# Children, Adolescents and Young People in 13 Provinces of Afghanistan:
## an analysis using data from the Socio-Demographic and Economic Surveys (SDES)

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**Introduction: Adolescents and young people in the development process**

During the last 20 years of ICPD and MDG implementation and the recent introduction of the SDG, significant progress has been achieved in incorporating human rights issues in development. Yet, health issues of adolescents and young people is lagging behind (WHO, 2015). Demographic dynamics, particularly age structural changes, have received increasing attention due to the development impact of the "demographic dividend" (UNFPA, 2014). In Afghanistan, adolescents' issues have been addressed in the Afghanistan National Peace and Development Framework (ANPD) 2017-2021 (GoIRA, 2017), and in the Afghanistan National Youth Policy (ANYP) of 2014 (GoIRA, 2014).

There is growing understanding that adolescent reproductive health and the choices and opportunities for girls during adolescence play a critical role for development, for the fertility transition, and for beginning adulthood as empowered, active citizens. Yet, adolescent and child pregnancies are still a serious concern at the global level and in Afghanistan. In the period 2005-2010, around 72.5 million babies were born per year to girls aged 15-19 across the world – a figure expected to decline to 63.9 million in the period 2015-2020; in Afghanistan these were estimated at 811 and 665 thousand respectively. At the global level, they represented 10.6% (2005-2010), declining to 9.1% (2015-2020) of total births, compared to percentages of 14.2 and 11.5 in Afghanistan (United Nations, 2017). The incidence of adolescent births is declining faster in Afghanistan that at the global level, but the percentage is still much higher and requires renewed efforts, because young girls are more exposed to suffering complications at pregnancy and childbirth. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) have placed adolescents and youth in a more prominent position than in the previous Millennium Development Goals. It is against this background that this report analyses SDES data from 13 provinces, focusing on the demographic and social patterns pertaining to adolescents and young people.

## Objectives, data and methods

The analysis in this report is based on data from the Socio-Demographic and Economic Surveys (SDES) carried out in 13 provinces. The first round of surveys took place in Bamiyan (2011), Daykundi and Ghor (2012), Kabul (2013) and Kapisa and Parwan (2014). A second round was conducted in Takhar (2015), Samangan (2015), Balkh (2015), Herat (2016), Nimroz (2016), Baghlan (2016) and Badghis (2017). The SDES surveys have a large sample size (50% of the province's population), which allows for more disaggregated studies than other surveys. The study employs standard demographic methodology, focusing on age structure of the population, fertility, nuptiality and educational aspects in age groups 10-24, and their participation in economic activities. Indicators are presented for each of the 13 provinces to allow comparing the provinces and with the national level and selected countries –using information from other sources.

## Data analysis

### Age structure

In regions where fertility has declined faster such as Latin America and the Caribbean and in most parts of Asia, smaller percentages (16.9 percent and 16.5 percent respectively) of children below age 10 are registered. In parts of the world where fertility has declined little or not, the proportion of children (ages 0 to 9) is very high. In Afghanistan, it is 30.8 percent.

**Table 1: Proportions of population 0-9 years old to total population in DESD provinces, Afghanistan, selected countries, regions and in the world**

| | |
|---|---|
| Kabul | 28.9 |
| Kapisa | 30.3 |
| Parwan | 30.5 |
| Baghlan | 32.8 |
| Bamiyan | 31.3 |
| Takhar | 32.9 |
| Samangan | 30.9 |
| Balkh | 29.8 |
| Ghor | 33.6 |
| Daykundi | 33.7 |
| Badghis | 32.9 |
| Herat | 30.1 |
| Nimroz | 34.9 |
| ***Afghanistan*** | ***30.8*** |
| Iraq | 29.0 |
| Pakistan | 24.7 |
| Iran | 16.8 |
| ***Southern Asia*** | 19.7 |
| ***Asia*** | 16.5 |

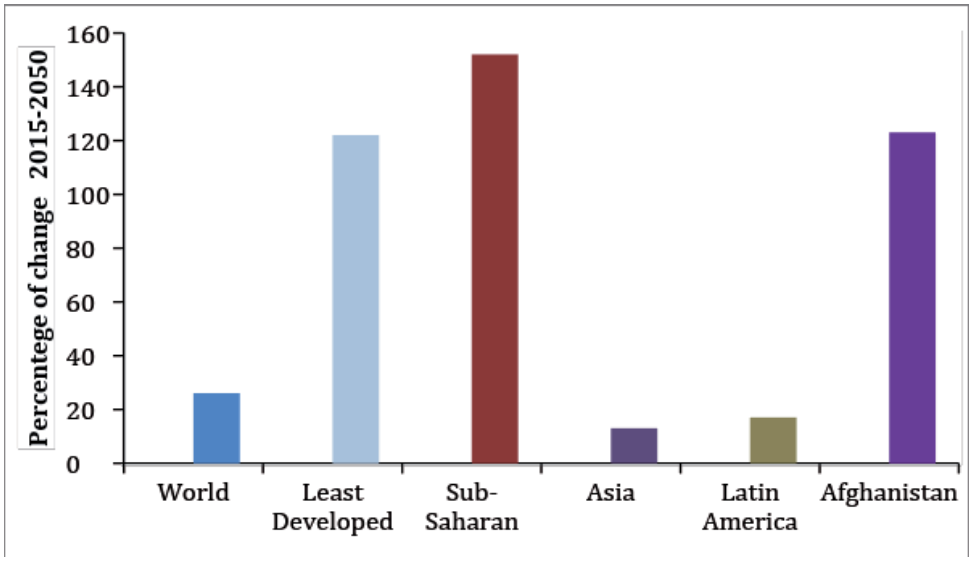
| | |
|---|---|
| ***Latin America and Caribbean*** | 16.9 |
| **World** | **17.8** |

Source: SDES- 2011-2016 UNFPA-Afghanistan and CSO of Afghanistan (Micro data) and data from the UN Population Division, World Population Prospects 2017.

Table 1 reveals significant differences in the age structure of the provinces within Afghanistan, but more remarkably, the differences between Afghanistan and the rest of the world. The stage of the demographic transition has a direct impact on the proportion of children in the population, reducing the relative size of very young cohorts. In Afghanistan the proportion under 10 is 30.8 percent. The provinces with lower proportions of children under 10 are Kabul (28.9 percent) and Balkh (29.8 percent), while in some provinces (Nimroz, Ghor and Daykundi), children under 10 represent one-third the total population. This implies a very high child dependency ratio, which is a heavy burden for the economically active population.

As the fertility transition advances, the proportion of young children will decline, with rapid increases in adolescents (10-19 age group) and young people (15-24 age group). This process will later translate into significant increases in the working-age population (15-64 age group). Figure 1 portrays the main features with respect to the expected changes in working-age populations at the global level, compared to the expected changes in Afghanistan.

**Figure 1. Percentage change in the population aged 15-64 from 2015 to 2050**




***Source:*** Own elaboration, based on data from the UN Statistical Division, World Population Prospects 2015.

Table 2 shows the age structures of the provinces according to SDES data. The different dynamics of fertility change have determined differences in age structures. Afghanistan and the 13 SDES provinces have a very young population: at national level, half the population is younger than 17.5 years, and 44%

is younger than 15. In Nimroz, the province with the youngest age distribution, half the population is younger than 14 years. In addition, while the world population is 42% younger than 25, and 48% in Southern Asia, in Afghanistan, around two thirds are younger than 25 (over 70% in Nimroz and Daykundi). Adolescents and young people (10-24 years) represent more than a third of the total Afghan population (34.9%), while at the global level this group represents one fourth of the population (24.5%). In Iran, adolescents and young people represent 22.7% of the population. Adolescents and young people are just over one third of the population in Badghis, Baghlan and Ghor, and between 36 and 37.5% of the total in most of the other provinces.

**Table 2: Median age of the population and proportions in selected age groups: for SDES provinces, Afghanistan, selected countries and world population**

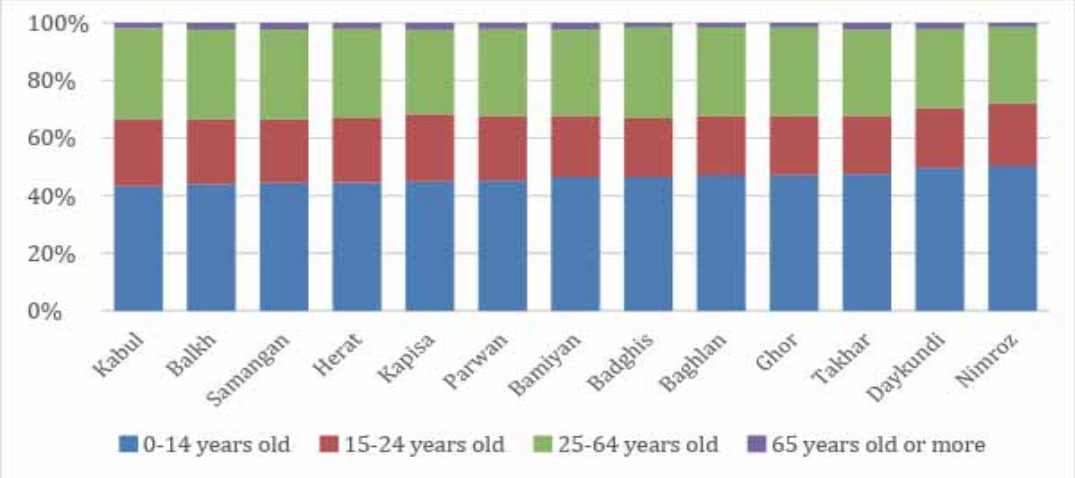
| ***Regions, countries, and Afghan provinces*** | Median age | Population in age groups (%) | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | 0-14 | 0-24 | 10-19 | 10-24 | 15-24 |
| Badghis | 15.7 | 46.5 | 66.8 | 24.2 | 33.9 | 20.4 |
| Baghlan | 15.4 | 47.0 | 67.5 | 25.3 | 34.5 | 20.5 |
| Balkh | 16.6 | 44.0 | 66.5 | 27.0 | 36.5 | 22.5 |
| Bamiyan | 16.6 | 44.4 | 67.7 | 27.1 | 36.2 | 21.3 |
| Daykundi | 15.2 | 49.7 | 70.4 | 27.1 | 36.5 | 20.7 |
| Ghor | 16.3 | 47.2 | 67.6 | 26.8 | 33.9 | 20.4 |
| Herat | 16.3 | 44.6 | 66.8 | 27.5 | 36.6 | 22.4 |
| Kabul | 17.7 | 43.3 | 66.2 | 27.2 | 37.7 | 23.3 |
| Kapisa | 17.1 | 44.9 | 68.2 | 24.6 | 37.7 | 23.3 |
| Nimroz | 14.0 | 56.5 | 72.0 | 25.4 | 37.0 | 21.7 |
| Parwan | 17.1 | 45.2 | 67.6 | 28.4 | 36.9 | 22.4 |
| Samangan | 16.5 | 46.4 | 66.5 | 25.0 | 35.4 | 22.1 |
| Takhar | 15.2 | 47.4 | 67.7 | 24.1 | 34.6 | 20.3 |
| ***Afghanistan*** (2015) | 17.3 | 44.0 | 65.2 | 25.5 | 34.9 | 21.2 |
| Iran (2015) | 29.5 | 23.6 | 39.5 | 13.8 | 22.7 | 15.9 |
| Pakistan (2015) | 22.5 | 35.0 | 54.9 | 20.5 | 19.2 | 19.9 |
| Iraq (2015) | 19.4 | 41.0 | 60.5 | 22.1 | 31.2 | 19.6 |
| ***Southern Asia*** (2015) | 26.1 | 29.6 | 48.2 | 19.2 | 28.4 | 18.6 |
| ***World*** (2015) | 29.6 | 26.1 | 42.3 | 16.3 | 24.5 | 16.2 |

***Source****:* SDES- 2011-2017 UNFPA-Afghanistan and CSO of Afghanistan (Micro data) and data from the UN Population Division, World Population Prospects 2017.

Adolescents (10-19 years old) are about one fourth of the total population in Afghanistan as well as in the 13 provinces, while they represent less than 20% in the Southern Asia region, 16.3% at the global level and only 13.8% in Iran, a country at an advanced stage of the demographic transition. The weight of adolescents in Afghanistan's population is therefore greater than in most other countries. Figure 2

presents a comparative profile of the age structure of the 13 provinces by large age groups. At the current stage of population change in Afghanistan, most important in this figure is the proportion under age 15, since age 65 or older is a small proportion in all provinces. Recent fertility changes in some of the provinces have had an impact only in younger groups, below age 15. The working-age group (15-64) comprises the red and green segments in the graph, represented separately to visualize the participation of young people (15-24). The young people segment varies little from one province to another. The highest share (23.3%) is in Kabul and Kapisa, followed by Balkh at 22.5 percent. The lowest is 20.3% in Takhar. There is only a 3% range from the highest to the lowest, indicating that the changes in fertility are very recent and yet to have a relevant structural impact in groups beyond age 15.

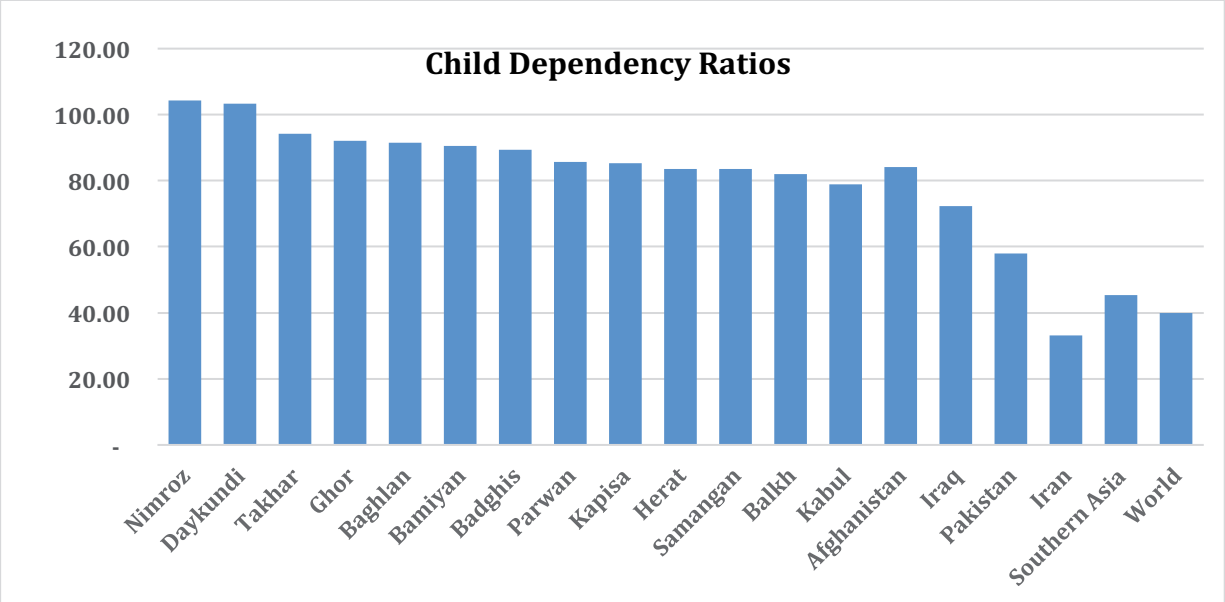
**Figure 2. SDES provinces: Population distribution by broad age groups**




Sources: SDES- 2011-2016 UNFPA-Afghanistan and CSO of Afghanistan (Micro data)

It is apparent that the provinces where fertility changes have had a more relevant impact on age structure are Kabul and Balkh, with lower percentages in ages 0-14 (close to 40% of the total population). At the other extreme is Nimroz, followed by Daykundi with 50% of the population younger than 15. Age structures determine high child dependency ratios in all provinces, with differences according to the stage of fertility decline. These child dependency ratios are presented in Figure 3. Compared to other countries and to the Southern Asia region, child dependency ratios are very high for Afghanistan and for all the provinces. However, it is evident that dependency ratios are declining in some provinces, which show ratios below the national average, with Kabul and Balkh being at the lowest end.

**Figure 3. Child dependency ratios, SDES provinces, Afghanistan and selected countries and regions**




Sources: SDES- 2011-2016 UNFPA-Afghanistan and CSO of Afghanistan (Micro data and data from the UN Population Division, World Population Prospects 2017.

Afghanistan is in the early stages of fertility decline (UNFPA Afghanistan Country Office, 2012). It has experienced high fertility levels over the past 40 years. About the year 2000 the fertility rate began a downward trend. Consequently, the population is still young, as reflected in a low median age (7.3 years in 2015)[1]. However, fertility decline with consequent changes in the age structure are already under way. The changes are evident in the indicators (Table 2 and Figure 3) of the provinces that initiated this process of change at earlier dates (like Kabul and Balkh) when compared to indicators from provinces that have experienced little or no demographic change yet (like Nimroz and Daykundi).

**Adolescent fertility**

Adolescent fertility rate (AFR) is a very important demographic indicator that is also relevant to gender equity and social development. It was incorporated as part of SDG 3 "Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages" and constitutes indicator 3.7.2 of the SDG framework. The SDES analysis of infant and under-five mortality (UNFPA Afghanistan 2017.a), revealed that childbearing at very early ages, followed by additional births at short intervals, significantly increases the risk of infant and child mortality. Beyond its health positive outcomes, reducing adolescent fertility also bring about beneficial effects on adolescent's education, particularly girls'. From a gender perspective, starting childbearing at early ages usually implies that girls do not continue with school, thereby restricting their options to pursuing a career, joining the labour market with paid jobs and achieving economic

[1]United Nations Population Division. Available from http://esa.un.org/unpd/wpp/index.htm (accessed 5 March

autonomy. Policies must therefore aim to delay the onset of childbearing, and reduce adolescent fertility.

Table 3 presents the AFR these SDES provinces, Afghanistan (2005-2010, and 2015-2020) and a number of countries. It is worth noting that overall, AFR has been declining in Afghanistan: estimations point to a decline from about 117.4 to 64.5 in the last ten years. The dates of the SDES correspond to the later part of this period, but changes cannot be assessed for the provinces due to lack of comparable data at provincial level for other moments in time. Only some hypotheses can be considered, by associating the demographic change with changes in school attendance and changes in the age at marriage. The variation in adolescent fertility by provinces suggests that AFR has been declining in some provinces for some years, while no change has taken place in others. For example, Balkh, Kabul, Kapisa and Parwan present values below the national average for the period 2015-2020, which suggests that these provinces may be leading the AFR decline. Baghlan, Bamiyan, Samangan and Takhar are about the estimated national rates for the period 2015-2020, suggesting some decline in AFR, while the rest of the provinces register higher AFR than the national average, being at an earlier stage in the change process or having experienced no changes.

The lowest contribution of AFR to total fertility is registered in Parwan, Kapisa, Kabul, Bamiyan, Takhar and Balkh, respectively. Except for Kabul and Balkh, are not among the provinces with lower total fertility. This would suggest that the national trend toward increased incorporation of girls into primary and secondary education, as well as initiatives to reduce child and early marriage may have had a relatively stronger impact in these provinces (having relative lower AFR compared to TFR). Lower AFR in these provinces is also associated with relatively lower contribution of this age group to both the TFR and the total number of births registered in these provinces. Total fertility in these four provinces is still high, because age groups other than adolescents have changed little or perhaps in some cases not changed. Badghis, Daykundi, Ghor and Nimroz register very high adolescent fertility levels: more than one in ten adolescent girls have had a birth during the 12 months preceding the survey.

**Table 3. SDES provinces, Afghanistan, selected countries and regions: AFR, TFR, adolescent fertility contribution to total number of births and to total fertility rate (TFR)**

| ***Regions, countries, and Afghan provinces*** | Fertility rate 15-19 (x1000) | TFR | Adolescent's contribution (in percentages) | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | To TFR (%) | To total number births (%) |
| Badghis | 106.0 | 7.00 | 7.6 | 11.60 |
| Baghlan | 63.1 | 6.45 | 4.9 | 7.87 |
| Balkh | 48.6 | 6.45 | 3.8 | 6.73 |
| Bamiyan | 58.6 | 8.27 | 3.5 | 6.99 |
| Daykundi | 109.0 | 7.56 | 7.2 | 8.48 |
| Ghor | 105.4 | 7.31 | 7.2 | 12.21 |
| Herat | 88.0 | 6.38 | 6.9 | 11.80 |
| Kabul | 41.5 | 6.01 | 3.4 | 6.13 |
| Kapisa | 42.9 | 7.16 | 3.0 | 6.03 |
| Nimroz | 130.1 | 8.18 | 7.9 | 15.01 |
| Parwan | 41.5 | 7.08 | 2.9 | 5.53 |
| Samangan | 66.8 | 6.53 | 5.1 | 9.18 |
| Takhar | 57.6 | 7.89 | 3.6 | 6.41 |
| ***Afghanistan*** (2005-10) | 117.4 | 6.37 | 9.21 | 14.21 |
| ***Afghanistan*** (2015-20) | 64.5 | 4.41 | 7.31 | 11.48 |
| Iraq (2015-20) | 78.5 | 4.27 | 9.39 | 11.68 |
| Pakistan (2015-20) | 40.8 | 3.38 | 5.47 | 7.03 |
| Iran (2015-20) | 28.6 | 1.62 | 7.71 | 6.22 |
| ***Southern Asia*** (2015-20) | 38.7 | 2.39 | 6.70 | 7.20 |
| ***World*** (2015-20) | 46.5 | 2.15 | 6.43 | 9.06 |

***Sources****:* SDES- 2011-2016 UNFPA-Afghanistan and CSO of Afghanistan (Micro data and data from the UN Population Division, World Population Prospects 2017.

In some provinces, the contribution of adolescents to total fertility is twice that of Parwan, Kapisa, Kabul, Bamiyan, Takhar and Balkh. In relative terms, when compared to other countries, their contribution to total fertility does not seem excessively high. However, this is because total fertility in these provinces is very high as can be observed in the second column of Table 3. Some geographical clustering is observed in the results in Table 3. The provinces in the west, namely Ghor, Herat, Badghis and Nimroz all display particularly high adolescent fertility, births to adolescent girls is over 10% of total births. In contrast, Kabul, Kapisa and Parwan (in the central-eastern parts of Afghanistan) display lower adolescent fertility rates and low contribution from adolescent girls to total births. Geographical clustering in these results may be associated with some common socio-cultural patterns, as well as to differing levels of urbanization and degrees of development, which are more advanced in the capital city, and in the neighbouring geographical provinces. This may lead to higher female participation in the labour force and/or higher educational attainment; both factors associated with postponement of marriage and childbearing, which may be linked to the lower level of adolescent fertility in Kabul, Kapisa, Parwan and probably Balkh, –located to the north of the country bordering Tajikistan- and have relative better educational infrastructure.

Afghanistan has been considered a country of very early marriages and early motherhood (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights and United Nations Assistance Mission in

Afghanistan UNAMA, 2011). Yet the current pattern of adolescent fertility in Afghanistan does not differ too much from that of other countries, even when total fertility in those countries is much lower. This may be associated with social and cultural changes from the last decade. These changes may have made nuptiality patterns more similar to those of other countries, reducing child and early marriage. Within a traditional cultural context, with low contraceptive utilization the most important factor in adolescent fertility is marriage: once a girl is married, she starts procreating regardless of her age at marriage. The overall level of fertility is very high, and so is adolescent fertility, even though the weight of adolescent fertility on total fertility may have declined due to changes in nuptiality.

Marital fertility is very high at all ages (UNFPA Afghanistan 2017.b), as contraception use is low. Analysing patterns of marriage is very important in addressing adolescent fertility. In provinces and population groups where marriage starts too early, public policies should emphasize reducing the incidence of early marriages, but also advocate for an increase in use of contraception among married couples in all provinces.

**Nuptiality patterns**

In Afghanistan Marriage is virtually universal and a critical threshold for adolescents. Most often, it means the end of their formative years, leaving school and starting of a life of responsibilities: taking care of a family and providing for themselves and any children to come. Less than 1% of the Afghan female population aged 35 or older had never married (CSO, 2014). For the vast majority of Afghan women, marriage takes place early and only once in their lifetime. On the timing of marriage, the 2007/2008 NRVA survey (ICON-Institute, 2009) showed that a decade ago the female mean age at first marriage was 17.9 years, confirming very early nuptiality. Yet the findings from the 2010 Afghanistan Mortality Survey and the 2011/2012 NRVA revealed a significant change in the Afghan marriage pattern, indicating that younger cohorts (below the group 25-29 years) were marrying later. Utilizing the singulate mean age at marriage[2] (SMAM) (Hajnal, 1953), the average age at which people marry, by sex, is presented in Table 4 for the 13 provinces and selected countries. Recent data show remarkable changes in Afghanistan: women are marrying later, and the age differences between spouses have reduced. Comparisons of NRVA-2007/08 and the Afghanistan Demographic and Health Survey (AfDHS) 2015 reveal rapid changes at national level over the past decade. SDES results show SMAM values consistent with the AfDHS-2015 results for the country as a whole, confirming that women are indeed marrying later in most provinces. This trend is likely associated with observed

[2]Information on this indicator and methodology in the SDES Report on Nuptiality (UNFPA Afghanistan, 2017)

increases in girl's school attendance and positive responses to government initiatives to eliminate child and early marriages. Sustained changes of this nature will make a significant contribution to human capital formation for young generations as well as reducing gender inequalities. "Normative meanings of marriage and family life are based on cultural and social values that are central to the shaping of gender systems" (Malhotra, 2012). Women living in a gender-imbalanced context, such as in Afghanistan, are often exposed to social norms that may have harmful consequences in their lives. Examples include the "early age at marriage (including child marriage) and childbearing, polygamous unions, high levels of fertility, seclusion within the home from public places and high exposure to domestic violence" (UNFPA Afghanistan, 2017.c).

**Table 4. SDES: Singulate mean age at marriage (SMAM) and differences between sexes**

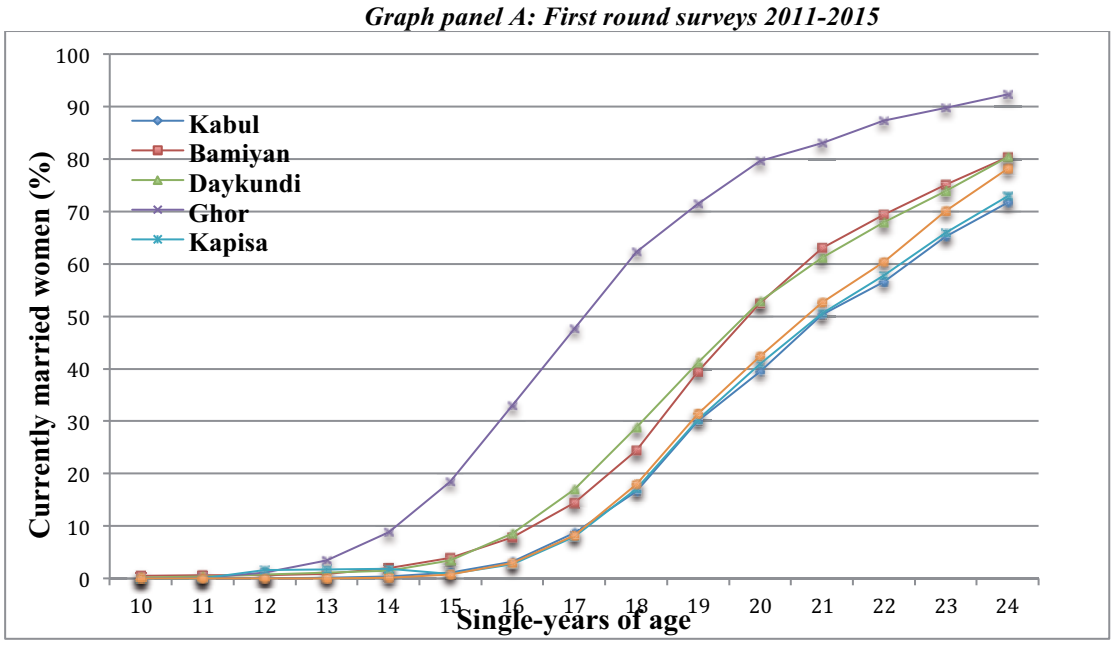
| ***Regions, countries, and Afghan provinces*** | Singulate mean age at marriage | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | Female | Male | Difference by sex |
| Badghis | 19.4 | 23.3 | 3.9 |
| Baghlan | 21.4 | 24.5 | 3.1 |
| Balkh | 22.1 | 25.3 | 3.3 |
| Bamiyan | 21.2 | 25.1 | 3.8 |
| Daykundi | 21.3 | 24.4 | 3.1 |
| Ghor | 22.7 | 22.7 | 4.0 |
| Herat | 20.7 | 23.9 | 3.2 |
| Kabul | 22.6 | 25.5 | 3.3 |
| Kapisa | 22.6 | 25.6 | 3.0 |
| Nimroz | 20.1 | 23.1 | 3.1 |
| Parwan | 22.2 | 25.2 | 3.0 |
| Samangan | 20.4 | 24.4 | 3.9 |
| Takhar | 21.1 | 25.4 | 4.3 |
| ***Afghanistan*** (Census 1979) | 17.8 | 25.3 | 7.5 |
| ***Afghanistan*** (NRVA 2007-08) | 17.9 | - | - |
| ***Afghanistan*** (DHS 2015) | 21.3 | 24.3 | 3.0 |
| Iraq (PMMS 2012) | 22.7 | 26.2 | 3.5 |
| Pakistan (DHS 2012-13) | 23.1 | - | - |
| Iran (2015-20) | 23.5 | 26.8 | 3.3 |

Sources: SDES- 2011-2017 UNFPA-Afghanistan and CSO of Afghanistan (Micro data) and data from the UN Population Division, World Marriage Data, 2017.

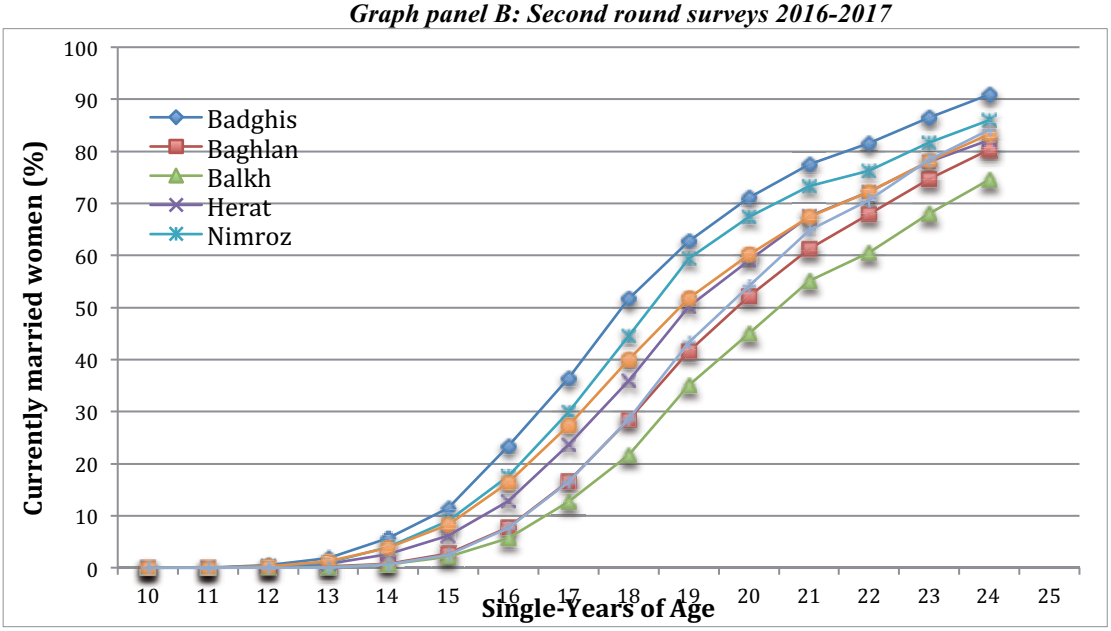
Although overall data indicate positive changes, vulnerability is still visible in some provinces and in rural areas, as shown in Figure 4 (in panel Graph A and B) and in Figure 5. Figure 4 presents the timing and pace of girl's entrance into marriage. Graph A shows results for the surveys from 2011 to 2015, Graph B presents provinces surveyed from 2015 to 2017. It is clear that except for Ghor and Badghis, the proportion of married girls for most provinces is low up to age 15. At age 15, about 18

percent of girls have married in Ghor, and about 11% in Badghis. Nimroz and Samangan are close to Badghis, with just below 10% of married girls by age 15. In panel A, Ghor stands out clearly, with relevant incidence of early marriage. At the other end, Kabul, Kapisa and Parwan show a later and slower pace of marriage. In panel B, Balkh shows a pattern close to that of Kabul, Kapisa and Parwan: later age at marriage and just about 20% of girls married by age 18. The rest of the provinces, in both panel A and B, cluster around an intermediate path: they show relatively low percentages of married girls by age 15, closer to –yet still below– 10%; but the percentages increase rapidly, reaching more than 20% by age 18. In Herat and Samangan, between 30% and 40% are married at age 18. The highest levels of married girls by age 18 are over 50% in Badghis and more than 60% in Ghor.

**Figure 4. SDES: Proportion of currently married women by single age up to Age 24**



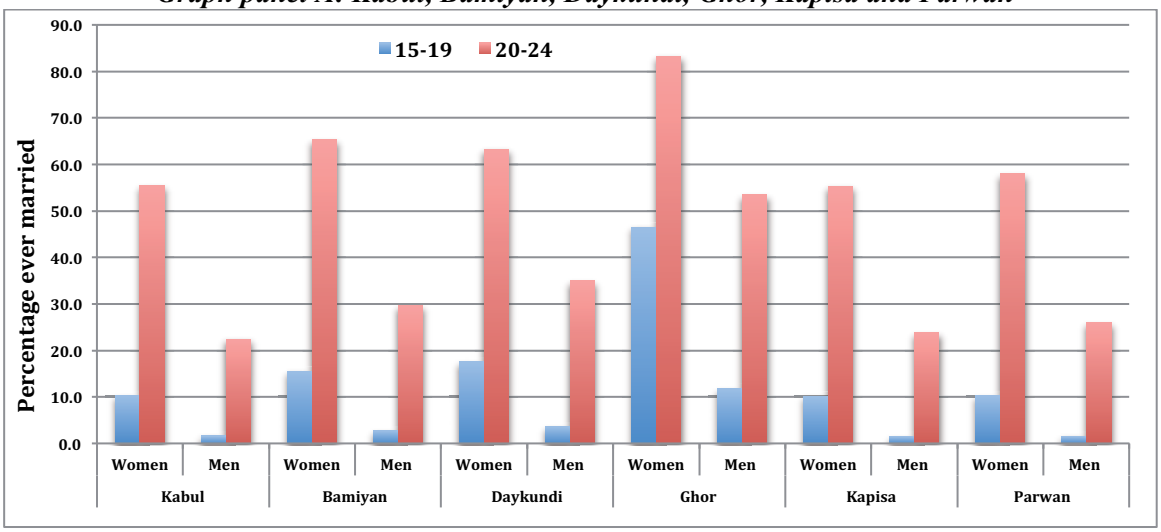
***Graph panel B: Second round surveys 2016-2017***



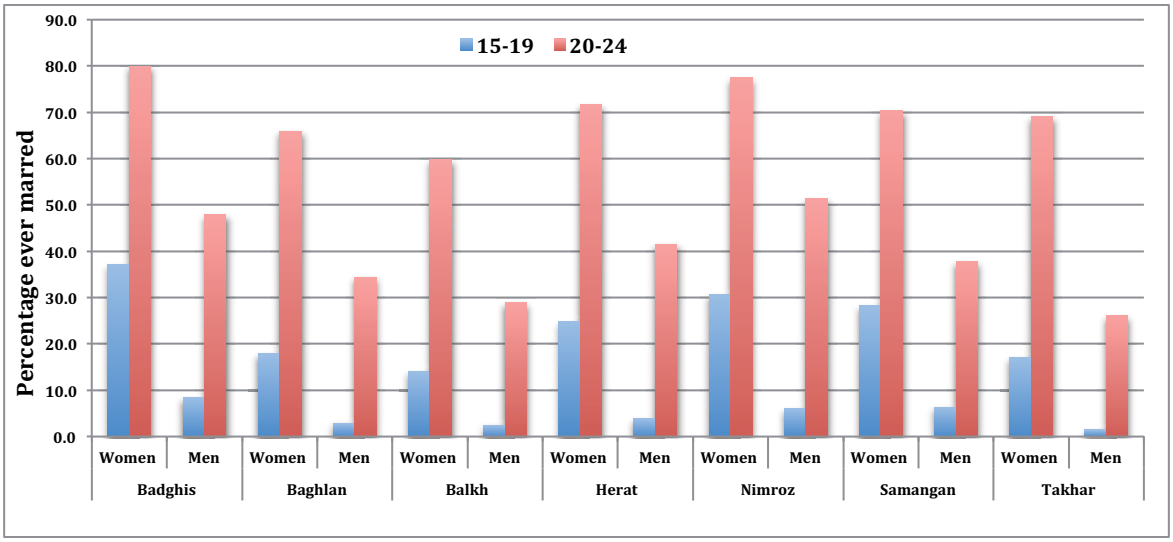

***Source:*** SDES- 2011-2017, UNFPA-Afghanistan and CSO of Afghanistan (Micro data)

## *Figure 5. SDES: Percentage ever-married adolescents and youth by sex*

***Graph panel A: Kabul, Bamiyan, Daykundi, Ghor, Kapisa and Parwan***




***Graph panel B: Badghis, Baghlan, Balkh, Herat, Nimroz, Samangan and Takhar***




Source: SDES- 2015-2017, UNFPA-Afghanistan and CSO- Afghanistan (Micro data)

Figure 5 presents the proportion of ever-married women and men for age groups 15-19 and 20-24 years. Sex differentials are visible, with much higher proportions of married women. Both in age group 15-19 and 20-24, the proportion of ever-married women is substantially higher than that observed among men. Figure 5, as Figure 4, clearly show that the large majority of women living in any province were ever married before age 25. In Badghis and Ghor for example, 80% of women aged 20-24 were ever married. In Herat, Nimroz, Samangan and Takhar, the figure was about 70% or higher. For men, the highest percentage was in Ghor, with more than 40% ever married by age 20-24.

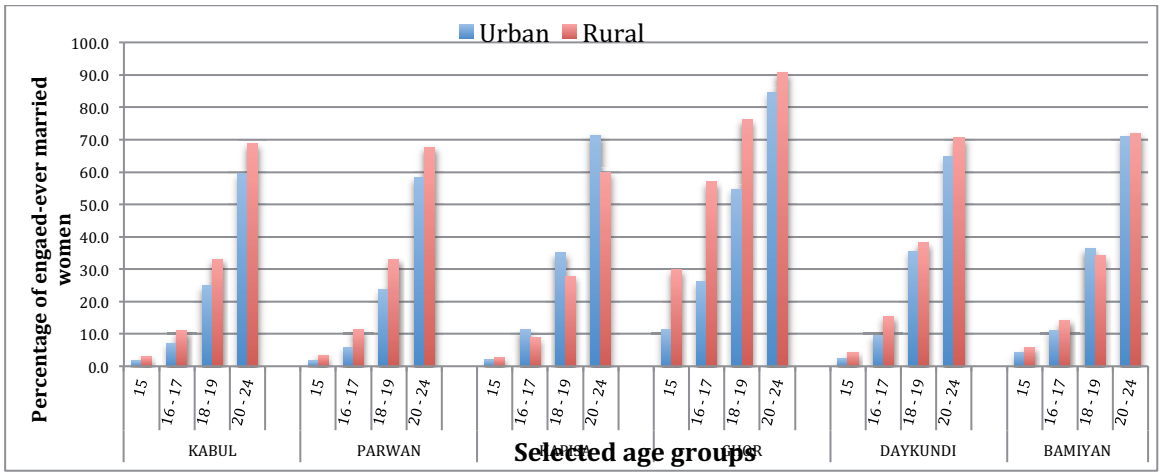
The patterns of vulnerability to very early marriages are more intense in rural areas (Figure 6). The percentage of engaged or married girls is always higher in rural than in urban areas by the same ages, except in Kapisa, and in age group 18-19 in Bamiyan (although these may be random fluctuations due to age misreporting and relatively small numbers). Engaged or married girls in rural areas at ages 16-17 represent close to 60% in Ghor, about 50% in Badghis and Baghlan, between 30 and 40% in Herat, Nimroz and Samangan and over 20 percent in the provinces of Baghlan, Balkh and Takhar.

The majority of adolescents and young people reside in rural areas in most provinces, as observed in Figure 7, and interventions need to be adapted to this location. Cultural patterns are different in different provinces and are different by areas of residence. Figure 7 shows the variation in the distribution of children and young people (0-24 years old) by area of residence in the 13 provinces.

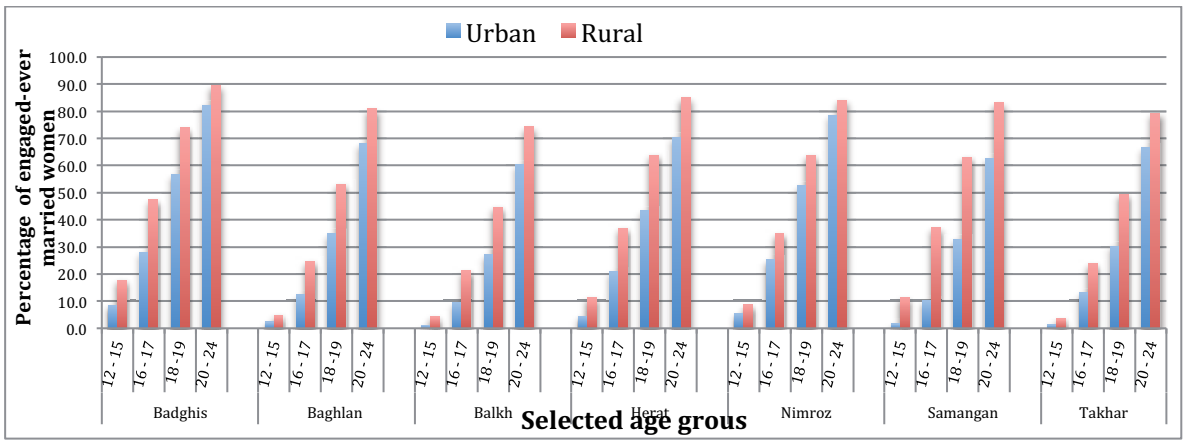
It is clear that the majority of children and youth aged 0-24 in the 13 provinces covered in the report live in rural areas. In fact, over 60 percent of 0-24 year-olds in the 13 provinces live in rural areas. The only province in which the majority of children and youth reside in urban areas is Kabul (76 percent).

**Figure 6. SDES provinces: Percentage of engaged and ever-married females (EEM) at selected ages according to urban/rural residence**

**Panel A: Bamiyan, Daykundi, Ghor, Kabul, Kapisa and Parwan**



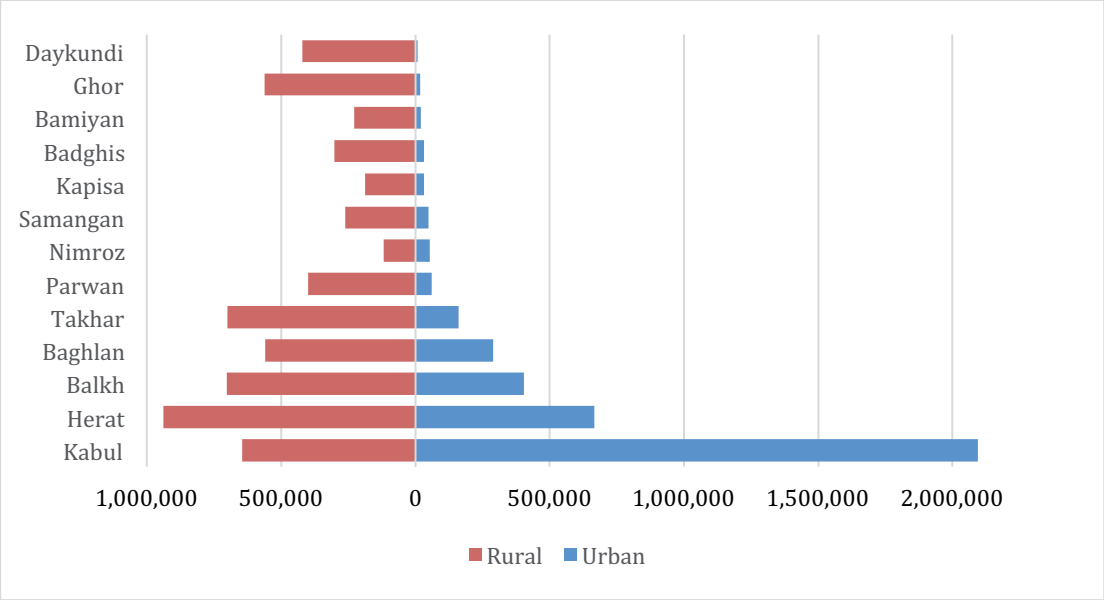

**Panel B: Badghis, Baghlan, Balkh, Herat, Nimroz, Samangan, Takhar**




***Source:*** SDES- 2011-2017, UNFPA-Afghanistan and CSO of Afghanistan (Micro data)

Furthermore, over half of the 0-24 year-olds living in urban areas enumerated in the 13 provinces reside in Kabul (54 percent). This illustrates the magnitude that the population of Kabul represents in terms of urban population. There is a relative degree of homogeneity in the rest of the provinces regarding a lower level of urbanization of the population as a whole and in parallel to the younger members of the population, aged 0-24.

**Figure 7. SDES: Distribution of children and young people (0-24 years old) in the surveyed provinces by rural/urban area of residence**




***Source:*** SDES- 2011-2017, UNFPA-Afghanistan and CSO of Afghanistan (Micro data)

Except for Kabul where only one fourth of individuals under the 25-year-old population reside in rural areas, in all other provinces, most people live in rural areas: in Herat about 60 percent are rural, about 64 percent in Balkh, and 66 percent in Baghlan, which after Kabul are the most urbanized provinces; Nimroz and Takhar are about 70 percent and 80 percent rural respectively. Daykundi, Ghor, Bamiyan and Badghis stand out for having over 90 percent of their children and youth living in rural areas.

**Level of education**

Afghanistan's population registers some of the lowest levels of education in the world, with a large proportion of women unable to read or write (World Bank, 2005). Table 5 presents the literacy rate by sex for the surveyed provinces, Afghanistan and some countries. Large differences are observed with respect to those countries, with only Kabul comparing to the lowest literacy level observed in another country, while all other provinces and the country register much lower levels. Another feature that stands out in the comparison concerns the larger differences observed in Afghanistan and SDES provinces by sex, much larger sex differentials than in all other countries.

**Table 5. SDES: Adult literacy rate (15 and older) by sex in the surveyed provinces, Afghanistan, selected countries and mean years of schooling in SDES provinces**

| Provinces and countries | Literacy rate | | | Mean years of schooling | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Men | Women | M/W | Men | Women | M/W |
| Badghis | 36.6 | 10.7 | 3.4 | 2.1 | 0.8 | 2.7 |
| Baghlan | 52.4 | 19.0 | 2.8 | 3.8 | 1.5 | 2.6 |
| Balkh | 52.5 | 31.3 | 1.7 | 3.8 | 2.5 | 1.5 |
| Bamiyan | 46.1 | 17.6 | 2.6 | 2.4 | 1.3 | 1.9 |

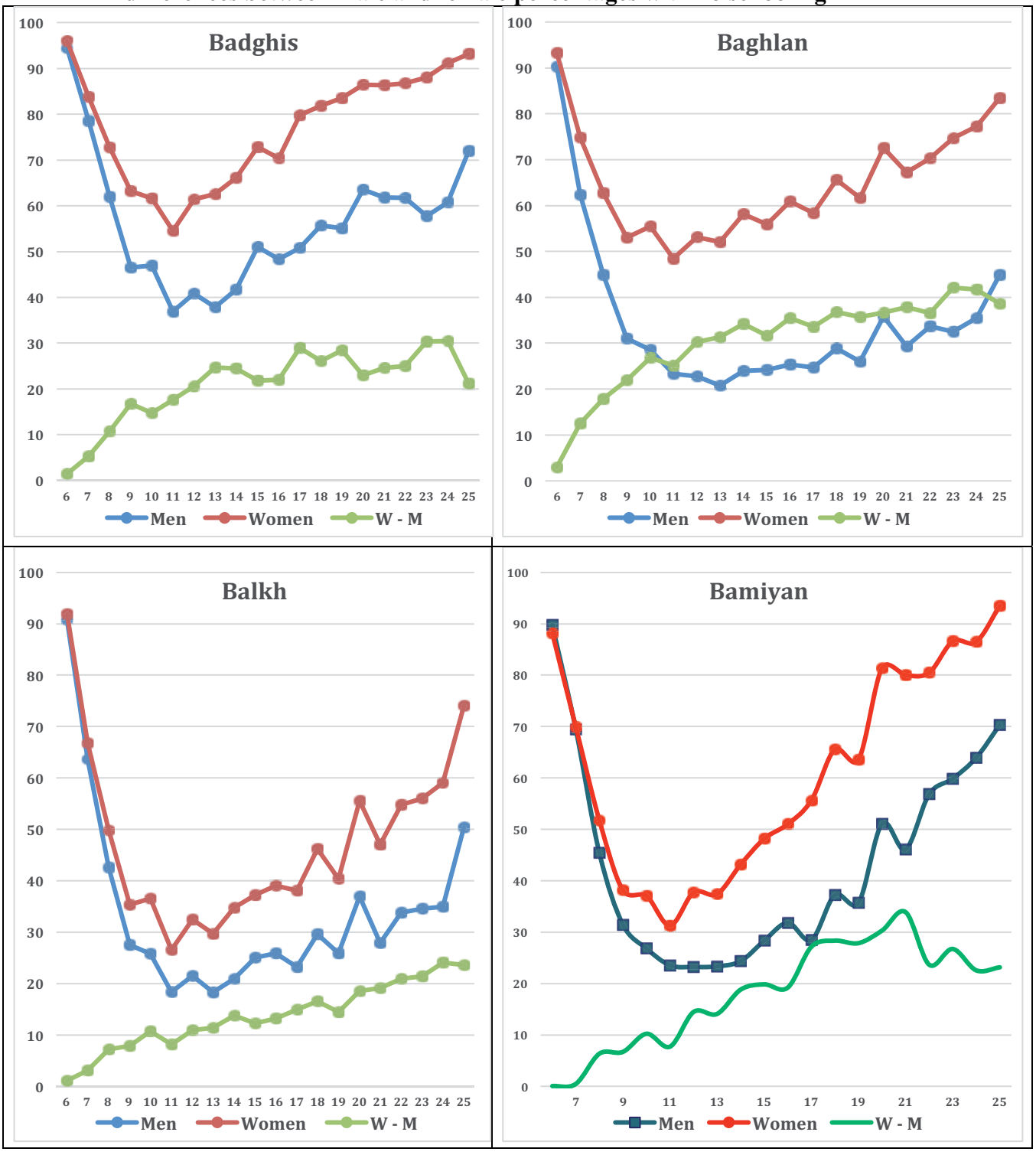
| | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Daykundi | 49.4 | 22.4 | 2.2 | 2.5 | 1.6 | 1.6 |
| Ghor | 33.6 | 8.1 | 4.2 | 1.5 | 0.6 | 2.6 |
| Herat | 51.1 | 33.9 | 1.5 | 3.2 | 2.4 | 1.4 |
| Kabul | 71.4 | 37.7 | 1.9 | 5.5 | 3.0 | 1.9 |
| Kapisa | 66.3 | 26.2 | 2.5 | 5.0 | 1.9 | 2.6 |
| Nimroz | 49.8 | 26.8 | 1.9 | 2.6 | 1.6 | 1.7 |
| Parwan | 54.4 | 5.4 | 10.0 | 4.3 | 1.3 | 3.2 |
| Samangan | 39.9 | 16.2 | 2.5 | 2.4 | 1.2 | 2.0 |
| Takhar | 37.7 | 18.2 | 2.1 | 2.6 | 1.5 | 1.8 |
| ***Afghanistan*** | ***45.4*** | ***17.7*** | ***2.56*** | **-** | **-** | **-** |
| Egypt | 81.7 | 65.8 | 1.24 | - | - | - |
| Indonesia | 95.6 | 90.1 | 1.06 | - | - | - |
| Iran | 89.4 | 79.2 | 1.13 | - | - | - |
| Iraq | 85.8 | 72.2 | 1.19 | - | - | - |
| Pakistan | 67.0 | 42.0 | 1.60 | - | - | - |
| Saudi Arabia | 96.5 | 91.4 | 1.06 | - | - | - |
| Syria | 90.8 | 79.2 | 1.15 | - | - | - |

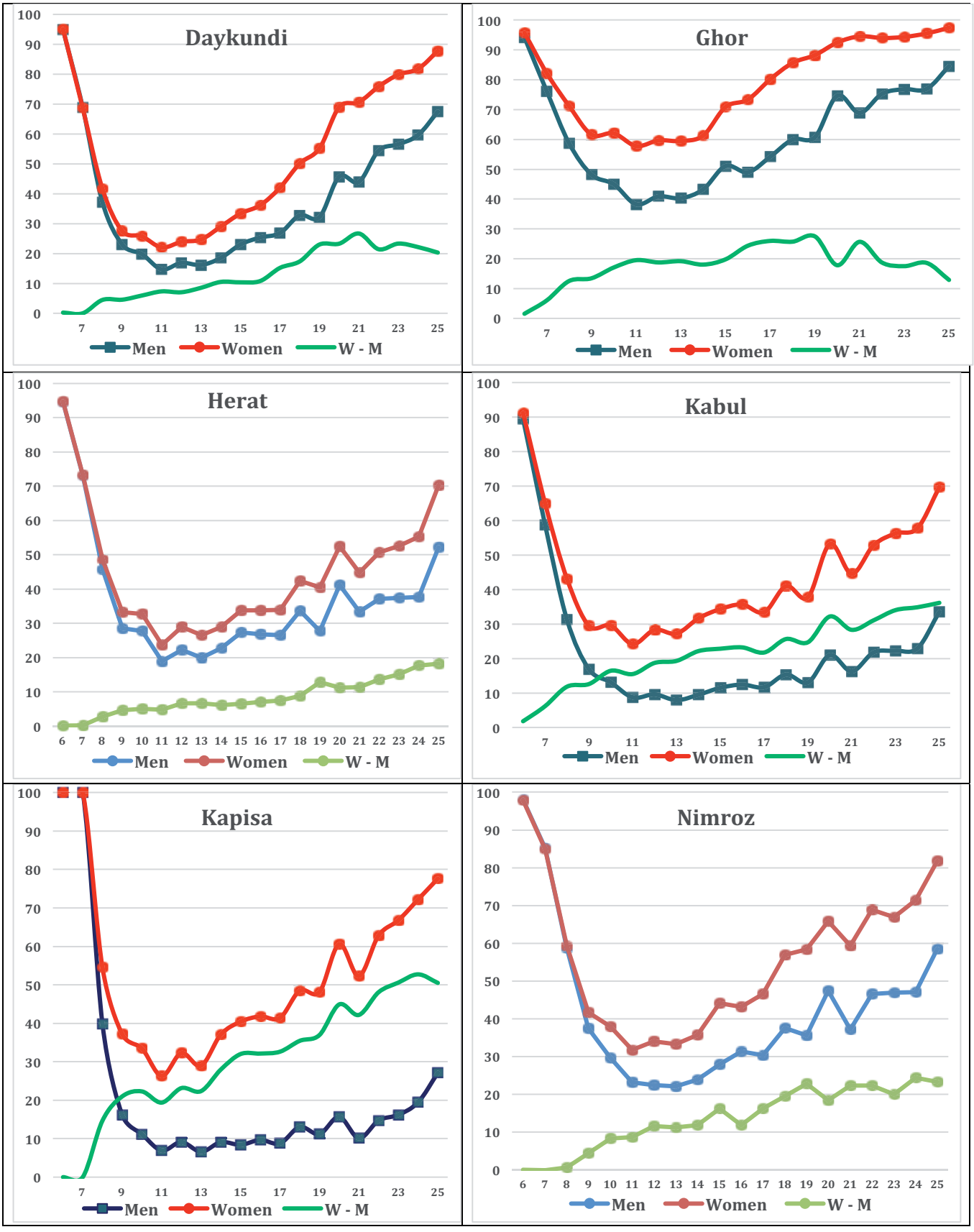
***Sources**:* SDES- 2011-2017 UNFPA-Afghanistan and CSO of Afghanistan (Micro data) and data from the UN Population Division, World Marriage Data, 2017.

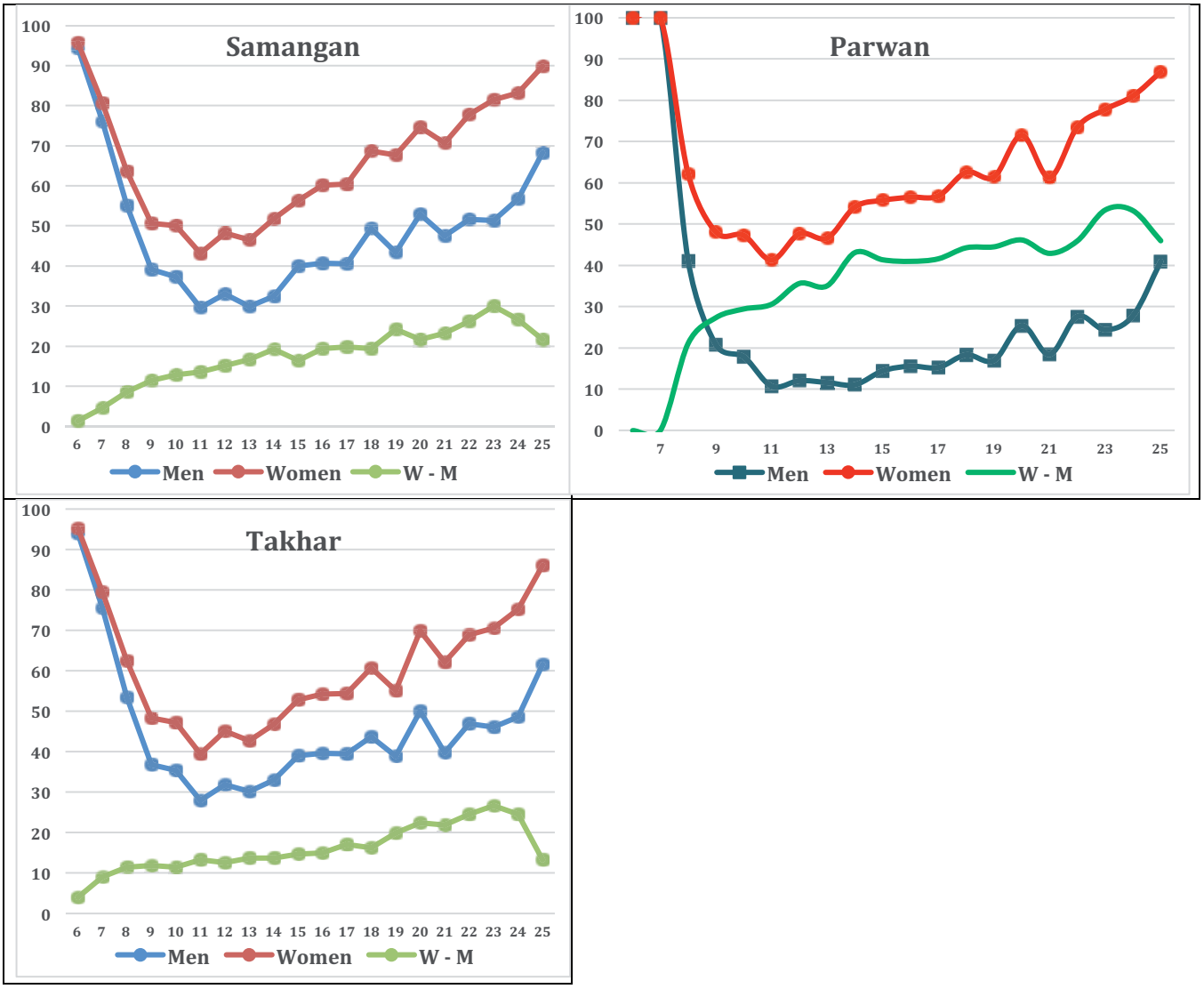
Table 5 also shows substantial provincial disparities, as well as gender inequalities in literacy rates in the 13 provinces. Kabul and Kapisa present the highest literacy rates, while Ghor, Badghis and Takhar have the lowest percentage of the population aged 15 years and above who could write and read a simple message.

Figure 8 presents percentages of children and youth (6-25 years) who had no schooling at the time of the survey. The results are presented by sex, and a green line shows the difference between males and females with no schooling by single year of age. Overall, results show that at each age, females show higher percentages with no education than males. Such percentages show in all provinces and there is a decreasing trend at younger ages by which numbers with no schooling are consistently reducing with increasing age – indicating the gradual increased access to education for children of both sexes as they join school and start their education.

**Figure 8. SDES: Percentage of 6-24 year-old males and females with no schooling and differences between male and female percentages with no schooling**




Daykundi
Men
Women
W - M
Ghor
Men
Women
W - M
Herat
Men
Women
W - M
Kabul
Men
Women
W - M
Kapisa
Men
Women
W - M
Nimroz
Men
Women
W - M




Source: Graphs taken from the two previous SDES reports on gender (UNFPA Afghanistan, 2017.c).

As earlier mentioned, the rising path of the curves after a certain age indicates increasing percentages of females and males with no education as age increases, evidence of the more limited access to education for older generations. In Kabul, this increase begins at age 11 for females and age 13 for males. The descending part of the curve at younger ages illustrates the significant expansion in access to school in recent years in the 13 provinces. In Kabul, for instance, 70 percent of women aged 25 years had no education, while this percentage was 24 percent among girls aged 11 years. The graphs in Figure 8 also demonstrate that the differences in the percentage of females and males with no education have considerably decreased among the younger cohorts: the green lines that represent these differences consistently increase with increasing age. Kabul, Kapisa and Parwan had the lowest

percentage of men with no education at each age. Baghlan, Kapisa and Parwan reflect the largest sex differentials.

**Children and young adults in economic activities and in school**

The participation in work that is not harmful to the health and personal development of children and adolescents is a positive contribution to their development. The negative side of "child labour" emanates from work that deprives children from enjoying childhood and is harmful to their physical and/or mental development. Child labour involves a complex operational definition; a simple proxy is the proportion of children not attending school. This measure is also associated with the percentage of children working before the minimum legal age of employment, which is 15 years old in Afghanistan.

The results of the SDES (in Annex 1) show profiles of percent distributions of children and young people from 5 to 29 years old, according to whether they only study, study and work, only work or do not study and do not work, that reveal very significant features of the situation of children and young people, with quite distinctive patterns by gender, varying also from one province to another.

A significant feature is the high proportion of children aged between 5 and 17 years, who do not attend school. Badghis is in the most vulnerable situation (63.6 percent of 5-17 year-olds are out of school). The vast majority of children not in school are not working either, as percentages working and not in school are lower than 11 percent (the highest proportion is observed in Badghis). The proportion of young males that are not in school and not in work is also very high in Daykundi, Ghor, and Nimroz. The proportion of girls in school is lower than boys, Daykundi being the province with the lower educational gender gap.

The proportion of children attending school increases with age until age 11 in all the provinces. Kabul has the highest percentage only studying observed at age 11 (90% boys and 74% girls). Kapisa also registers 90% for boys, but girls are just over 70%. Daykundi, where school attendance for boys is 85%, stands out with the highest percentage for girls, 76%. Parwan registers relatively high school attendance for boys (88%), but the gender gap is important: the highest for girls at age 11 is 57%. Balkh, where the highest level for boys is 80%, registers over 70%for girls only studying at age 11. The lowest percentages of children only studying are observed in Ghor and Badghis: 60 and 53% for boys and 40 and 42% for girls respectively. The proportions of boys who are only working start to increase at early ages. In some provinces, this incidence is already visible at ages 6 or 7 (Badghis, Ghor, Samangan). This means withdrawal from school, as very few youngsters both work and study. For girls, the scenario is more critical. Girls in school is lower that boys all provinces; girls' school

attendance reaches a peak level at age11. At the subsequent ages girls' school attendance declines substantially, with no parallel increase in the economic activity level. The most expressive female labour participation registers in Badghis, the province with the highest percentage of young females who only work. The percentage of females who only work is also visible in Herat, Balkh and Bamiyan, although a bit lower than in Badghis.

Simultaneous analysis of school attendance and participation in economic activities allows for identifying a group of young people who are not in education, employment or vocational training. This group, which came to be known as the "NEET" (for "not in education, not in employment, not in training"), has received particular attention in recent literature on the subject. Proper characterization of the group varies from social and cultural contexts, as it depends on the legal status for age school attendance as well as legal age for work or training, and is at the same time related to social norms associated with family and gender relations, which influence the expected role and situation of young people in the family and society (Scottish Executive Social Research, 2005). To a certain degree, NEET groups reveal the level of social inclusion of these young generations by means of studying or having an economic activity.

**Conclusions and policy recommendations**

The analyses confirmed that important social, economic and demographic changes are taking place in Afghanistan, changes that directly impact the situation of adolescents and young people. Many of these, such as education expansion and changes in nuptiality, have adolescents and young people as their central actors. Education expansion keeps adolescents in school; it facilitates delays in the age at marriage, allowing young people, particularly girls, to enter marriage at later ages, better prepared to make informed decisions on these central issues in their lives. Evidence indicates that national policies targeting young people are making a positive difference in their lives. Yet, the indicators are still very low. Greater efforts are still needed to generate more profound and lasting progress. The analyses of age structure, adolescent fertility and age at marriage indicate that the demographic transition is already taking place, although most provinces are still at an incipient stage.

Access to education, employment and meaningful social and political participation are fundamental human rights of young people, rights that are recognized in Afghan policies. Success in these policies may propel a demographic bonus, as well as a gender dividend, from incorporating women and young girls, in the development of the country. The diversity of situations identified in the analyses calls for

targeted interventions. In provinces that are more advanced in expanding education and the demographic transition, added emphasis on job opportunities would be needed.

The analysis of school attendance and participation in economic activities identified a group of young people who has come to be known as the "NEET" (for "not in education, not in employment, not in training"). With Afghanistan at a critical demographic juncture, having nearly two thirds of the population below the age of 25, it is of utmost importance that this group is given high priority. Technical and vocational education and training must be provided to equip young people with skills and competencies to build a modern and highly productive workforce in Afghanistan. Technical training can be associated with the promotion of small enterprises as an instrument to support self-employment, generate new jobs, and promote micro enterprise development. Policies addressing economic opportunities and job creation are central to avoiding unemployment or underemployment of these young cohorts. If young workers are not productively employed, the increasing number of entrants to the job market may create tensions and contribute to social instability, as evidence from some studies indicates (Urdal, 2012).

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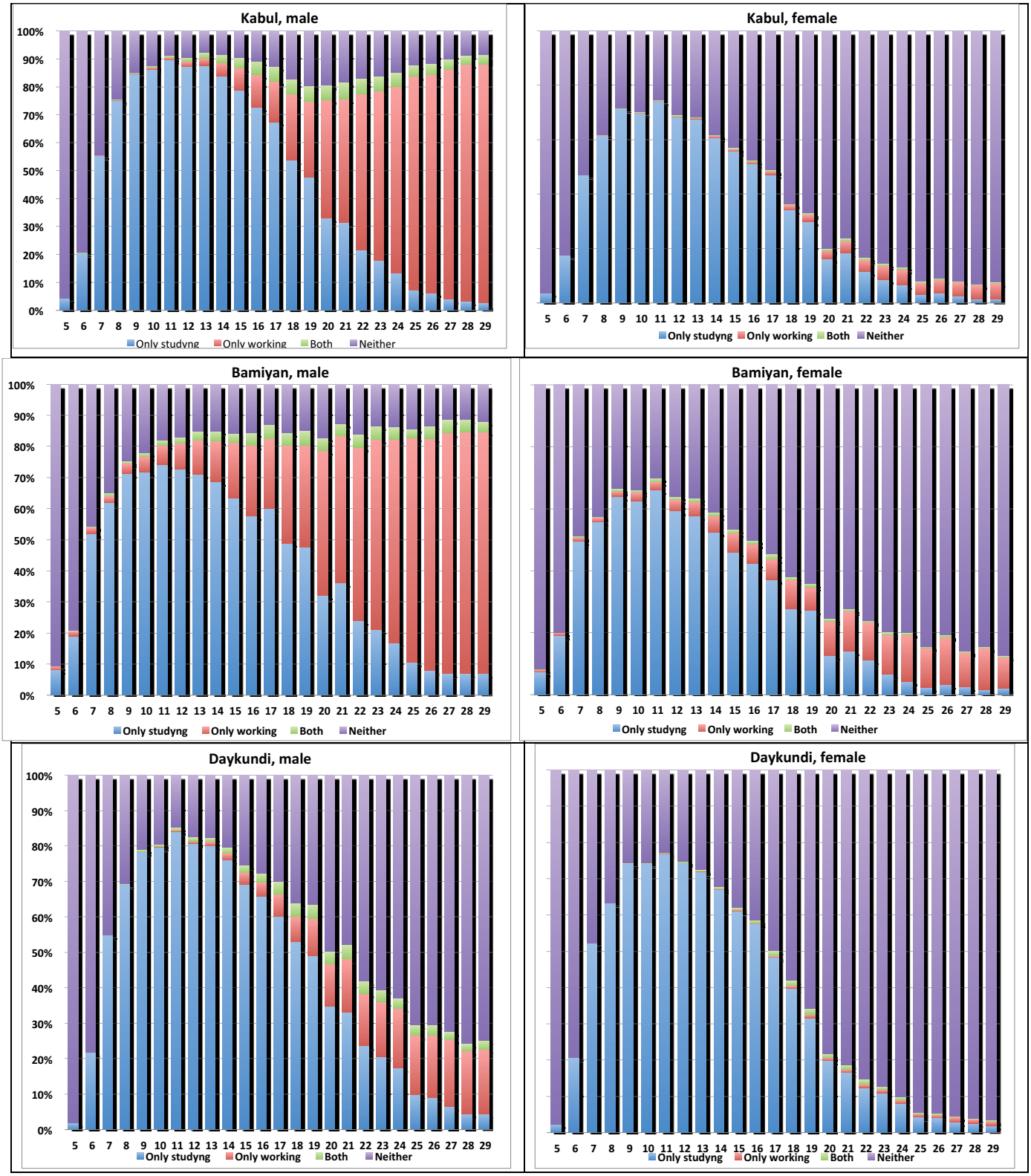
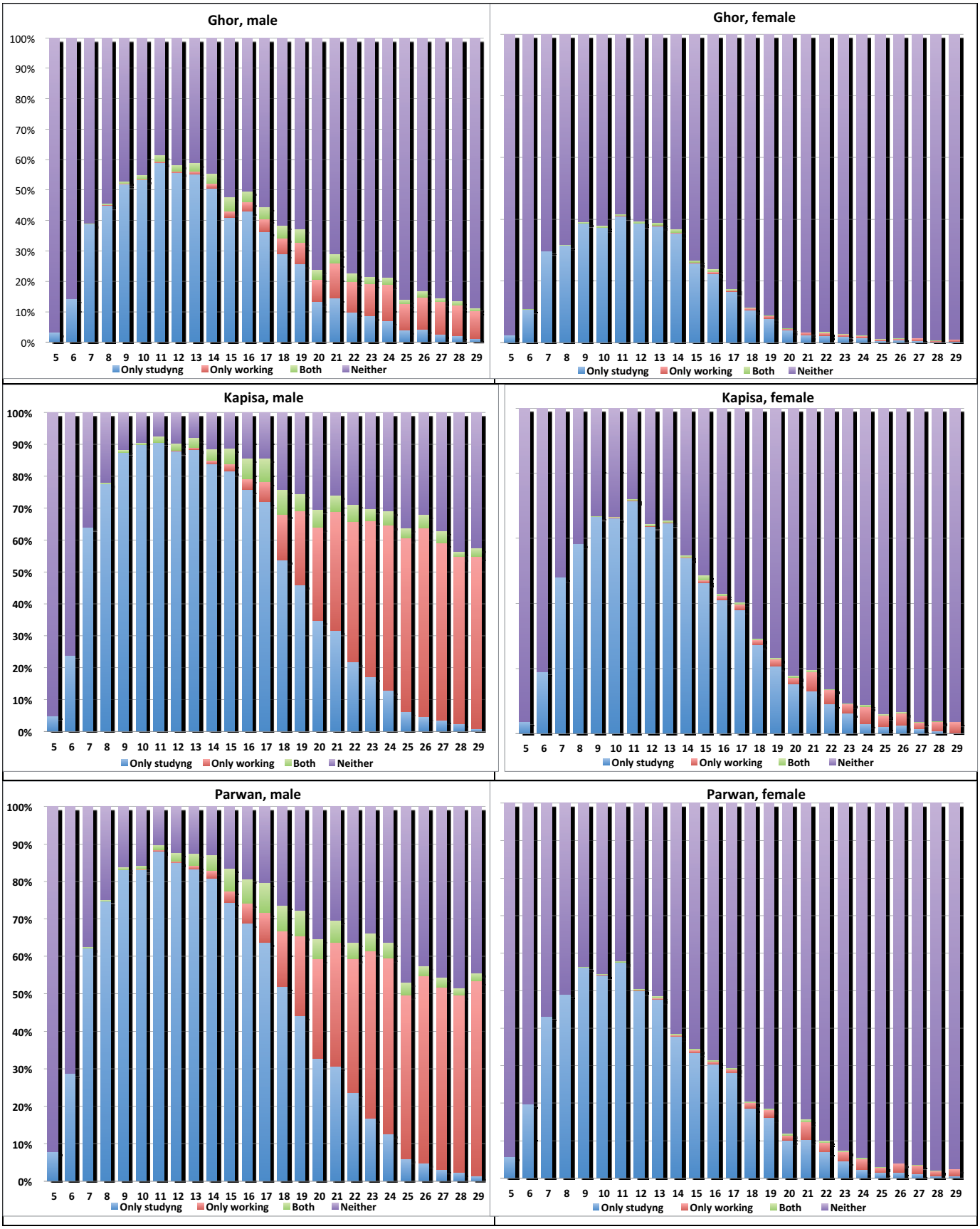
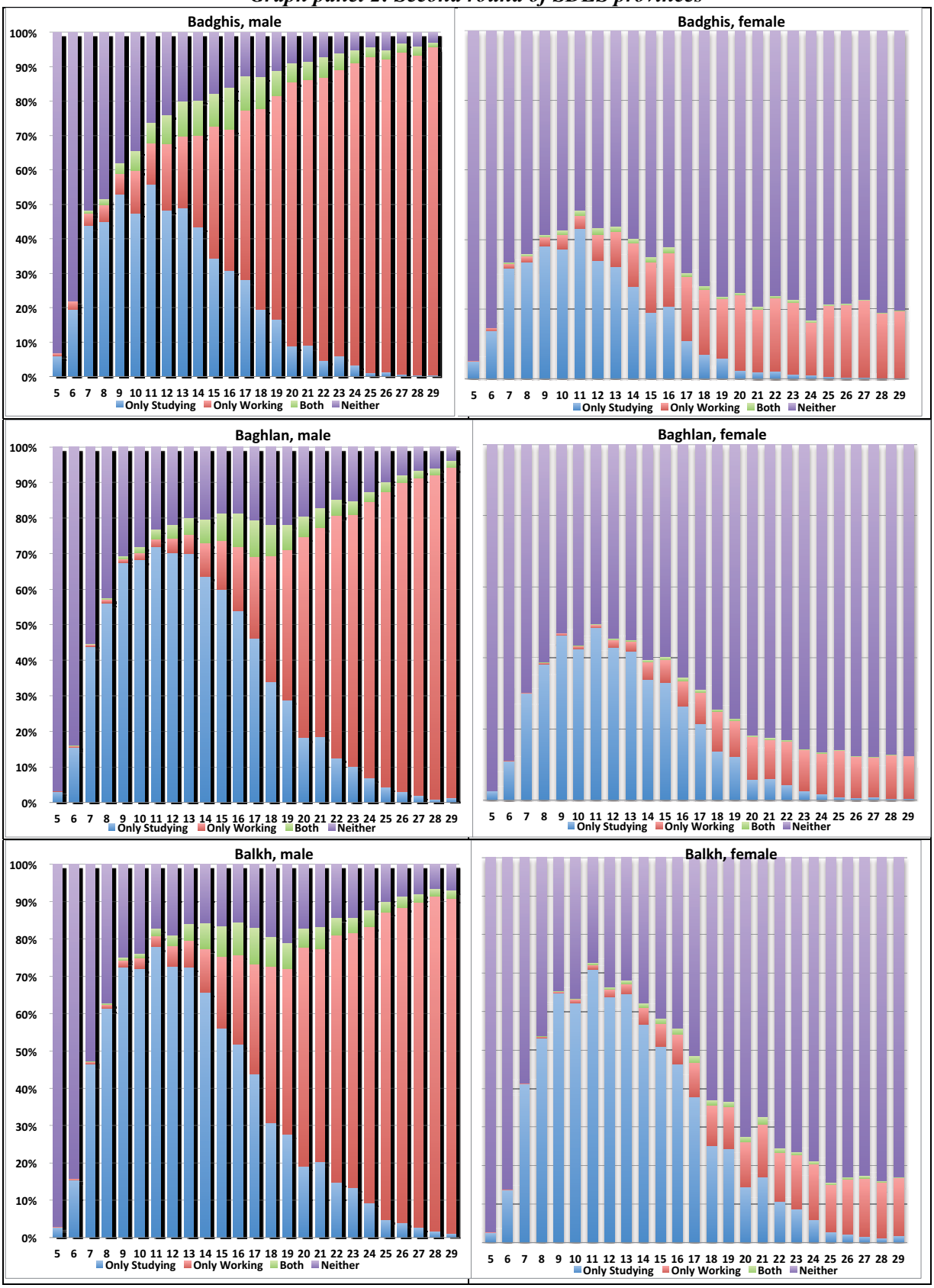
# ANNEX 1: Economic activity and school attendance by age and sex

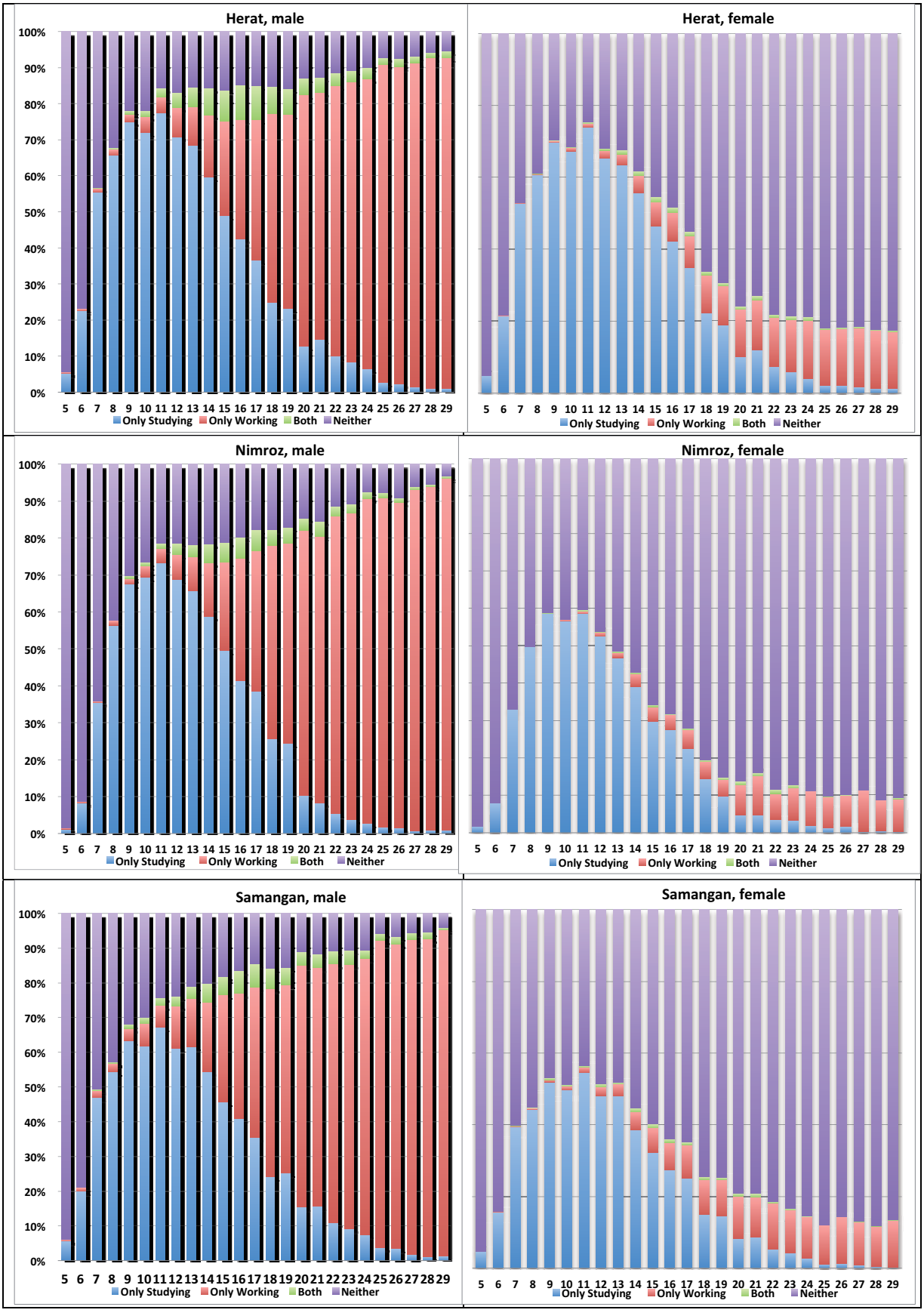
*Graph panel 1: First round of SDES provinces*

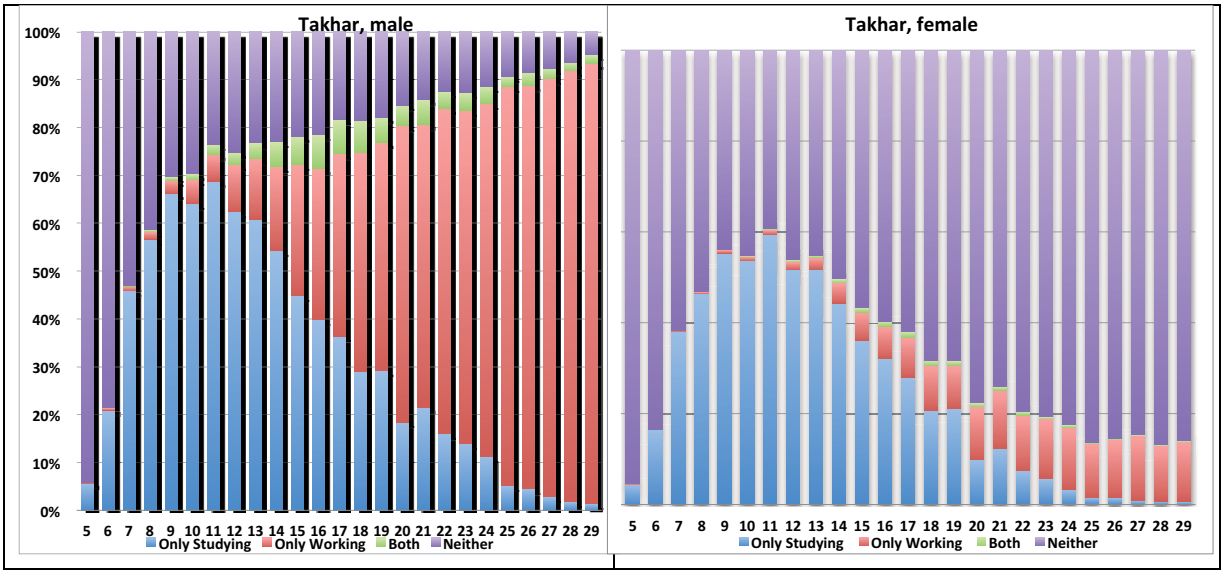



Ghor, male
100%
90%
80%
70%
60%
50%
40%
30%
20%
10%
0%
5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29
Only studyng
Only working
Both
Neither
Ghor, female
5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29
Only studyng
Only working
Both
Neither
Kapisa, male
100%
90%
80%
70%
60%
50%
40%
30%
20%
10%
0%
5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29
Only studyng
Only working
Both
Neither
Kapisa, female
5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29
Only studyng
Only working
Both
Neither
Parwan, male
100%
90%
80%
70%
60%
50%
40%
30%
20%
10%
0%
5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29
Only studyng
Only working
Both
Neither
Parwan, female
5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29
Only studyng
Only working
Both
Neither

*Graph panel 2: Second round of SDES provinces*




Herat, male
100%
90%
80%
70%
60%
50%
40%
30%
20%
10%
0%
5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29
Only Studying
Only Working
Both
Neither
Herat, female
5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29
Only Studying
Only Working
Both
Neither
Nimroz, male
100%
90%
80%
70%
60%
50%
40%
30%
20%
10%
0%
5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29
Only Studying
Only Working
Both
Neither
Nimroz, female
5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29
Only Studying
Only Working
Both
Neither
Samangan, male
100%
90%
80%
70%
60%
50%
40%
30%
20%
10%
0%
5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29
Only Studying
Only Working
Both
Neither
Samangan, female
5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29
Only Studying
Only Working
Both
Neither




**Source:** SDES – 2011-2017, UNFPA-Afghanistan and CSO of Afghanistan (micro data) – Figures taken from SDES Thematic Reports on Labour Force – 1st and 2nd Round Surveys (Figure 11 in both reports)