

A Comprehensive Assessment of Adolescents (10-19 years) Well-being in Afghanistan: Analysis based on Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys 2022-23

ABSTRACT

Adolescents are an increasing proportion of Afghanistan's population, and adolescence is recognized as a critical stage during which behavioural patterns, risks and challenges that can have lifelong effects on the wellbeing of adolescents. This paper seeks to provide an in-depth exploration of the well-being of adolescents age 10-19 in Afghanistan, a nation marked by complex sociopolitical dynamics and a long decade of conflict. The challenges confronting adolescents in Afghanistan are manifold, encompassing socio-economic disparities, limited access to education and healthcare, gender inequities, and the ubiquitous threat of violence and displacement. Factors such as widespread poverty, entrenched harmful practices, and disrupted infrastructure exacerbate their vulnerability, impeding their ability to thrive and fulfill their potential. Moreover, the erosion of social support systems and the traumas of conflict exert a profound toll on their mental and emotional well-being, perpetuating cycles of distress and instability. The analysis shows that wealth quintiles and mothers' level of education significantly influenced outcomes for adolescents across areas such as child marriage, child labor, education attainment, access to literacy and ICT skills and mental health. Through this comprehensive analysis, this paper aims to provide the status of adolescents (10-19) well-being and suggested programme strategies to inform programme interventions aimed at promoting holistic development of adolescents in Afghanistan to promote their rights and well-being.

Keywords: Conflict; Adolescents; Education; ICT and literacy skills; Child Labour; Child Marriage; Mental health

1. INTRODUCTION

Adolescents are an increasing proportion of Afghanistan's population, and adolescence is recognized as a critical stage during which behavioral patterns, risks and challenges that can have lifelong effects on the wellbeing of adolescents (WHO, 2022). Adolescents, the fastest growing population in the world are among those whose progress towards achievement of UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGS) by 2030

is lagging (Sherr et al., 2020). It is imperative to have a comprehensive understanding of adolescents (10-19) well-being to develop targeted development approaches and strategies to accelerate progress and improve the well-being of adolescents in the short and long term (Patton et al., 2016).

This synthesis report seeks to provide an in-depth exploration of the well-being of adolescents aged 10-19 in Afghanistan, a nation marked by complex sociopolitical dynamics and a long decade of conflict (Mohd Saleem et al., 2021). The challenges confronting Afghan adolescents are manifold, encompassing socio-economic disparities, limited access to education and healthcare, gender inequities, and the ubiquitous threat of violence and displacement. Factors such as widespread poverty, entrenched harmful practices, and disrupted infrastructure exacerbate their vulnerability, impeding their ability to thrive and fulfill their potential. Moreover, the erosion of social support systems and the traumas of conflict exert a profound toll on their mental and emotional well-being, perpetuating cycles of distress and instability (Ahmadi et al., 2021). This report aims to inform programme interventions and community-based initiatives aimed at promoting the holistic development of Afghan youth to promote their rights and well-being.

2. material and methods

To analyze adolescent data for individuals age 10-19 years from UNICEF Afghanistan Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey 2022-23 datasets, relevant datasets were selected: hh (households), h1 (household members), fs (children age 5-17 years), bh (birth history), and wm (women). Thereafter, identified and extracted variables pertinent to adolescents, such as age, gender, education, health, and socio-economic indicators. Each dataset was sorted (hh, h1, fs, bh, and wm) in ascending order based on the age of adolescents. Filters and queries were created to retain only the records corresponding to adolescents aged 10-19 years in each dataset, excluding any records outside this age range.

After filtering, the datasets were combined using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). Consistency in variable names and data structures across datasets was ensured to facilitate smooth integration. With the datasets merged, descriptive and inferential analysis was conducted.

SPSS was used to explore key indicators such as education attainment, disability and health outcomes, household characteristics, and socio-economic status among adolescents aged 10-19 years in Afghanistan. Summary statistics, frequency distributions, and cross-tabulations to discern patterns and relationships within the data were generated to provide a comprehensive overview.

2.1 Key socio-demographic characteristics

2.1.1 Age

The survey encompassed 38,707 adolescent girls aged 10 to 19 years, with a mean age of 13.8 years and a standard deviation of 2.8 years. Among these adolescents, half (50.0%) fell within the 10 to 13-year age bracket, constituting the early adolescence group. Meanwhile, 36.1% were between 14 to 17 years old, representing

the middle adolescence stage. Only 13.9% were aged over 17 years. Figure 1.

Figure 1: Distribution of adolescents by age

2.1.2 Residence

The majority, 82.6%, of adolescent girls lived in rural areas, with the population almost evenly distributed across the various provinces. Table 1.

Table 1: Distribution of adolescents by area and region of residence

Province	Share of children aged 10-19 years (%)
Kabul	3.0
Kapisa	2.2
Parwan	2.7
Maidan Wardak	3.1
Logar	3.3
Nangarhar	3.9
Laghman	3.2
Panjsher	2.9
Baghlan	2.3
Bamyan	2.6
Ghazni	2.8
Paktika	3.3
Paktya	3.6
Khost	4.8
Kunarha	3.3
Nooristan	3.1
Badakhshan	2.5
Takhar	2.7
Kunduz	2.9
Samangan	2.5
Balkh	2.1
Sar-E-Pul	2.5
Ghor	2.5
Daykundi	2.2
Urozgan	2.7
Zabul	2.8
Kandahar	4.3
Jawzjan	3.1
Faryab	2.6
Helmand	3.8
Badghis	2.4
Herat	3.3
Farah	2.3
Nimroz	2.8

2.1.2 Birth History

Among adolescent girls, 51.0% experienced single-child births, while the remaining 49.0% had multiple children in one birth. For most of these adolescents, the most prevalent age range for their mothers at the time of their birth was between 20 to 34 years at 74.4%. The highest recorded birth order was 2 to 3, accounting for 36.6% of births. All adolescents who had given birth reported receiving prenatal care, which was provided by various healthcare professionals including doctors, nurses/midwives, traditional birth attendants, or community health workers. Traditional birth attendants were the primary providers of prenatal care for the majority of these adolescents. Table 2.

Table 2: Distribution of adolescents by area and region of residence

Variable	Category	Percentage (%)
Ever given birth	Yes	44.7
	No	55.3
Received prenatal care	Yes	71.1
	No	28.9
Twins	Single	51.0
	Twins	49.0
Birth order	1	21.4
	2-3	36.6
	4-6	31.7
	7+	10.3
Mother's age at birth	<20	21.3
	20-34	74.4
	35+	4.3

The mothers of adolescents who gave birth before the age of 20 predominantly belonged to the poorest wealth quintile. Conversely, the mothers of adolescents who gave birth at 35 years or older were mainly in the second quintile. Across all age groups, low birth rates were observed among the richest wealth quintile. Figure 2.

Figure 2: Distribution of age at birth by wealth quintile

3. results and discussion

Education

A majority 58.3% of the adolescent girls attended at least an early childhood program. Among these, the majority, 60.6%, had completed primary education, while only 11.6% had advanced to upper secondary education. Merely 2.2% had received formal Islamic education. Regarding school attendance, 65.4% of the girls attended school during the

1401 school year, and 70.2% had attended during the 1400 school year. Table 3.

Table 3: Level of education

Variable	Category	Percentage (%)
Ever attended school or early childhood programme	Yes	58.3
	No	41.7
	No response	0.0
Highest level of education attended	ECE	0.7
	Primary	60.6
	Lower secondary	24.8
	Upper secondary	11.6
	Higher	0.0
	Formal Islamic education	2.2
Highest grade attended	Grade/year 1	5.1
	Grade/year 2	7.2
	Grade/year 3	10.0
	Grade/year 4	13.2
	Grade/year 5	12.8
	Grade/year 6	14.7
	Grade/year 7	13.6
	Grade/year 8	4.8
	Grade/year 9	6.8
	Grade/year 10	5.6

	Grade/year 11	3.5
	Grade/year 12	2.7
	Grade/year 13	0.0
	Grade/year 14	0.0
Completed grade/year	Yes	22.7
	No	77.2

Among those who attended school during the 1401 school year, a majority (63.8%) had completed primary education. Similarly, for those attending school during the 1400 school year, a majority (70.9%) had reached the primary level of education. Thus, it's evident that the majority of adolescent girls had achieved education up to the primary level, with most stopping at grade/year 6 for both school years (1401 and 1400). Table 4. Since September 2021, all Afghan girls age 12 are not attending school and it is estimated that over 80% of adolescent girls are out of school (UNESCO, 2023)

Table 4: Grade/year attained during 1401 school year

Variable	Category	Percentage (%)
Attended school during 1401 school year	Yes	65.4
	No	34.6
Level of education attended 1401 school year	ECE	0.9
	Primary	63.8
	Lower secondary	20.9
	Upper secondary	11.4
	Higher	0.1

	Formal Islamic education	2.9
Grade attended at that level attended 1401 school year	Grade/year 1	5.8
	Grade/year 2	7.7
	Grade/year 3	10.6
	Grade/year 4	14.6
	Grade/year 5	14.1
	Grade/year 6	14.2
	Grade/year 7	13.0
	Grade/year 8	2.3
	Grade/year 9	6.0
	Grade/year 10	6.1
	Grade/year 11	3.9
	Grade/year 12	1.7
	Grade/year 13	0.1
	Grade/year 14	0.0

Table 5: Grade/year attained during 1400 school year

Variable	Category	Percentage (%)
Attended school during 1400 school year	Yes	70.2
	No	29.8

Level of education attended 1400 school year	ECE	0.8
	Primary	70.9
	Lower secondary	19.0
	Upper secondary	7.4
	Higher	0.0
	Formal Islamic education	2.0
Grade attended at that level attended 1400 school year	Grade/year 1	7.3
	Grade/year 2	9.8
	Grade/year 3	14.1
	Grade/year 4	13.7
	Grade/year 5	14.1
	Grade/year 6	14.3
	Grade/year 7	5.8
	Grade/year 8	2.3
	Grade/year 9	11.1
	Grade/year 10	4.6
	Grade/year 11	2.0
	Grade/year 12	0.9
	Grade/year 13	0.0
	Grade/year 14	0.0

Education status by age cohorts

Pre-primary/ECE level of education was the most attained level of education among the adolescent girls.

Figure 3: Education status by age cohorts

The educational attainment of adolescent girls was significantly influenced by their mothers' level of education. A substantial proportion of adolescent girls whose mothers have attained only pre-primary/ECE/No education themselves have similarly achieved pre-primary/ECE/No education (44.6%), with only a small fraction (6.3%) reaching upper secondary education. Conversely, among adolescent girls whose mothers have pursued higher education, the majority (33.7%) have attained only lower secondary education, revealing an intriguing trend.

Table 6: Influence of Mother's education attainment on Adolescent education status.

Mother's education	Child's education (%)			
	Pre-primary/ECE/None	Primary	Lower secondary	Upper secondary
Pre-primary/ECE/None	44.6	35.3	13.9	6.3
Primary	12.7	54.3	21.2	11.8
Lower secondary	13.1	54.5	21.4	11.0
Upper secondary	5.9	56.6	21.3	16.2
Higher	3.9	44.2	33.7	18.3

Literacy rate and ICT skills

Access to internet and technology remains low in Afghanistan (Salam Watandar, 2024). Less than half, 45.6%, of adolescent girls have the ability to read books. Among those who do read, 67.7% express a preference for stories. However, a smaller proportion, 38.3%, can correctly read every word in practice. On the academic front, a significant majority, about 78.8%, demonstrate proficiency in arithmetic operations, including tasks like identifying the next number in a series and adding numbers, with 58.4% excelling in this area. Functional disabilities are present in only 33.2% of adolescent girls. The age range for the commencement of formal education among these girls falls between 9 to 17 years.

Engagement with various media platforms is notably low. Merely 1.9% report reading the newspaper almost daily, while only 10.4% listen to the radio with similar frequency. Television viewership is also infrequent, with just 4.4% watching at least once a week. A mere 2.0% have experience using computers or tablets. Among this small group, only 9.1% have used these devices almost daily in the past three months. Their activities primarily include copying or moving files/folders (56.0%), utilizing copy/paste functions in documents (51.2%), and basic arithmetic (39.3%). Other tasks, such as connecting or installing new devices (35.7%), installing and configuring software (33.3%), creating electronic presentations (41.7%), file transfer (59.5%), and writing computer programs (34.5%), are less common. Internet usage is minimal, with only 5.7% having accessed it, and mobile phone ownership is limited, at just 13.1%.

Table 7: Literacy and ICT skills.

Variable	Category	Percentage (%)
Frequency of reading the newspaper	Not at all	91.3
	Less than once a week	4.3
	At least once a week	2.4
	Almost every day	1.9
Frequency of listening to the radio	Not at all	79.8
	Less than once a week	5.4
	At least once a week	4.4
	Almost every day	10.4
Frequency of watching TV	Not at all	75.6
	Less than once a week	3.1
	At least once a week	4.4
	Almost every day	16.8
Ever used a computer or a tablet	Yes	2.0
	No	97.8
Computer / tablet usage in the last 3 months	Not at all	65.2
	Less than once a week	14.1
	At least once a week	11.6

	Almost every day	9.1
During the last 3 months: Copy or move a file or folder	Yes	56.0
	No	44.1
During the last 3 months: Use a copy / paste in document	Yes	51.2
	No	48.8
During the last 3 months: Send e-mail with attached file	Yes	60.7
	No	39.3
During the last 3 months: Use a basic arithmetic formula in a spreadsheet	Yes	39.3
	No	60.7
During the last 3 months: Connect and install a new device	Yes	35.7
	No	64.3
During the last 3 months: Install and configure software	Yes	33.3
	No	65.5

During the last 3 months: Create an electronic presentation	Yes	41.7
	No	58.3
During the last 3 months: Transfer a file	Yes	59.5
	No	40.5
During the last 3 months: Write a computer program	Yes	34.5
	No	65.5
Ever used internet	Yes	5.7
	No	94.2
Internet usage in the last 3 months	Not at all	12.6
	Less than once a week	22.5
	At least once a week	29.8
	Almost every day	35.1
Own a mobile phone	Yes	13.1
	No	86.8
Mobile phone usage in the last 3 months	Not at all	60.8
	Less than once a week	15.7

At least once a week	13.7
Almost every day	9.7

Child labour and school attendance

Child labour, a serious protection concern (IMO, 2024), was recorded among 89.7% of the adolescent girls. Of these adolescent girls, 58.9% worked more than 40 hours a week where 39.4% were involved in work involving heavy loads, 16.4% were working with dangerous/heavy machinery, 55.6% were exposed to dust, fumes or gas, 25.4% were exposed to loud noise or vibrations, 30.2% were required to work at heights and only 8.6% were required to work with chemicals. A majority 74.3% were engaged in house chores for 40 hours or less in a week. Table 6.

Table 8: Child labour

Variable	Category	Percentage (%)
Child labour	Yes	89.7
	No	10.3
Hours worked in a week	40 hours or less	41.2
	More than 40 hours	58.9
Work involving heavy loads	Yes	39.4
	No	60.5
Working with dangerous/ heavy machinery	Yes	16.4
	No	83.4
Description of work: exposed to dust fumes or gas	Yes	55.6
	No	44.3

Description of work: exposed to extreme temperatures or humidity	Yes	68.6
	No	31.3
Description of work: exposed to loud noise or vibration	Yes	25.4
	No	74.3
Description of work: required to work at heights	Yes	30.2
	No	69.7
Description of work: required to work with chemicals	Yes	8.6
	No	91.0
Number of hours engaged in past week (house chores)	40 hours or less	74.3
	More than 40 hours	25.7

A majority of adolescents involved in child labor had only completed primary education, with formal Islamic education being rare, represented by only 2.1% of cases. Child labour emerged as a significant factor influencing the educational attainment of adolescent girls (p-value 0.001). Figure 4.

Figure 4: Child labour and school attendance

Child marriage

The age at first marriage for adolescent girls in Afghanistan occurs below the age preferred by women (Safi et al., 2024). Based on this analysis of UNICEF MICS 2022-2023 dataset, marriage age typically fell within the range of 13 to 18 years, mirroring the age range at which their mothers were commonly married, typically between 15 to 19 years, accounting for 98.2% of cases. Remarkably, 85.4% of these adolescent girls were married to men aged over 45 years. The highest recorded age for a husband was 73 years, married to a 17-year-old girl as his fourth wife. Additionally, a significant majority (86.7%) of the girls were married as second wives, as their husbands already

had one wife at the time of marriage.

Table 9: Child marriage

Variable	Category	Percentage (%)
Age at first marriage	13-18 years	
Age of husband	Less than 45	14.6
	More than 45	85.4
Husband has more wives	Yes	5.1
	No	94.9
Number of wives	1	86.7
	2	12.2
	4	1.1
Age at first marriage/union of mother	10-14	1.8
	15-19	98.2

Level of education and wealth quintile

A significant proportion, 65.5%, of adolescent girls hailing from the poorest wealth quintiles have achieved either pre-primary/ECE/No education. Similarly, 51.4% of those from the second wealth quintile and 40.6% from the middle quintile have attained this level of education. However, a notable shift occurs among adolescent girls in the fourth and richest quintiles, where the majority have attained primary education—43.5% and 42.2%, respectively. Interestingly, among those who have reached upper secondary education, the majority (17.4%) belong to the richest wealth quintile. These findings underscore the significant influence of wealth quintile on the educational attainment of adolescent girls, with a statistically significant correlation (p-value=0.0001).

Figure 5: Level of education and wealth quintile

Mental health

In In Afghanistan, the burden of mental health is widespread especially in contexts of

widespread poverty and violence with increased inequalities in access to basic services (Renato et al., 2022). Based on the analysis, 21.7% of adolescent girls reported experiencing daily feelings of anxiety, nervousness, or worry, while the majority (31.2%) indicated never experiencing such emotions. The comparison with boys was not possible due to data limitations.

Figure 6: Anxiety

Additionally, 13.5% reported experiencing daily depression, with 18.0% experiencing it weekly, 19.5% monthly, and 10.0% a few times a year, while the majority (38.9%) reported never experiencing depression.

Figure 7: Depression

Wealth quintile and well-being of adolescent girls

Wealth quintile emerged as a significant factor influencing the mental well-being of adolescent girls in Afghanistan. Notably, girls from the poorest households experienced higher levels of depression (14.5%) compared to those from higher wealth quintiles. Conversely, a majority (51.7%) of adolescent girls from the richest quintiles reported never experiencing depression.

4. Conclusion

Afghanistan's long history and decade of conflict has affected adolescents' education, health and socio-economic well-being. The effects vary across wealth-quintiles and geographical location. In Afghanistan, most of the adolescents (86.2%) age (10-19) live in the rural areas. It was observed that wealth status and mothers' knowledge determined most of the outcomes. Childbirth for poor households occurs before age 20 and child marriage between the age of 13-18. The educational attainment of adolescent's girls was significantly influenced by their mothers' level of education and affected by child labour. In terms of mental health, wealth quintile emerged as a significant factor influencing the mental well-being of adolescent girls in Afghanistan. Notably, girls from the poorest households experienced higher levels of depression (14.5%) compared to those from higher wealth quintiles.

These findings demonstrate that adolescents (10-19) are affected across all programme areas such as education, health and social well-being especially in the rural areas. Therefore, programme interventions for adolescents can no longer be delivered in isolation if comprehensive impact is to be achieved. A multisectoral approach with a focus on adolescents from low wealth quintiles and improvement of mothers' knowledge is imperative to address most of the challenges faced by adolescents, and to accelerate progress towards SDGs.

Competing interests

The views expressed in this paper are not attributable to any organization. They are personal views of the author and therefore, all errors and mis representation are those of the author. The views expressed in this paper are not attributable to UNICEF. They are the views of the author who at the time of publication was an employee of UNICEF as Monitoring Manager at UNICEF Afghanistan

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