

Caught Between Dismay and Hope: The Status of Youth Today and Its Role in the Political Future in Afghanistan

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ABSTRACT

Youth is a pivotal force in shaping a nation's political future. The better they are educated and equipped with skills the better they would contribute to the development of the country, politically as well as socio-economically. In today's Afghanistan, however, the young generation face significant obstacles that hinder their ability to participate in the progress of their community and demonstrate a potential role in the country's political future. Many young people attempt to immigrate abroad, for education, for work, and for better life. The youth staying in Afghanistan hope to influence change by pursuing education in fields such as political science and economics, aiming not only to secure employment and support their families but also to contribute to shaping policies that promote socio-economic development in their communities.

The purpose of this study is to explore the status of Afghan youth in Afghanistan today, the limitation of opportunities they face, and potentials roles the educated youth could play for shaping the nation's political future and a pathway to a brighter tomorrow in Afghanistan. The study also highlights, through an analysis, strategies for the youth to overcome barriers and transform to active agents instead of being passive victims.

Keywords: Afghan Youth, Political Participation, Barriers, Empowerment

INTRODUCTION

The young generation in Afghanistan is not only the inheritors of a tumultuous past but could also be the potential architects for a better future. The youth constitute approximately 63% of the Afghan population under age 25 (UNFPA, 2023). For about five decades of conflict and political instability in the country all have suffered, killed, and economy deteriorated. However, the struggle for survival has strengthened the will of the people for freedom and have shaped their socio-political consciousness.

Following the Soviet invasion (1979–1989), civil wars (1990s), the first Taliban rule (1996–2001), the Republic Era (2001-2021), U.S. and NATO intervention therein has successively disrupted generations, caused massive immigration, broke families and communities, deprived the youth a normal childhood, endured disrupted education, economic precarity, and systemic gender inequality (Barfield, 2010; Rubin, 2013). Although factors that have significantly influenced the socio-political dynamics of Afghan society, but still Despite the challenges, Afghan youths remaining in the country embody resilience and potential to reinvigorate their participation and contribution in political discourse that leads to national stabilization (UNDP, 2021; World Bank, 2020). This study situates itself at the intersection of youth empowerment for political transformation, underscoring the significance of investing in the generation that is uniquely positioned to drive positive change for a better tomorrow.

While youth have historically been inspired by other's experience and learnings, they have also been at the forefront of social and political movements globally. Afghan youth have also through the last five decades tried to follow suit. However, while many Afghan youth deeply understand their communities and culture, some political movements in the past failed to consider Afghanistan's complex social and tribal structures. This, along with external influences and lack of inclusive political dialogue, led to instability that still affects the country today.

While all social and political leaderships usually call on youth to be active and good participants in socio-political affairs of a country, today youth in Afghanistan continue to face disproportionate challenges on their own and poverty of their family that limit their full participation in the political arena. The legacy of war and ongoing socio-economic hardships has created a gap in the literature regarding how these factors specifically impede the political agency of young Afghans.

Research Objectives:

The objectives for this research study is multifold:

1. Understanding the Status of Youth in Afghanistan, Today.
2. Identification and evaluation of the key cultural and social values, as well as economic and political factors, that serve as options or barriers preventing Afghan youth from actively engaging in civic and political life as a form of active citizenship.
3. Exploring options and strategies for empowering Afghan youth to overcome the present challenges & barriers against actively participating in shaping a hopeful political future for their community and the country at large.

In this research we study the socio-political status of youth in Afghanistan today and their possible roles in shaping the nation's political trajectory. We also make efforts to analyze systemic barriers preventing engagement of the youth as active citizens. In result of the findings we propose actionable pathways for inclusive participation by citizen in political affairs of Afghanistan.

This research is envisioned vital for several reasons. First, it fills a gap in knowledge about Afghan youth today by focusing on the important challenges they face but also the potential Afghan youth may have to participate in the political domain. By searching for empirical evidence on the barriers and facilitations to engage youth in socio-political engagement, the study can inform and attract the young activists, government policy-makers and NGOs aiming at youth empowerment. This can strengthen a process for reform and social progress of the youth as a major resource especially at a time when Afghanistan faces shortfall of skilled manpower who would need to adopt modern technological advancements in favor of a more inclusive, democratic, and stable society and political governing system.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study utilizes a mixed-method approach by combining quantitative and qualitative methods. The quantitative component consists of an online survey administered through Microsoft Forms to 101 Afghan youth respondents, selected through purposive sampling to capture variation in gender, age, education, ethnicity, and urban-rural background. The survey data were analyzed descriptively using percentages and frequency distributions to identify broad patterns of political engagement, exclusion, and lived challenges. The qualitative component includes 16 semi-structured interviews with young activists, educators, and diaspora members, chosen to provide deeper contextual understanding of youth experiences, motivations, frustrations, and strategies for participation. Interview data were coded thematically in order to identify recurring ideas and interpretive patterns. Secondary sources, including academic literature and reports from national and international organizations, were also used to strengthen triangulation and provide broader contextual framing. Ethical considerations, including informed consent, confidentiality, and protection of participant identity, were observed throughout the study because political participation in Afghanistan remains sensitive. Overall, this research method was designed to produce a coherent and robust explanation of the status of youth today and their role in Afghanistan's political future.

Research Question:

The United Nations defines 'Youth' as people of the 15-24-year age group. This is in terms of schooling age-scale people enrolled in school classes of middle school, high school and university. In Afghanistan traditionally

the school children in high-school (15 -18) and the university students (18-23) were engaged in political movements, demonstrations and political youth organizations. It has been at this age-range that the political parties, in urban setup, whether underground or lawful, recruited their young followers. Often people above 25 are engaged in jobs, with government, with private sector businesses or agriculture and transportation. This survey has covered people between the ages of 15 to 35. Among them 82 are male and 19 are female. The research questions of this study are multifold:

1. What is the status of youth today in Afghanistan?
2. What are key cultural and social values, as well as economic and political factors, that serve as barriers to preventing Afghan youth from actively engaging in civic and political life activities as a form of active citizenship?
3. What strategies can be implemented to empower Afghan youth to overcome existing challenges and actively participate in shaping a stable and hopeful political future for Afghanistan?

The data gathered makes it possible to compare the ways in which socioeconomic position, gender, education, and geography affect participation rates. This method is crucial for locating structural barriers and inequalities that restrict Afghan youth's ability to participate in political processes. Through organized surveys, the study's quantitative component makes it easier to identify statistical patterns in political activity, geographical and demographic differences, and common issues. This component offers quantifiable insights into the larger trends impacting Afghan youth by looking at rates of political involvement, civic engagement, and access to political discourse.

The qualitative component adds depth and perspective to the empirical data by capturing nuanced narratives, aspirations, and contextual strategies that complement the numerical data. This part of the study explores Afghan youth's motives, frustrations, and aspirations in relation to the political roles they believe they are denied. Understanding the emotional, cultural, and social foundations of political participation aspects that cannot be adequately conveyed by statistical metrics alone requires this qualitative knowledge.

Both primary and secondary sources were used in the data collection process to guarantee methodological rigor. An online survey using Microsoft Form was used to collect primary data from 101 Afghan youths between the ages of 18 and 35. Due to practical and contextual limitations, the sample size of 101 participants was determined based on accessibility rather than statistical calculation. The survey was organized online with the aim of gaining deeper understanding of Afghan youth perspectives. Despite efforts to promote it widely, only 101 responses were received, mainly because many Afghan youth lack internet access or showed limited interest in participating in online surveys. As such, the sample reflects those who were reachable and willing to participate under the current conditions.

The sample was purposefully chosen to represent variety in gender, ethnicity, geographical representation, and urban-rural divisions. A more representative knowledge of the youth population was made possible by the purposive sampling technique, which made sure that a variety of viewpoints were included in the study. The goal of the study was explained to the participants, and they received clear guarantees of confidentiality and consent that their data would only be used for research. This moral strategy sought to establish a secure setting for candid answers, making sure that participants could express their opinions without worrying about the consequences.

The survey results were contextualized and expanded upon by conducting semi-structured interviews with 16 young activists, educators, and diaspora members who were sampled with diversity in mind. Through these interviews, participants were able to discuss institutional difficulties, the overall sociopolitical environment in Afghanistan, and their trend toward political activity.

In order to assist the triangulation of findings, secondary data which included academic literature on youth studies as well as reports from national and international organizations provided theoretical framework and

foundational context. This study guarantees conformity with more general scholarly discourses and policy frameworks about youth political engagement by including external sources.

All phases of data collection and analysis were supported by ethical considerations, such as informed consent and participant confidentiality. Special precautions were made to secure participants' identity and guarantee their safety because political activity in Afghanistan is delicate. Only the reviewer and research supervisor had access to the safely kept data.

RESULT

This study surveyed 101 Afghan youth regarding their residence, education, gender, and age to explore how these factors shape political engagement and experiences of marginalization (Figure 1). The majority of respondents (78.21%) fall within the 18–30 age range. Smaller cohorts include those under 18 (2.97%) and those over 35 (4.95%), illustrating a predominantly youthful sample that is central to the study’s focus. Male respondents dominate the survey (81.19%), which highlights an ongoing barrier to women’s participation. The 19 female respondents, primarily residing in urban centers or part of the diaspora, exemplify resilience as they navigate male-dominated spaces.

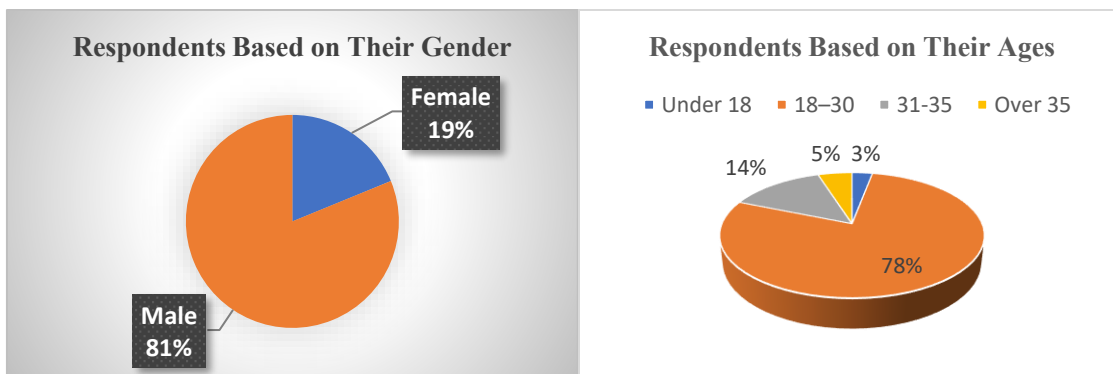


Figure 01

The survey illustrate in figure 02 shows that youth from urban constitute 74.26% of the sample leveraging better access to education and digital networks to mobilize politically. In contrast, only 6.93% come from rural areas, where systemic neglect and limited resources hinder active engagement.

Additionally, 18.81% of respondents belong to the Afghan diaspora, a group that balances emotional ties with Afghanistan.

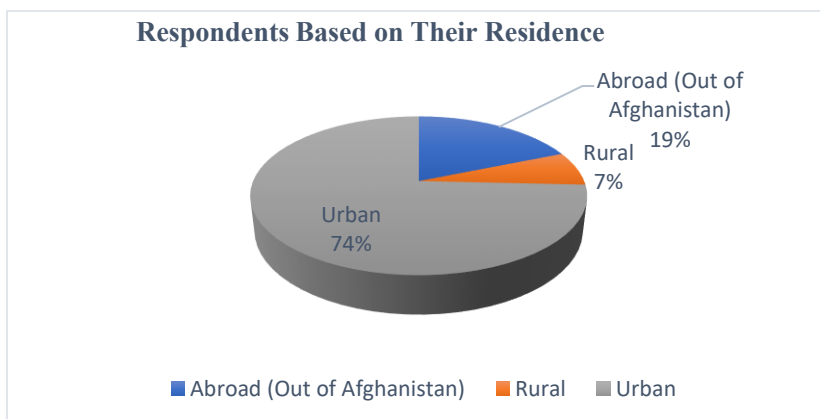


Figure 02

As shown in Figure 03, the survey indicates considerable variation in educational attainment among respondents. The majority, 58.42%, hold a bachelor’s degree, while 19.80% have pursued postgraduate studies, together

indicating that higher education serves as a major source of empowerment. Meanwhile, 17.82% completed high school (12th grade), and 3.96%, largely from rural areas, reported no formal education, reflecting educational exclusion driven by economic hardship and limited access to schooling.

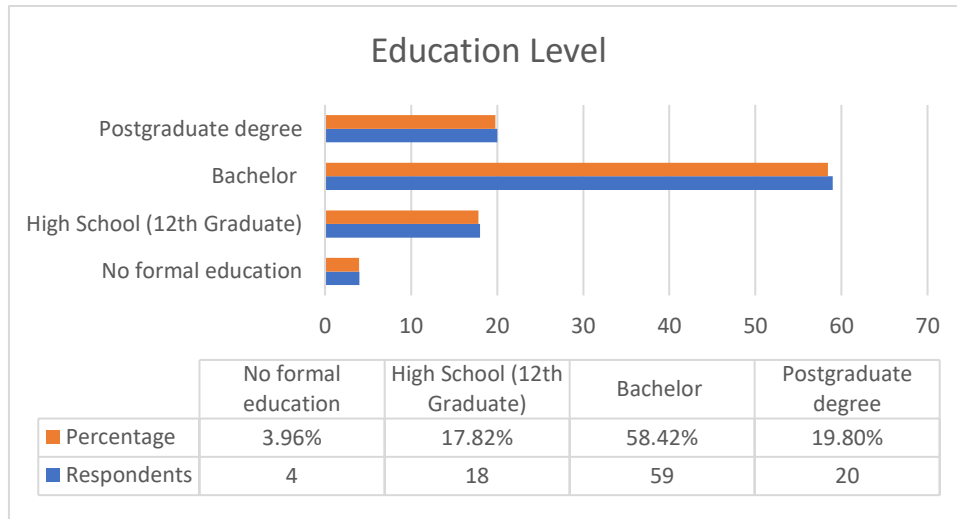


Figure 03

Complementing these survey findings, 16 in-depth interviews were conducted by way of representing the participants (5 women and 11 men, all between 18 and 30 years old) from key urban centers including Mazar-i-Sharif, Kabul, Herat, and Ghazni. These interviews reinforce the diversity of perspectives and add nuance to our understanding of youth political engagement in Afghanistan.

Findings shows that Afghanistan’s youthful population especially urban and educated segments often has greater exposure to digital networks and political discourse Furthermore, the underrepresentation of rural respondents and women reflects long-standing socio-economic and cultural constraints noted in recent studies.

Current Status and Political Roles of Afghan Youth

As depicted in Figure 4, the qualitative data illustrates a complex landscape of youth engagement in political activities. An overwhelming 94% of respondents reported no involvement in either formal or informal political processes. Only a small, vocal minority (6%) engage in activism that is largely grassroots and issue-driven. The nature of this activism includes participation in civil disobedience (18.18% of the active group), human rights advocacy (27.27%), and attendance at political gatherings (18.18%) based on survey data. The absence of formal political participation such as membership in political parties, attendance at municipal meetings, or diplomatic engagement—underscores the presence of structural barriers that prevent young people from entering established political institutions.

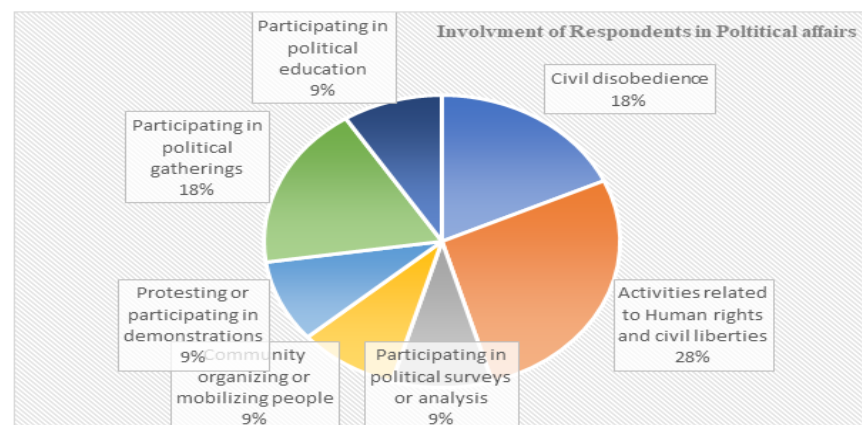


Figure 04

A dominant theme throughout the responses is the recognition of youth agency as critical to Afghanistan’s future. As shown in figure 05, 77% of respondents believe that youth are “very important” in shaping Afghanistan’s political landscape. They view young people as essential bridges between generations, capable of challenging the legacies of war, corruption, and entrenched power structures. Respondents frequently describe youth as “carriers of hope” and as catalysts for progressive change. Although a minority (10.89%) feel that youth are less important due to systemic impediments, the prevailing sentiment underscores a belief in the transformative potential of youth activism.

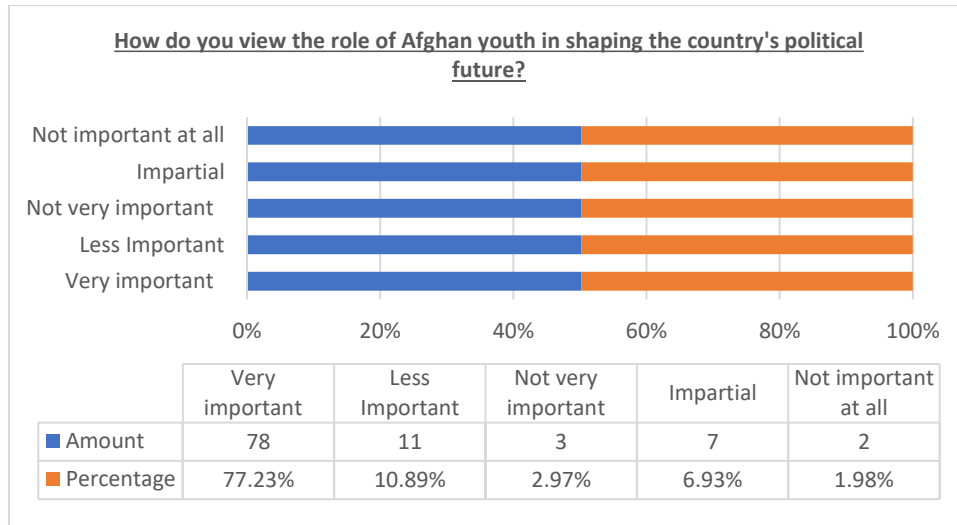


Figure 05

The survey and interview data collectively suggest that young people can make significant contributions in key areas such as anti-corruption, peacebuilding, and education. Rather than relying on formal institutions, youth are encouraged to engage in a broad initiative activity, taking on roles such as advocates for girls' education and educators in rural communities. The preference for community-based activism over traditional political systems shows obstacles on their way that many young people feel formal politics is hard to access, so they focus on making change at the local level. This shift underscores the importance of empowering youth at the local level to drive meaningful change.

Perceived Challenges and Barriers to Participation

Survey and interview data converge on several overlapping barriers inhibiting youth participation in political, social, and economic processes. These are rooted in Afghanistan’s socio-political context and manifest in several forms (Figure 06).

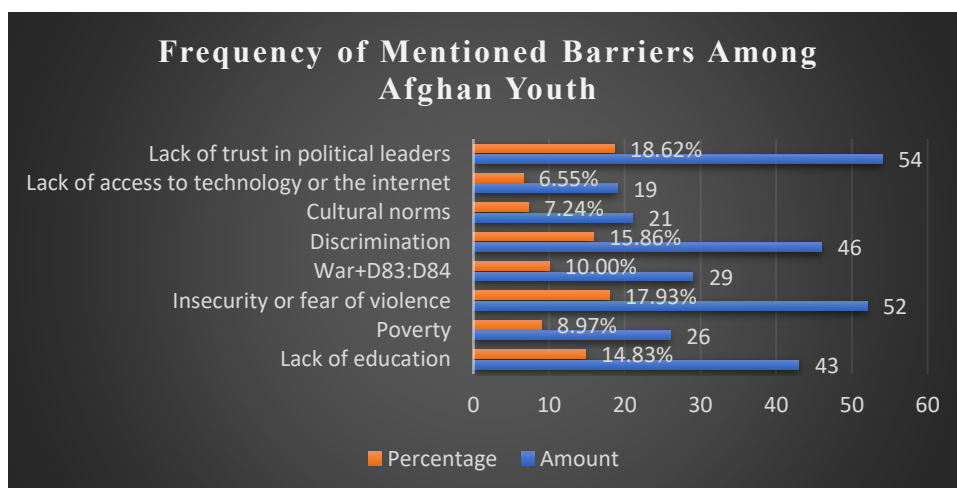


Figure 06

Based on the data provided in the survey, the lack of quality education is a basic constraint on one’s political literacy. Because of inadequate educational structures, a large number of the youth are unable to understand the dynamics of politics or articulate meaningful opinions, thereby rendering them unequipped for active public participation. Economically difficult circumstances and poverty add to the problem by shifting focus from civic engagement to basic survival, thus minimizing motivation and resources for political activism. The constant insecurity coupled with the threat of violence inhibits political engagement, and continual displacements along with disrupted schooling diminishes the quality and continuity of education. Such factors reduce self-esteem and instill deep-rooted political apathy, resulting in withdrawal or emigration for a considerable number of Afghan youth. It can be interpreted that these barriers are exacerbated by years of conflict.

The intersection of discrimination such as ethnocentrism as well as misogyny, within a rigid hierarchy of social order, continues to foster lack of inclusion and marginalization within the political sphere. The biases which stem from culture and other societal structures suppress a particular group from being part of the fundamental processes which discourse for democracy, and marginalize the voices that are heavily needed. The absence of adequate technology further alienates young people. Lack of resources like computers and the internet excludes individuals from participating in discussions about politics and societal organization in a modern context. This exclusion is an additional method of denying citizenship in contemporary society.

All of these barriers are built upon a fundamental distrust towards institutions associated with politics, as well as formal and informal leaders, including founders of political parties and militant groups, and informal framework of power anywhere. Years of perceived corruption and inefficiency have left youth disillusioned, which perpetuates the cycle of disengagement. This underscores the relevance of constructing holistic policies that address the fusion of dwarfed educational prospects, high unemployment rates, social inequalities, worsening discrimination, limited access to modern technology, and the absence of political frameworks that can support young people.

Empowerment and Participation Strategies

To overcome these formidable obstacles, respondents identified several strategies aimed at empowering youth to engage more fully in the political process. These recommendations are based on both quantitative and qualitative insights derived from the survey and interviews (Figure 07):

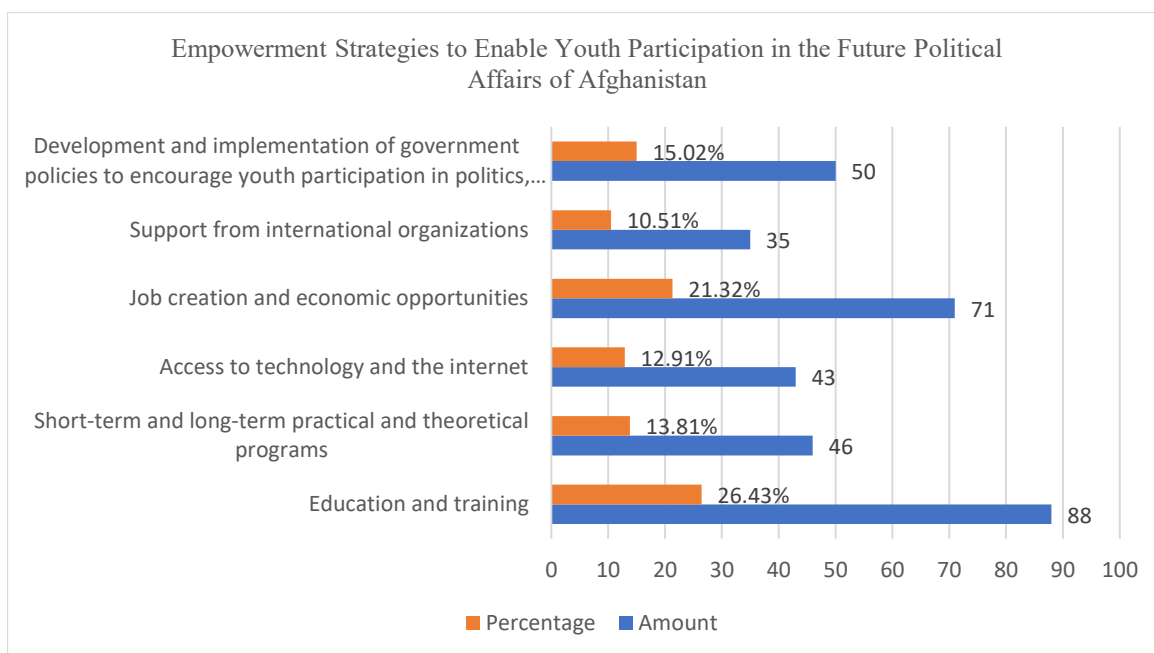


Figure 07

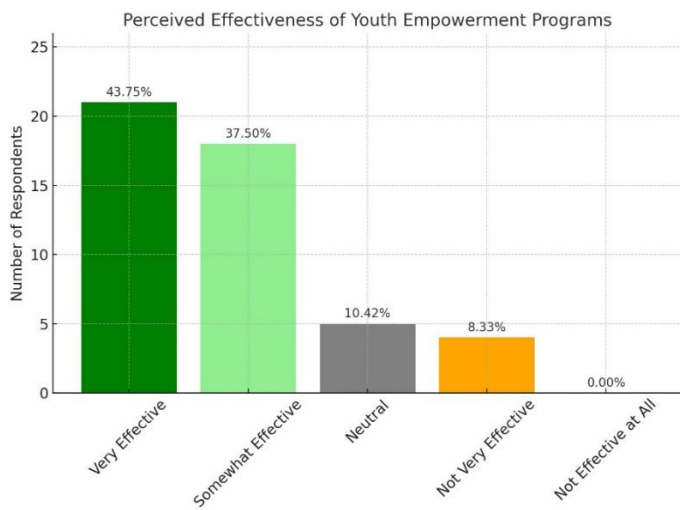


Figure 08

As it has been shown in Figure 08, Mostly of them imply participation in political discourse as very effective and their recommendation was to strengthen and enhance Afghan youths’ political participation. These recommendations target intervention at important aspects of care, arising from survey and interview findings.

Qualitative Education was the predominant strategy. Basic education, both formal and non-formal, was considered necessary to help develop the analytic skills, the critical tools that are required to make sense of, to comprehend and navigate political systems. An educated youth is a more participated one. Respondents also added alongside of qualitative Education that combine theory with practical experience. These are vital for bridging classroom knowledge with real-world application, preparing youth for active participation. Nearly half reported participation in empowerment initiatives and evaluated them positively, but over half had not engaged, indicating a need for broader outreach and accessibility.

Moreover, bridging the digital divide was another key recommendation. Equitable access to technology to rural and urban is vital, as digital platforms are central to political discourse, mobilization, and information-sharing. Ensuring youth access to these tools is necessary for inclusive participation.

Another important factor was economic empowerment. The creation of jobs has a big impact on civil engagement. Youth are more likely to get involved in community development when their financial requirements are satisfied. Both financial independence and the desire to participate in politics are fostered by employment.

In addition, international organizations' support was emphasized as a source of financial and technical help to boost local initiatives. In order to scale effective programs and fill domestic capacity gaps, respondents emphasized the value of international cooperation.

Furthermore, Institutional reform and government policy are equally important. To break down barriers to participation, youth-friendly policies and structural adjustments like young quotas in political institutions were proposed. While Afghanistan currently lacks formal representative institutions such as a parliament or elected councils under the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan-led administration. Despite this, the concept of youth quotas and policies that reflect the voices of young people, remains relevant for any future reforms. The goal of these modifications is to guarantee that young people participate actively in government rather than acting as passive onlookers.

Similarly, Afghan diaspora has also important role in empowerment of Afghan youths. It is expected from them to contribute in the form of informal diplomacy, political awareness, job creation, and economic investment, and overall government assistance. They are seen to be essential for assisting with reconstruction and bridging generational gaps. However, reintegrating diaspora youth continues to be difficult in the absence of sufficient incentives and legislation.

In conclusion, both domestic and diaspora Afghan youth possess the potential and resilience to transform the nation's political future. Realizing this potential depends on addressing their complex barriers. Sustained investment in education, economic development, digital access, and institutional reform can nurture an empowered youth population capable of driving democratic transformation and national progress.

DISCUSSION

Youth are a nation's greatest asset their energy, creativity, and resilience fuel innovation, economic growth, and social progress. While many countries invest heavily in education, technology, and entrepreneurship to empower young people, Afghanistan's youth remain hampered by decades of war, poverty, limited schooling, and political instability. To contend this challenge, we surveyed 101 young Afghans and interviewed 16 candidates from diverse regions. Respondents highlighted barriers such as poor educational access, socio-economic constraints, and an unstable political climate. Our findings suggest that targeted investments in quality education, skills training, and leadership development alongside grassroots initiatives can unlock Afghan youth's potential. By engaging these young citizens in policymaking and nation-building, government bodies, international organizations, and NGOs can help pave the way for lasting peace, economic revitalization, and a more inclusive society.

Navigating Hope: Youth Resilience and Future Outlook

Political participation is any activity that shapes, affects, or involves the political sphere" (EU-Council of Europe youth partnership 2020). Youth engagement matters because it is:

- **Rights-Based:** Young people deserve a say in decisions that affect their lives and futures.
- **Empowering:** Participation builds agency and community leadership.
- **Efficient:** Fresh perspectives and innovation improve decision-making.
- **Developmental:** Addressing youth needs promotes sustainable progress (Farthing 2012: 77; Kiilakoski 2020; Reimer 2002; SIDA n.d. UNICEF 2019).

In contemporary political science literature, youth are consistently identified as a potential with a high capacity for innovation, energy, and reform minded initiative, yet their potential remains under leveraged when formal institutions exclude them or cause to be unmotivated. By contrast, when sovereign states systematically exclude youth from decision making whether by legal barriers, cultural norms, or simple inertia, they engage in alternatives ways and paly their roles peacefully in order to be active in political affairs for stabilizing country and state. The same theory can be applied on Afghan youths that play their roles in such circumstances where educated Afghan youths possess not only the influential but also the creative agility to reshape policy agendas, from educational reform to national governance (Boell Foundation, 2020). Meanwhile, there are gender disparities, as female respondents were found to have strong restrictions in their ability to speak publicly, attend social gatherings, and engage in political activities compared to their male counterparts. For instance, a 29-year-old female interviewee from Kabul, Afghanistan, expressed her desire to attend a local community gathering to discuss the current situation of girls regarding issues of banning their education. She, however, found it difficult to attend the gathering due to restrictions from her family. She said, "My brothers said it is not safe and not acceptable for girls to attend meetings, so I had to stay home." This is an example of how culture can influence women's participation in politics. Moreover, according to UN Women's Gender Country Profile 2024 and UNAMA's De Facto Authorities' Moral Oversight in Afghanistan, women are restricted socially, for instance, by requiring them to travel with a man (UNAMA, 2024; UN Women, 2024). This has significantly restricted their ability to participate in politics. Gender disparities were also seen in our research as female respondents showed strong restrictions in their ability to move, speak publicly, and attend social gatherings compared to their male counterparts. Gender, therefore, does not only influence participation but also its form.

Civil Obedience: About 18.18% percent of Afghan youth surveyed engage in civil disobedience nonviolent refusal to obey certain laws to expose systemic problems. Motivated by frustration with corruption and

exclusion, they echo global legacies of ethical protest (Barfield 2022). For example, despite bans on women’s education and work, Afghan women continue learning via online schools, universities or any educational program like the Women’s Online University or Afghans for Progressive Thinking (APT) online programs. While these efforts may not be physically visible, they cultivate political awareness, solidarity, resilience, informed leadership, and resistance to exclusion among young people.

Civil disobedience among youth matters because it:

- Catalyzes change without violence, uniting diverse groups around shared goals.
- Signals political consciousness and readiness to confront governance deficits.
- Raises public awareness and pressures authorities to address long-standing issues.

Although formal political gatherings are currently banned in Afghanistan, Survey depicts that political gatherings remain vital forums for dialogue and identity-building. Historically, rural and tribal jirgas provided dispute resolution and consensus (Barfield 2022). Today’s youth-led forums and digital discussions blend tradition with innovation, adapting dialogue to a fragmented society.

During the 2001–2021 Republic, numerous events such as the Youth Developers Summit in Mazar-i-Sharif organized by Rawzana-e-Noor social Organization, youth Summit for Peace organized by Afghanistan Youth Leaders Assembly encouraged policy innovation for peacebuilding and such as these. Although these efforts attracted government and donor interest, but were not adequate for Afghan youths.

Emerging Mobilization Trends represent equally weighted through the survey it has been done, but numerically limited forms of youth political engagement, each contributing to the overall dataset (Figure 09).

Emerging Mobilization Trends (each 9.09%)

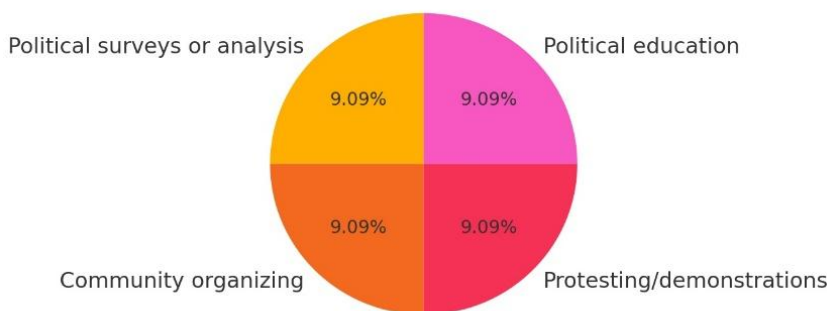


Figure 09

First, participation in political surveys or analysis enables youth to gauge public sentiment and inform policy debates. Although this activity appears infrequent, its share underscores its analytic importance. In Afghanistan, however, independent research is often constrained unless it aligns with state narratives.

Second, community organizing or mobilizing people employs grassroots structures such as jirgas and shuras to address local social, economic, or security challenges. Conrad Schetter (2013) argues that decentralized movements can deliver context-specific solutions. Yet Afghan authorities tightly regulate such efforts to ensure ideological conformity.

Third, protesting or participating in demonstrations represents a direct form of civic dissent against government decisions. Despite the widespread risk of arrest and violence, a 2023 policy brief from Princeton’s Afghanistan Policy Lab highlights that most activism in Afghanistan post-2021 now takes place online through social media platforms, as public assemblies have been severely restricted under the rule of Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan.

Finally, political education fosters critical citizenship shifting learners from passive recipients to active analysts of governance (Schetter 2013). Although Afghan universities offer courses in political thought, systemic barriers censorship, gender discrimination, poverty, and ideological control severely restrict their transformative potential.

Together, these four activities though each representing through chart illuminate the diverse strategies youth employ to engage politically under restrictive conditions.

Everyday resistance. Without confronting power directly, they set up secret schools, underground art groups, and encrypted chat rooms. These activities are being organized in order to reach Afghan youth help communities to for better future through education, awareness, and decision abilities.

Digital networking. Since the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan's return to power in 2021, the use of social media, encrypted apps, and diaspora run websites and other websites are increased to share stories of injustice, share personal narratives, mobilize international solidarity and organize efforts across borders. Young Afghans abroad lobby aid agencies to require human rights improvements turning local demands, like girls' education, into international causes. Online mentorships and virtual forums also let them exchange skills and build professional networks and make a

Parallel institutions. Where official services vanish, youth create their own: community dispute councils, volunteer health clinics, and informal schools. These grassroots bodies both meet immediate needs and model self-reliant governance (Barfield, 2022).

Passing on memory. To prevent their struggles from being forgotten, they collect oral histories, build digital archives, and produce art. Projects like the Afghan Memory Project make sure these stories endure.

Pre figurative politics. Rather than waiting for change, youth build small versions of the society they want. Through policy workshops, interethnic coalitions, climate resilience training, and volunteer campaigns, they practice transparency, equity, and anti-corruption measures. For example, the Afghan Youth Policy Collective is already drafting fair resource distribution plans and governance reforms that could guide Afghanistan's future (World Bank 2023).

Interconnected Youth Disengagement factors & overcoming ways: Hope gateway for Afghan youths

Surveys and interviews reveal a complex web of obstacles that constrain Afghan youth in political participation, all rooted in Afghanistan's fragile socio-political context. In our survey, the most commonly reported obstacles were lack of education, economic hardship, insecurity, and limited access to political information. These obstacles affected respondents differently, but they consistently appeared in both the survey and interviews. This shows that youth disengagement is driven by a mix of structural and personal challenges. For instance, several respondents mentioned that their daily survival needs leave them with little time or energy for political participation. Economic hardship intensifies this disengagement, as poverty compels young people to focus on survival rather than civic involvement (UNDP, 2022). This was also clearly reflected in our interviews, where several respondents said they spend most of their day trying to meet basic needs. As one 27-year-old interviewee from Ghazni explained, "Politics is for people who have time; we are just trying to survive. This precocity also fuels migration and recruitment into armed groups, depriving the country of its most vital demographic for recovery and development.

Enduring insecurity and the legacy of war exacerbate the situation. Persistent violence normalizes risk, deterring public activism and fostering fear (Suhrke, 2021). Conflict has disrupted education, entrenched ethnic and religious divides, and deepened psychological despair; many youths regard political participation as either futile or dangerous. This reality is reflected in the 2025 report by UNICEF and UNESCO describes Afghanistan as facing "one of the world's largest out-of-school crises," with about 9 million children out of school and over 13 million in need of educational support. UNESCO further warns that this crisis "threatens the future of an entire generation," with more than 2.13 million primary-aged children still excluded from education. These conditions significantly limit youth engagement in social and political life (UNICEF & UNESCO, 2025). Educational

shortfalls leave them ill-prepared to engage with political systems, while patriarchal norms systematically exclude women and minorities from civic life (Hakimi & Bose, 2019). Technological barriers limited internet access, high connectivity costs, and digital illiteracy further isolate rural youth from online discourse and activism.

These factors interact in self-reinforcing cycles. Economic instability accelerates brain drain, insecurity disrupts schooling, and ethnic bias combines with institutional distrust to marginalize minorities. The Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan's return in 2021, a 30 percent GDP collapse, and youth unemployment above 40 percent have deepened despair and eroded any remaining sense of political efficacy (World Bank, 2022). Bandura's (2001) theory linking hopelessness to civic disengagement aptly describes how prolonged conflict and authoritarianism have undermined youth agency: many now see migration—not nation-building—as the only viable path.

Based on regional situation of Afghanistan, It is clear that urban youth has more access to education, internet, and political discussion, while rural youth face stronger barriers caused by poverty, insecurity, and weak infrastructure. This urban–rural difference also appeared in our interviews, where urban respondents more often described access to schools, online platforms, and informal political discussions, while rural respondents emphasized transportation problems, weak connectivity, and fewer opportunities to join civic activities.

The findings shows from interview & survey that female and rural youth are particularly vulnerable to exclusion, which makes inclusive policy reform essential for any future political framework in Afghanistan.

To break this cycle, interventions must operate at multiple levels through both the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan and international support. First, policy reforms should prioritize the creation of youth-focused bodies and representation mechanisms, supported by grassroots advocacy and international accountability. Second, education must be restructured to include civic awareness and practical engagement. While earlier studies from Rwanda's post-conflict reforms (King, 2013) provide useful insights, these approaches need adaptation to Afghanistan's post-2021 realities under the IEA. Although 43.75 percent of participants rated such programs “very effective,” scaling them especially in rural areas and for young women—remains a challenge.

Third, digital inclusion is important. Afghanistan's internet penetration remains among the lowest in the region, with only 18% of the population (about 7.7 million people) connected in 2023 (World Bank, 2023). Fourth, economic empowerment grounded in Maslow's hierarchy of needs can foster stability: evidence from Colombia shows that employment initiatives reduce youth recruitment into armed groups (Blattman & Annan, 2016). In Afghanistan, vocational training and market-aligned job creation in agriculture and technology could translate economic security into civic engagement.

Finally, the Afghan diaspora represents an underused resource. Diaspora youth armed with global perspectives can act as investors, cultural mediators, and advocates, much as the Indian diaspora has influenced India's tech sector (Kapur, 2010). Policies that ensure safe return, facilitate remote engagement through virtual mentorship, and harness diaspora expertise can strengthen Afghanistan's civil society from within and beyond its borders (Majidi, 2024).

These challenges are not only social and economic but also institutional, because the absence of youth-focused policies and representative mechanisms continues to restrict meaningful youth participation. By integrating institutional reform, education, digital inclusion, economic opportunity, and diaspora engagement, stakeholders can create a supportive ecosystem in which Afghan youth regain agency and contribute to their country's political future.

Based on study findings indicate that Afghan youth remain feebly connected to formal institutional frameworks. Although Afghanistan previously had youth-related policy framework and initiatives, current mechanisms for youth representation, consultation, and civic inclusion are limited or inactive. For instance, in Deputy of Youth Affairs in Ministry of Information and cultural of Afghanistan, emphasizes mainly on youth empowerment through education, technical training, and capacity-building programs. While valuable, these efforts focus on individual development and overlook broader issues such as political participation, poverty, unemployment, and formal mechanisms for youth representation. As a result, youth development remains limited to empowerment

initiatives rather than a comprehensive, policy-based framework that ensures meaningful participation and institutional inclusion. This gap means that young people are rarely included in decision-making structures, and their concerns are often addressed only through informal or external channels. Therefore, youth exclusion is not only a social issue but also an institutional failure. These challenges are not only social and economic but also institutional, as the absence of youth-focused policies and representative mechanisms continues to restrict meaningful youth participation. By promoting institutional reform and allocating a formal lawful administration for youths in government body to work dedicatedly for youths regarding with their education, digital inclusion, economic opportunities, and diaspora engagement, ensure that both male and female youth from urban and rural areas are represented in local and national decision-making processes, and whatnot issues.

CONCLUSION

Afghanistan stands at a crossroads where the political future of the country is irrevocably tied to the aspirations and agency of its youth. This study, based on the life-worlds of Afghan youth, reveals a generation caught between the specter of war and the fragile possibility of hope. Decades of conflict, systemic exclusion, and socio-economic breakdown have limited their political participation, yet their potentiality and resilience exist as a most essential groundwork for the building of Afghanistan. Integrating empirical findings, this research underscores the urgent need for multifaceted interventions to dismantle barriers and empower youth as the future builders of Afghanistan.

The analysis starts by restating the main research problem: Afghan youth, even though they make up most of the population, are still left out of political life. Most active participation comes from educated young people in cities, shown through online campaigns, protests, and human rights work. However, 94% of those surveyed said they feel disconnected from political institutions. This paradox reflects institutionalized suspicion within government institutions, weakened by corruption and inefficiency during the Republic era, which ultimately paved the way for the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan's return. Rural youth, women, and ethnic minorities are doubly marginalized, their voices muted by patriarchal culture, economic maturity, and limited access to technology and education. These observations summarize a bitter truth: Afghanistan's youth are disengaged not by choice but by an interdependent web of intersecting adversities.

The study identifies multifaceted barriers to participation. Economic instability emerged as a primary obstacle, with poverty compelling youth to abandon political aspirations for subsistence labor, marginality or lack of facilities for remote areas of Afghanistan. Educational deficits rooted in war-torn infrastructure and patriarchal norms limit political literacy, particularly among rural women. Security concerns, amplified by the government, deter open dissent, while the urban-rural digital divide silences marginalized voices in national discourse. Cultural exclusion, institutional distrust, and the absence of inclusive policies compound these challenges, creating a labyrinth of disenfranchisement.

Amid these barriers, however, pathways to empowerment emerge. Education reforms and experiential learning programs for qualitative purpose could cultivate critical thinking and political agency. Bridging the digital divide through expanded internet access would democratize participation, enabling rural youth to contribute to national dialogues. Economic interventions, such as job opportunities through government long-term strategies and policies, could alleviate poverty and free capacity for civic engagement. Policy reforms, including youth quotas and anti-corruption measures, are essential to rebuild trust in institutions. Equally critical is the role of the Afghan diaspora, whose expertise, resources, and transnational networks offer innovative solutions for development and intergenerational reconciliation.

The diaspora's potential, however, hinges on reintegration. Many diaspora youths expressed willingness to contribute but cited bureaucratic hurdles, lack of economic opportunities, security risks, and cultural alienation as deterrents. Strategic partnerships between diaspora organizations and local governance bodies could channel remittances and expertise into grassroots projects, fostering sustainable development. International actors, can have main positive role to help in reintegration to country.

This research carries profound implications for policymakers. Afghanistan's stability depends on transforming youth from peripheral actors into central stakeholders. Education, technology, and economic security must come first and without them, youth remain vulnerable, and lead them despair. Inclusive governance ensuring representation for youths equally across country reaching rural communities, and ethnic minorities must underpin these efforts.

The study acknowledges limitations. Notwithstanding, the sample survey & Interview were helpful in analyzing the research questions, but as individual it was impossible to gather more responses due to not having adequate support or facilitation from Afghan Youths in filling survey, and therefore it needs to adopt broader demographic and geographic sampling to capture Afghanistan's diversity profoundly. Long-term studies on policy on each variable impact like educational reforms or diaspora engagement are crucial for understanding sustainable empowerment. Comparing post-conflict societies like Syria or Somalia could reveal best practices for youth inclusion in fragile states.

In conclusion, Afghan youth embody a duality of vulnerability and potential. Their marginalization is not inevitable but a product of systemic failures that demand redress. By investing in their education, economic security, and political inclusion, Afghanistan can break the cycle of conflict and apathy. This generation's resilience forged in the crucible of war offers a blueprint for hope. Their vision of a stable, inclusive future is attainable, but only through concerted local and international action. The time to act is now: to transform barriers into bridges, despair into determination, and youth from casualties of war into catalysts of peace. Afghanistan's political future, ultimately, rests not in the hands of warlords or foreign powers, but in the courage and creativity of its youth.

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