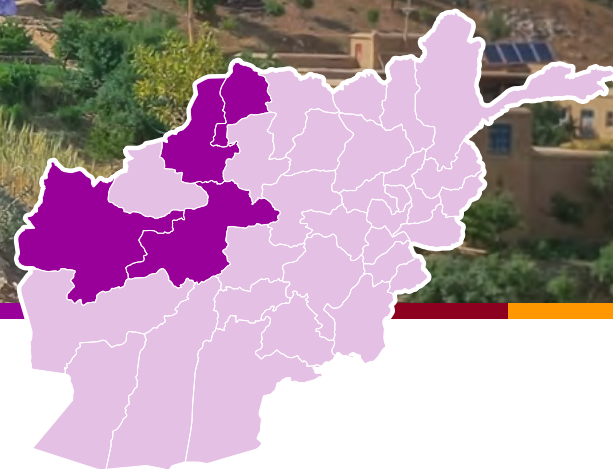


Field Findings – March 2026
Provinces: Jawzjan, Ghor, Herat, Faryab

B B C MEDIA ACTION

What Matters?

AFGHANISTAN SPEAKS!



From Home to Classroom

Community voices on children's education barriers (grades 1-6)

“Many women are happy when their children, especially girls, go to school. However, many men in the family do not allow it. ... since girls are expected to work at home and marry afterwards.”

Female, Herat

Introduction

According to the Afghanistan Education Situation Report 2025 ([UNICEF/UNESCO](#)), over 2.13 million primary school aged children remained out of school in 2024, 60% of whom were girls. Boys' participation is increasingly affected by poverty and household demands, while girls are completely excluded beyond grade 6. School dropout is driven by multiple factors - poverty, restrictive social norms, child labour, the ban on girls' secondary education, and early marriage, alongside declining aid and sanctions limiting teacher salaries.

Research approach

This study involved four focus group discussions and eight interviews with parents, community elders, and teachers across Jawzjan, Ghor, Herat, and Faryab.

Value of education: Perception vs practice

Across all discussions in the four provinces, families consistently described education as important and associated it with dignity, respect, and a better future for children. Literacy was commonly valued for its usefulness in daily life, such as reading signs and boards in the street, communicating with institutions, and access to salary and livelihoods.

“My father is illiterate; he had travelled to Iran for work. He heard many times that others called him blind because he was illiterate. He was suffering because he could not read the signs and was not able to find the address. For this reason, my father decided to encourage and support me in my education.”

Male, Faryab



While many participants expressed their verbal support for their children attending school, there is a clear gap between how education is discussed and how it is prioritised in practice. Participants said that for many families the value of education is ultimately measured against immediate economic returns. Attending school is perceived as a weak investment when families see uneducated individuals earning a living while educated youth remain unemployed or underpaid. This perception significantly undermines their motivation to keep children in school, particularly beyond early grades.

A photograph showing four women sitting on the floor, working on a large, colorful textile piece. They are wearing headscarves and dark clothing. The woman on the far right is using a large pair of scissors to cut the fabric. The textile has a complex pattern with red, blue, and yellow threads. The background is a plain, light-colored wall.

“ Our people are mostly illiterate. Unfortunately, they do not understand the value of education and upbringing. I myself and my nieces and nephews were in school. When they were in school, their learning was good. Unfortunately, their father decided not to send them anymore. Justifying [his decision with the fear that] if my children go to school, they could eventually become teachers with a small salary. ”

Male, Ghor

Economic hardship and opportunity cost

In the group discussions participants said poverty is one of the biggest barriers to schooling. Families reported being unable to afford the basic school-related expenses such as books, notebooks, stationery, uniforms, shoes, and bags. In the context of severe poverty, these costs compete directly with essential household needs like food.

“Some of our neighbours don’t send their children to school, because they cannot afford stationery and school bags. They say that instead of paying for children’s school expenses, we have to cover home expenses because we ourselves stay hungry.”

Female, Herat

Parents said that many families withdraw their children from school and send them to work in order to contribute to the household income. Boys are more often engaged in labour such as shepherding, car washing, or shop work, while girls are frequently kept at home for domestic work or family business tasks like carpet weaving. The opportunity cost of choosing education over immediate income was repeatedly described as a burden that many families simply cannot afford.





“ We are fifteen people in the household, and I have to provide a daily livelihood for these fifteen people... I do not want my children to go to school right now... these are children aged ten to twelve, fourteen...one washes the car, one polishes the shoes, one does something else, but we have to find the same daily sustenance in some way. ”

Male, Ghor

Distance and safety

Participants highlighted that distance to school is an issue and creates concerns about safety and harassment that limits access, particularly for girls in rural and remote areas.

Many children must walk long distances which discourages regular attendance and increases dropout. Parents expressed particular concern for girls, who are perceived as being at greater risk of harassment or community judgment while travelling to and from school. Younger children often require an adult to accompany them, but families lack the time or resources to provide this support.

“Public schools are about an hour’s walk from our village, and 7-year-olds, 8-year-olds or 10-year-olds can’t walk. It’s a long way off. And there’s fear.”

Female, Jawzjan



Even for supportive families, distance to school can be exhausting, and over time this shapes their behaviour and decisions about education. Travelling to school also exposes both girls and their families to verbal harassment for choosing to educate girls. We can see this reflected in the lived experience of a mother who shared her story.

“My daughter studied until grade 4. Every day I accompanied her from our village to the other village [where the school was located]. I would spend half a day every day. I wanted my daughter to learn something, to be able to read, and to have a bright future. People used to criticize and mockingly say to me, ‘You are the only one who takes your daughter every day. What will your daughter become in future? Will she become a mullah? Will she become a teacher? Is she going to be a doctor? Nothing will happen’. Then they laughed at me and my daughter when they saw us, and when they saw us, they said, ‘Hey, the doctors and teachers are coming’.”

Female, Jawzjan



A recurring theme across interviews was the expectation that male children should follow their father's occupation, regardless of their own interests or talent. In families with established businesses such as mechanics, carpenters, or labourers, education is often seen as unnecessary.

“Some say, ‘Do the same business as your father did; do the same work as your father did’. Why will you go to school then?”

Male, Faryab



Barriers inside schools

Even when families are willing to send their children to school, there are some factors inside the school that discourage attendance and lead to dropout. The fear of corporal punishment was frequently mentioned, particularly for younger children, with parents describing how threats or actual physical punishment cause anxiety and lead to children refusing to attend.

“One day I was leaving the house to go to work. It is a memory. My little girl was sitting there. Although the school is close to us, I called out, ‘Come on, go to school.’ It was a few minutes past eight, and I saw that my daughter was crying and said, ‘I don’t want to go to school’. I asked her why she doesn’t go to school. She said, ‘My teacher is beating me.’”

Male, Ghor

Bullying and violence by older or stronger students further undermine children’s sense of safety.

“Some of the students in the class are older than others, and they oppress and beat the younger children. In some cases, we have seen older children bullying small children, and this causes these children to no longer like going to school.”

Male, Ghor



In several communities, schools are perceived as low-quality institutions where children learn nothing or gain skills with lower perceived practical value. Parents cited poor teaching, teacher absenteeism, and a lack of discipline as evidence that time spent in school is wasted.

“You send a student to school, he doesn’t learn anything. The quality of schools is not good, no one learns anything, teachers can’t teach properly. It is better to send our children to work at home or learn a vocation. Now my son earns 300 AFN [per day].”

Male, Faryab



Some community members expressed concern that formal schooling does not align with cultural or religious values and may even lead to moral or ideological deviation.

“In our neighbourhood there is a mosque imam who has six children. He has forbidden all of them from going to school. Even though the girls themselves are interested in going to school, he has brought the books that the school gave them and burned them. He said that when you go to school and do not study religious subjects, it causes mental and ideological deviations in you.”

Female, Jawzjan

“Our grandfather did not allow us to attend school. He believed that if we went, we would become [liberal] like Russia or America. Because of this, he forced us to leave school.”

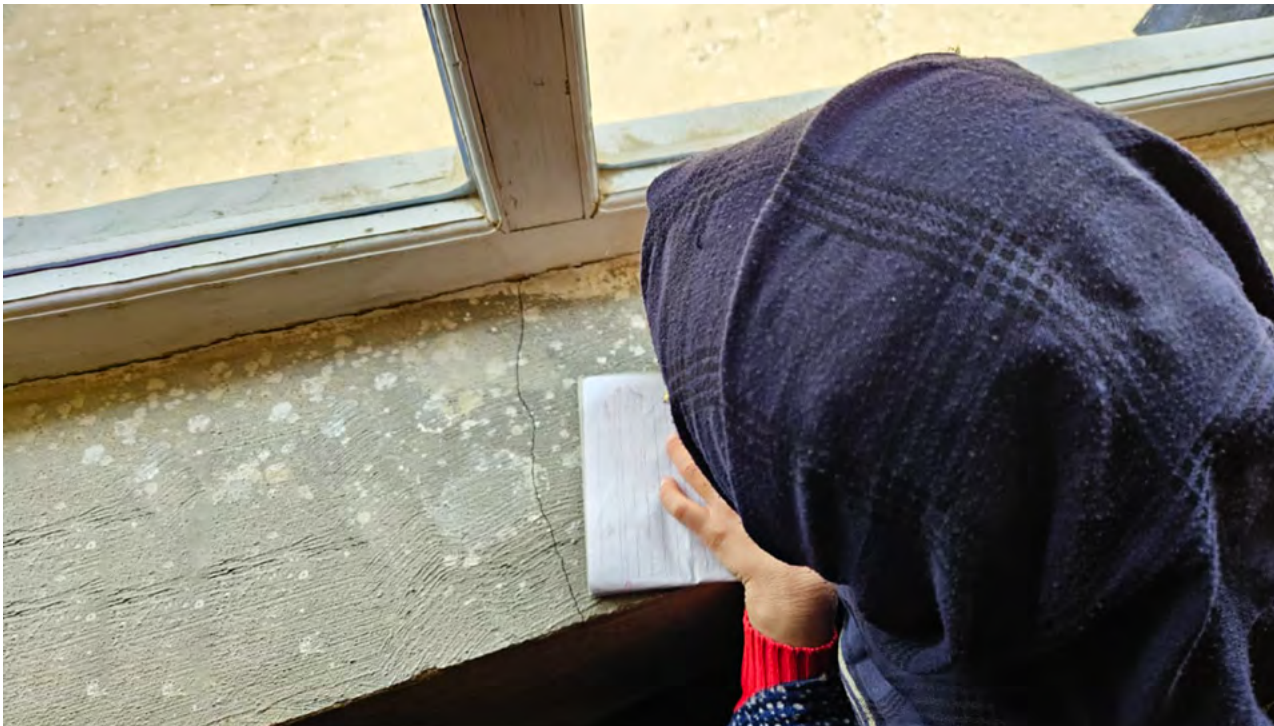
Female Jawzjan

Gender barriers and household decision making

Participants observed that girls face a heightened set of barriers that lead to earlier and more frequent exclusion from schooling. They said that families believe that girls only need basic literacy, often limiting education to the first few grades.

“There are families who say that for a girl it is enough to read and write. That is, from the first to the third grade. When some girls are able to read and write, they say this is enough, and it is not necessary anymore.”

Female, Herat



Domestic responsibilities, childcare, and income-generating activities such as carpet weaving commonly replace schooling for girls.

“My brother-in-law’s daughter was in school until the second grade. He then dropped her out of school. He said the school is of no use. She must weave carpets. The girl was very interested in studying, but her father prevented her.”

Female, Jawzjan



Another reason families mentioned is that the ban on schooling beyond grade 6 discourages them from sending their daughters to school. Their reasoning is that if girls cannot continue their education, there is no point in enrolling them in primary school.

“I have a daughter who is currently not attending school and has gone to school up to grade three. Her grandfather tells her ‘Even if you go to school, you can only continue for two or three more years. After that, you must stay at home’. He says you have already learned reading and writing to some extent, and there is no need to continue going to school.”

Female, Herat

While mothers often support schooling, particularly for girls, their influence is limited by entrenched power dynamics and patriarchal norms. In many cases, a single elder’s opposition is enough to prevent children from attending school altogether. Children’s own interests, motivation, and aspirations are rarely considered, leaving them with little agency in decisions that directly affect their futures.

“Many women are happy when their children, especially girls, go to school. However, many men in the family do not allow it. They believe schooling till grade 6 makes no difference, since girls are expected to work at home and marry afterwards.”

Female, Herat

Fear of social gossip, concerns about honour, and restrictions on girls’ mobility further discourage school attendance.

“They say that if a girl goes out of the home, she will be corrupted morally, and she may take the wrong direction. Most families believe that the girl should be at home and covered from others, and there is [even] a common saying that ‘it is better for a girl not to see the sun or the moon’.”

Female, Herat



Disability inclusion

Children with disabilities experience some of the most severe forms of exclusion from education. Some participants stated that schools generally lack accessible infrastructure, such as ramps or adapted facilities, and teachers are rarely trained in inclusive education practices.

“Our teachers do not specialise in teaching children with disabilities, nor are there special facilities such as ramp and transportation for children with disabilities.”

Female, Jawzjan



Distance is also a big challenge for children with a physical disability, such as those who have difficulty walking.

“I have a child who has a disability, one leg is shorter than the other and he can’t maintain his balance. I also talked to the doctor and sought his advice about sending him to school. He said if he travels to school, his spine would hurt because he doesn’t have the balance of his limbs. I couldn’t provide the transport, and in the end, he stopped going to school.”

Male, Faryab

Stigma and bullying from peers, combined with social misconceptions about disability, further discourage attendance. Even when parents are willing for their children to attend school, fears that their child may experience corporal punishment, bullying by older students, and concerns about safety, can act as barriers. These negative school experiences often result in withdrawal, reinforcing exclusion even in the absence of strong cultural or economic opposition.

“Children with disabilities face many challenges in school. When other children taunt them or call them ‘blind’ or ‘lame’ it discourages them.”

Female, Jawzjan



Conclusion and recommendations: Education as a cycle of hope and hesitation

Families hope schooling will improve their children's future but hesitate due to poverty, cultural pressures, and weak systems. Reducing cost, distance, fear, and exclusion, while amplifying acceptable role models and community trust, can help break this cycle.

The following are recommendations from this research:

- » **Conduct community awareness activities** to highlight the long term and non-economic benefits of education beyond immediate income. These include life skills, personal development and everyday usefulness of literacy and knowledge.
- » **Promote education as an investment:** While many families prioritise work over education for their child, it is vital to emphasise that schooling is worth the cost. Even small investments in books or uniforms can bring long term value. Families should be encouraged to see education as an investment rather than an expense.
- » **Promote more community-based classes:** This approach reduces travel distance, and creates safe, girls only learning spaces to encourage attendance.
- » **Strengthen training of teachers:** Train teachers to avoid corporal punishment, improve positive discipline, and to build trust in schools.
- » **Prioritise disability inclusion:** organisations should provide in-depth training on inclusive education for teachers and raise awareness among students to reduce stigma and bullying of children with disabilities.
- » **Highlight positive role models:** Share success stories of educated community members to inspire families and help counter negative perceptions of schooling.



About What Matters? Afghanistan Speaks!

What Matters? Afghanistan Speaks! is a research bulletin which informs the humanitarian community about how people are experiencing issues on the ground. This bulletin focuses on barriers to primary school education.

The content of What Matters? Afghanistan Speaks! is the responsibility of BBC Media Action. Any views expressed in this report should not be taken to represent those of the BBC itself, or the work of the charity.

BBC Media Action welcomes collaboration with other organisations collecting feedback in areas where they work or who would like to contribute to the analysis and production of this bulletin.

Methodology

This research used a qualitative approach to explore people's perceptions, and lived experience related to children's education. This research involved four focus group discussions (FGDs) and eight in depth interviews (IDIs). FGD participants included parents (both those who send their children to school and those who do not), community elders, and parents of children with disabilities. The IDIs were conducted with teachers. Data has been collected from Jawzjan, Ghor, Herat, and Faryab.

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