESCO, 2023, p. 16).

²⁹ (Plan International, 2024).

³⁰ Human Rights Watch (2024)

been widely condemned by Islamic scholars, who affirm that Islam obligates education for all genders.³¹ This contradiction highlights that Afghanistan's crisis is not religious but political, a deliberate act of gender-based suppression. International actors, including the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), have called the ban a violation of international law and Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.³² However, diplomatic pressure alone has proven insufficient. The denial of education in Afghanistan thus stands as both a human rights crisis and a symbolic war on female agency. Afghanistan's crisis demonstrates the extreme limit of policy collapse: even international agreements and national laws are rendered meaningless by political ideology. Here, the failure is not implementation but deliberate state refusal, leaving no institutional pathway for reform within the existing regime. This makes Afghanistan an outlier where traditional policy solutions are insufficient.

Comparative Analysis: Three Countries, One Struggle

A cross-country comparison of India, Nigeria, and Afghanistan reveals distinct political contexts but a shared pattern of gendered exclusion.³³ In each country, the control of female education functions as a mechanism of power, shaping who has access to knowledge and who is denied a fundamental human right. Economic deprivation intersects with cultural norms and weak institutional structures to create a systemic cycle of exclusion. In India, poverty positions daughters as economic liabilities, prompting families to invest in boys' education while girls are withdrawn from school, married off early, or forced to contribute to household labour. Nigeria mirrors similar economic barriers, particularly in the northern regions, where families struggling to meet basic needs perceive girls' schooling as a luxury.³⁴ Conflict, insecurity, and violent insurgent groups such as Boko Haram exacerbate this situation, making safety a primary concern and pushing parents to keep girls at home. Afghanistan represents the end of this continuum, where the intersection of poverty, political instability, and the Taliban's explicit ban on secondary and higher education for girls has created a context in which education for girls is criminalised. Here, even modest efforts to learn, such as

³¹ (UNESCO, 2023, p. 16).

³² (UNAMA, 2022).

³³ (Sen, 2001, p. 55).

³⁴ (UNICEF, 2023, p. 10).

secret study groups in basements, expose girls and their families to legal and physical threats.

Cultural and social norms further reinforce exclusion. Across India, entrenched patriarchy manifests through the valorisation of obedience, modesty, and adherence to traditional gender roles. Even when schools are physically accessible, girls face societal expectations that prioritise domestic work and early marriage over education. Similarly, in Nigeria, harmful cultural practices, including female genital mutilation (FGM), early marriage, and strict limitations on female mobility,³⁵ act as invisible barriers to learning. Education is often framed as a threat to established power hierarchies, with families fearing that literate girls will challenge norms or resist traditional obligations. In Afghanistan, the Taliban regime enforces a rigid interpretation of religion to justify exclusion, framing education for girls as morally subversive. The consequences are both practical and psychological: girls are not only denied access to schools but are also socially stigmatised for aspiring to learn.

Institutional weaknesses compound these social and cultural barriers. In India, the Right to Education Act and government programs like Beti Bachao Beti Padhao and Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya guarantee access to education and attempt to improve school infrastructure.³⁶ However, implementation gaps, insufficient monitoring, and a failure to challenge the underlying patriarchal mindset limit the effectiveness of these programs. Nigeria faces similar challenges, where the Child Rights Act and various donor-led interventions often collapse after funding ends, leaving communities without sustainable support structures. Afghanistan illustrates the ultimate institutional failure: legal frameworks are rendered meaningless under the Taliban's control, erasing decades of progress and leaving girls entirely dependent on informal, clandestine learning arrangements.

Security concerns present an additional, pervasive barrier. In India, harassment, gender-based violence, and insurgency-affected areas make school attendance unsafe for girls.³⁷ Nigeria has suffered some of the most extreme examples, with Boko Haram attacks targeting schools and abducting girls, including the Chibok girls in 2014. Even outside conflict zones, fears of violence prevent families from sending daughters to school. In Afghanistan, the threat of punishment or

³⁵ (Human Rights Watch, 2024; UNICEF, 2023, p. 15).

³⁶ (Government of India, 2009; World Bank, 2023b).

³⁷ (Sen, 2001, p. 53).

imprisonment for attending school renders education a dangerous act of defiance. Across all three countries, these security issues intersect with economic deprivation, cultural norms, and institutional weaknesses to create what Sen describes as “interlocking inequalities,” whereby each barrier reinforces the others, producing systemic exclusion.

Policy Gaps and Failures

Across all three countries, the most significant policy failures stem from a mismatch between what governments design on paper and what girls experience in their daily lives. Despite repeated global commitments and national legislation, policy implementation across India, Nigeria, and Afghanistan remains insufficient to address the multi-layered crisis of girls’ education. One major gap lies in the fragmentation of programs.³⁸ Many interventions prioritise infrastructure, such as building schools or providing sanitation facilities, without addressing the ideological barriers that prevent girls from attending. In India, programs like Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalyaya have succeeded in providing schools for marginalised girls, but social attitudes often undermine these investments, as families continue to prioritise boys’ education or perceive girls’ schooling as unnecessary. Nigeria’s interventions, frequently donor-driven, are similarly limited: conditional cash transfers and school construction projects have increased access in some regions, but without local ownership and long-term engagement, these programs collapse when funding ends. Afghanistan demonstrates the ultimate institutional failure, where policy gaps are not merely about enforcement but the complete absence of legal and structural support for girls’ education under Taliban rule. A clearer distinction emerges between design failures, policies that ignore cultural resistance, gender norms, or safety, and implementation failures, where even well-designed schemes break down due to poor monitoring, corruption, or lack of political will. In many cases, governments announce ambitious programs but do not invest in capacity, coordination, or accountability mechanisms. Budgetary politics also undermines progress: despite public commitments, education spending in all three countries remains below recommended international benchmarks, leaving infrastructure, teacher training, and safety interventions chronically underfunded.

Safety and mental health remain critically neglected. Few programs across these countries incorporate gender-sensitive transport, complaint mechanisms, or

³⁸ (UNICEF, 2023, p. 12; Bourdieu, 1990, p. 52). (Ministry of Women and Child Development, 2021; World Bank, 2023b).

psychosocial support. In India, harassment en route to school and domestic pressures create unsafe environments, often forcing girls to drop out. In Nigeria, the legacy of Boko Haram and the persistence of early marriage combine with limited counselling and support structures, leaving girls vulnerable to both physical and emotional harm. Afghanistan exemplifies the extremity of this failure: girls risk imprisonment, social ostracism, or violence simply for attending school, and there is no formal framework to address their mental health or protection. Poor data collection further compounds these issues, as attendance records and dropout statistics are unreliable in rural or conflict-affected regions, masking the full scale of neglect and limiting evidence-based policy making.

Another critical policy gap is **moral and ideological failure**. Governments frequently treat girls as beneficiaries of charity rather than citizens with inherent rights to education. Despite constitutional guarantees in India and Nigeria, enforcement is inconsistent, reflecting a broader societal undervaluation of female education. In Afghanistan, where legal frameworks exist in name only, ideological barriers are enforced through punitive measures. Bourdieu's concept of "symbolic violence" is evident here: subordination becomes normalised, making inequality appear natural and inevitable. Until policymakers confront this moral dimension, interventions will remain superficial, addressing infrastructure rather than the fundamental inequities that deny girls the right to learn.³⁹

Policy Recommendations: Turning Pain into Policy

To respond effectively to these systemic barriers, reforms must operate on multiple levels: legal, infrastructural, economic, cultural, and institutional. No single type of intervention can address the complexity of the problem. First and foremost, the right to learn must be treated as non-negotiable. Governments should enshrine girls' education as an inviolable constitutional and moral obligation. In India, strict enforcement of the Right to Education Act and anti-child marriage laws is essential. Nigeria must operationalise the Child Rights Act nationwide, ensuring that violations are promptly addressed.⁴⁰ The international community must hold regimes such as the Taliban accountable under human rights law for criminalising girls' education, with sanctions and diplomatic

³⁹ (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 55).

⁴⁰ (UNESCO, 2023, p. 14; UNICEF, 2023, p. 11; World Bank, 2023b).

pressure where necessary. ⁴¹Legal instruments alone, however, are insufficient without societal enforcement and monitoring mechanisms.

Investing in girl-friendly infrastructure is critical to remove practical barriers to education. Schools must provide safe transportation, separate sanitation facilities, and menstrual hygiene support. India's Swachh Bharat initiative provides a model for scaling up sanitation infrastructure, ensuring girls can attend school safely during menstruation. Nigeria's AGILE program has demonstrated that safe school environments with female teachers and functional facilities improve retention rates. In Afghanistan, international and community-supported initiatives should prioritise safe spaces for clandestine education, including temporary learning centres equipped with basic amenities.

Economic incentives can substantially improve enrolment and retention. Conditional cash transfers, free uniforms, mid-day meals, and scholarships have proven effective in India and Nigeria. By alleviating the immediate financial burden of schooling, these measures allow families to view girls' education as feasible rather than optional. Expanding such programs to reach marginalised populations is crucial, particularly in rural and conflict-affected areas.

Community and religious engagement are essential to address ideological barriers. Sustainable reform occurs when communities recognise girls' education as a source of pride rather than rebellion. Collaborating with local religious leaders, women's collectives, and civil society organisations can reshape cultural narratives, emphasising the compatibility of education with faith and tradition. Successful programs in Nigeria have demonstrated that when local leaders endorse education, attendance and retention improve significantly.

Ending gender-based violence and harmful practices in schools is indispensable. Governments must criminalise practices like FGM and ensure that schools have trained counsellors and confidential reporting systems. Curricula should include education on bodily autonomy, consent, and rights, fostering awareness among students and communities alike. India, Nigeria, and Afghanistan must integrate gender-sensitive pedagogy to combat the normalisation of violence and assert the moral imperative of protecting girls in educational settings.

Finally, investing in female teachers and role models creates long-term cultural change. Employing women educators fosters trust, provides mentorship, and

⁴¹ (UNAMA, 2022).

challenges patriarchal assumptions. A girl taught by a female teacher gains not only knowledge but also a vision of her own potential. Mentorship networks, community outreach, and visibility of successful women from similar contexts can generate intergenerational transformation, demonstrating that education empowers rather than threatens social order.

Conclusion: The Fire That Refuses to Die

Somewhere tonight, a girl studies by the light of a kerosene lamp. Her books are hidden beneath her bed, her dreams whispered into the dark. She does not know it, but she is part of a quiet revolution, the fire that refuses to die. Education is the first freedom, the seed from which all others grow. Denying it is not merely an act of neglect but an act of violence against human potential.⁴² India must confront its silent prejudices, Nigeria its cultural constraints, and Afghanistan its political cruelty.⁴³ When one girl learns to read, she rewrites the story of her family. When a thousand girls learn, they transform their nation. When every girl learns, humanity itself evolves toward justice. Half the sky cannot remain half denied. For this revolution to succeed, policymakers must recognise that educating girls is not an aspirational target but a binding responsibility, one that demands courage, enforcement, and unwavering political commitment.

⁴² (UNESCO, 2023, p. 5; UNICEF, 2023, p. 7).

⁴³ (Human Rights Watch, 2024; Plan International, 2024).

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