

Afghan women and dental education

By Kavita Rijhwani¹ and Raman Bedi²

The Taliban attacked Kabul on 15 August 2021, and seized power in Afghanistan. Due to the enforcement of laws that violated the right to education while the country was under Taliban rule, women and girls were more negatively impacted than any other group.¹ Their freedom of movement and expression, as well as their health and education, have all been severely affected, and many have lost their jobs.²

Implementing stringent gender segregation laws by the Taliban is expected to worsen existing challenges, especially in the healthcare sector, resulting in reduced access to medical care for women due to gender mixing restrictions and a scarcity of female healthcare providers. The enforcement of stricter patriarchal laws will likely negatively impact reproductive health, family planning choices, and demographic trends, exacerbating poverty and resource disparities.³

Within this oppressive environment, Afghan women risk experiencing increased trauma and negative mental health consequences due to exclusion from essential social activities and personal development opportunities.⁴ With international assistance, the national health system must be adequately equipped to provide women, adolescents, and girls with sufficient and high-quality mental health resources. The international community must stand in solidarity with Afghan women and work towards creating a more equitable and just society that promotes their well-being and enables them to thrive.⁵

The absence of women in the healthcare workforce poses significant challenges, including a potential decline in healthcare quality and accessibility. It retains gender disparity and impedes the development of healthcare systems inclusive of all genders. Protecting human rights and improving living conditions should be conducted globally due to its vast impact and moral reasons to foster long-lasting peace; humans must not leave others behind. Actions against the Afghan crisis, while not directly affecting other countries, are a testament to the belief that human rights should be universal, irrespective of one's gender, belief, ethnicity, or nationality.⁶

Due to factors like restricted access to dental care, health inequities, a lack of oral health education, a decline in the number of women working there, and gender inequality may have a substantial effect on oral health in Afghanistan. Promoting and supporting dental education is crucial for addressing these potential effects. Encouraging and supporting dental education for women in Afghanistan to address these possible effects is essential. This involves offering scholarships, fostering mentorship, and training opportunities, promoting women-friendly learning settings, and fighting for women's equal access to educational options and career prospects in the dental industry.

The strategies might be used to encourage women in Afghanistan who wish to pursue dentistry education. Online distance learning platforms offer lectures, webinars, and interactive modules as part of dental education. This can help remove physical obstacles and give everyone access to education wherever they are – peer-to-peer education trainer development to enable women who have already obtained dental education to work as peer educators. Even without formal education, they can ensure information transmission by offering primary oral health education and preventive measures within their communities.

Community-based projects: Work with neighbourhood groups, NGOs, and community leaders to plan dental education programmes in secure locations. These may include seminars, classes, and mentoring programmes by qualified dental experts. **Outreach initiatives:** Set up mobile dentistry clinics or camps tailored exclusively to women's requirements. These programmes can provide preventative care, oral health education, and screenings, raising awareness and supporting good oral hygiene habits.

For the implementation of the above strategies it is essential to have safe learning environments to ensure the safety and privacy of the participants and collaborate with regional organisations, educational institutions, and medical facilities. Mentorship initiatives link Afghan women interested in dentistry with foreign dental experts to get direction, career advice, and chances to advance their knowledge and abilities through virtual mentoring. Foster online communities or social media groups where Afghan women can connect and communicate with each other.

These platforms can allow women to share experiences, seek advice, and establish virtual friendships.

Looking into the above strategies, dental charities and organisations need to initiate a call to action for providing dental education to women in Afghanistan which involves employing various strategies to promote awareness, generate support, and drive policy change. It will take concerted and cooperative international collaboration to defend Afghanistan's right to education and lifelong learning. We call on the international community to commit to these objectives:

- To raise awareness and to stand against this issue, a campaign has been initiated in the form of an online petition calling the UK government and all dental healthcare professionals to sign this petition and to publicly condemn the ban on Afghan women's dental education and advocate for its immediate repeal
- Call for support from dental associations to raise global awareness about the Afghan women's dental education ban. They can collaborate with international media, participate in conferences and seminars, or write articles and op-eds to shed light on the issue and garner support from the international dental community ▶▶

¹Postgraduate student, King's College London, London, UK; ²Emeritus Professor, King's College London, London, UK.

- Support from dental schools worldwide for online education support for female dental researchers in Afghanistan and mentorship and peer-to-peer support opportunities.

In conclusion, we can transform lives and shape a brighter future by acting and supporting Afghan women's dental education. Through education, we can empower these women to break free from the constraints of poverty and discrimination while also addressing their communities' critical oral healthcare needs.

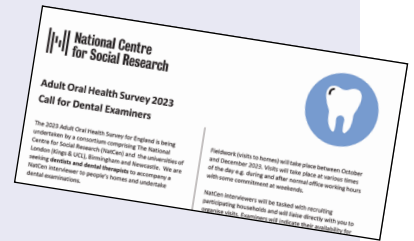
The global dental community must support Afghan women involved in dental education, giving them the tools to succeed and become change agents.

Your support can make a lasting impact, paving the way for a more inclusive and empowered society. Please sign the petition at <https://chnng.it/wZnj6YNZGK>. ■

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Urgent call for dental examiners



The Adult Oral Health Survey (AOHS) 2023 is an epidemiological study of the dental health of the adult population, and has been run approximately every ten years since 1968. The National Centre for Social Research (NatCen), in collaboration with the University of Birmingham, King's College London, University College London and Newcastle University, have been asked by the Office of Health Improvement and Disparities, part of the Department of Health and Social Care, to carry out this survey.

The AOHS Consortium are looking to recruit further dentists and dental therapists for some specific areas still outstanding, to undertake the fieldwork between October and December 2023.

To register your interest, please download the application form from the following site: <https://natcen.ac.uk/call-dental-examiners>.

The deadline for submitting applications has been extended to Thursday 14 September 2023. ✦

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