

W O M E N W I T H O U T B O R D E R S

AFGHAN WOMEN UNDER TALIBAN RULE: ARE THERE ANY GOOD OPTIONS?

*An Afghan Perspective on the Second Anniversary
of the Taliban's Return*

A POLICY PAPER BY ORZALA NEMAT

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THE POLICY CONTEXT.

The systematic oppression of women by the Taliban over the last two years remains a hot topic in both domestic and international debates this week as the world commemorates the second anniversary of the Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan. In general, the Taliban leadership hasn't given a clear justification for their systematic gender discrimination. With their steadfast opposition to girls' education and women's work, they are losing respect among Afghans and in the Islamic world. The deconstruction of the female educational system, efforts to radicalise the curricula for both boys' and girls' schools in the future, and discussions about how women will have few options for higher education in the future are all concerning and require us to think about global solutions and local actions with tangible results. This Policy Paper will aim to present some immediate actions to address this crisis.



THE POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS.

As the third year of the Taliban's rule unfolds, the future remains uncertain for Afghan people, especially for women and girls.

It is crucial for the international community to maintain pressure on the Taliban to ensure that the damage of depriving girls of secondary, high schools and universities is managed well, and that further continuation of such restrictions is avoided.

It is up to any government, higher educational institutions, and the private sector that opposes the Taliban regime's restrictive rules, to offer scholarships, mentorship, and learning opportunities for Afghan youth, especially women, to prepare them for a future where they must deal with this massive man-made crisis that the country and the world is facing now.

Women's movements worldwide must unite and stand up against this oppressive regime until they accept respect for women and girls and their fundamental rights in Afghanistan.

It is imperative for the international community to remain committed to address women's rights and ensure that Afghan women are not left behind in the quest for a stable and inclusive future.

INTRODUCTION

This week, as the world marks the second year of the Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan, their systematic oppression of women remains at the forefront of national and international discussions. The global outrage against these restrictions has only seen the Taliban furthering them.

Afghanistan is facing a collective of humanitarian, economic, and political crises, all of which are only deteriorating the situation for Afghans across the country and those refugees in transition without status and a clear future. There is a crisis of political representation, as the former republic representatives lost their credibility entirely due to running away from the country, and the Taliban are not recognised by any country officially, ruling through a system that is not acceptable by global norms and universally accepted values. Unfortunately, the voices and concerns of Afghan people who suffer from these restrictions are lost in the midst of these crises.

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Since seizing power in 2021, the Taliban have banned girls from all but primary education, most forms of employment, and severely restricted their ability to leave their homes. Sadly, there is no sign or

indication that the Taliban will ease their restrictions, which have progressively increased over the last months. Moreover, the Taliban's monopoly over violence and their territorial control means that the ban is effective across the rural and urban parts of Afghanistan, with only a few exceptions. The possibilities of providing secret schooling or online education are limited and entail high risks, and in no way or form can

compensate millions of girls in need of their fundamental rights to receive an education. The removal of educational and employment opportunities for women threatens to have long-term consequences for the country. Unfortunately, none of the international or regional engagements so far have been fruitful in changing their views on universally accepted norms such as women's rights and girls' education.

This piece will reflect upon ways in which the Taliban justify their actions; responses at national and local levels; the issue of dependency on external resources; diplomatic engagements; and possible ways to proceed forward.

THE TALIBAN'S LACK OF JUSTIFICATION

Since their return, the Taliban have systematically limited the civic space for all, especially for women and girls. Women who protest the draconian restrictions facing them are beaten, detained, and tortured. Of all the restrictions introduced by the Taliban, the ban on female education causes particular consternation. The Taliban leadership, in general, have provided no clear justification for their systematic forms of discrimination against women. They often claim that none of their leadership members are against female education and work, that these edicts are only temporary, yet show no evidence of removing or easing the bans. On the contrary, recently, news from at least eight provinces shows a further extension on the schooling ban to include grades 5 and 6 of primary school girls too. They are losing credibility among the Afghan population and the Islamic world with their persistent opposition to girls' education and women's work. Islamic scholars and even the Organisation of Islamic Conferences (OIC) responded in their statement that the Taliban's

decision is not based on texts in Islamic law¹. The Taliban's attempts to portray their decisions as traditional is also challenged by the local population, who take any opportunity to raise their voices and demands for reopening the schools and letting women work. Two years on, it is evident to people in the country that the Taliban's action against women's mobility, and their fundamental rights to education, jobs, and justice is unrelated to the Islamic principles and Afghanistan's cultural norms, and it is only linked to the politics and the way the Taliban govern and lead the country.

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Another alarming part of this crisis is the dismantling of not only the female education system, but also their efforts to radicalise the curriculum for both boys' and girls' schools in the future, as well as their discussions about a future where women will have limited choices in higher education to become only doctors, nurses or potentially police officers. In a country with over 65% of youth, radicalisation through a formal educational system could be a point of concern far and beyond Afghanistan in the longer term.

RESPONSES & DIFFERENT FORMS OF RESISTANCE

Afghan people across the country find different ways and forms to denounce this decision and plead for the Taliban leadership to reopen

¹ Organization of Islamic Cooperation. "OIC Secretary-General Calls on the IIFA to Gather a Unified Position from All Islamic References and Scholars on the Taliban's Decision to Prevent Girls from Education." Organization of Islamic Cooperation, December 29, 2022. https://www.oic-oci.org/topic/?t_id=38120&t_ref=26114&lan=en.

the schools for girls immediately. From Herat to Nangarhar, Badakhshan to Khost and Helmand, all over Afghanistan, men and women have been calling for the reopening of schools and universities for girls and women. Religious scholars and leaders within the country and in the region² are denouncing this act, but so far, the Taliban continue to further restrict women's access to such fundamental rights.

Afghan women in the country are also engaged in different forms of civic resistance against such unjustifiable rules. Each of Afghanistan's over 400 districts have at least 3-4 outstanding grassroots women leaders who display courage and creativity on a day-to-day basis. Their struggle may not be loud and visible through the mainstream media, but they succeed in finding workarounds to at least offer primary education services, ensure that humanitarian³ aid reaches the most vulnerable families, and continue to find ways to educate women and girls in their communities, despite all the risks and challenges.

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Younger and more urban parts of the Afghan women's movement are protesting on the streets of Kabul and some other provinces, confronting

² "Taliban Ban on Girls' Education 'Disappoints Pakistan.'" The Express Tribune, December 21, 2022. <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2392145/taliban-ban-on-girls-education-disappoints-pakistan>.

³ UK Humanitarian Innovation Hub (UKHIH). 'Navigating ethical dilemmas for humanitarian action in Afghanistan,' June 2023. https://www.humanitarianoutcomes.org/sites/default/files/publications/ho-ukhih_afghanistan_final_6_21_23.pdf.

a militarised and aggressive Taliban regime by raising their voices for collective demands by women such as education for all, reopening the schools, and the well-known slogan of 'Bread, Work, Freedom'.⁴ Afghan women in the diaspora continue to raise their voices against Taliban restrictive rules asking the international community to pressurise them to revisit these rules. Although there are attempts to provoke a breakout between these different forms of civic resistance against the despotic rules, evidence in general shows that all women across the country and outside stand united that Afghanistan cannot move forward with half of its population systematically discriminated against.

Afghan men also protest the restrictions on women and girls' concerns through different means and platforms, often at great risk. One example of such campaigners is the PenPath youth education network leader Mattiullah Wessa, who has travelled across Afghanistan campaigning to reopen schools for girls together with local communities. He has been detained for the last five months due to his campaigning and is kept in the notorious Pul-e-Charkhi prison without any formal charges. Other Afghan men have called on the Taliban to end restrictions in cultural and commercial events where the Taliban government members participate in local TV debates. The international community has also not remained silent in the face of Taliban's oppressive gender policies. Various countries, human rights organisations, and activists have been vocal in condemning the Taliban's actions and demanding the protection of women's rights. However, the response from the Taliban does not justify such a huge loss of already two years' of ruling without a girl graduating from high school or entering and graduating from university.

⁴ Anchal Vohra, Beirut. "Bread, Work, Freedom - Afghan Women's Graffiti Defies Taliban." The Times & The Sunday Times: breaking news & today's latest headlines, December 23, 2021. <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/bread-work-freedom-afghan-womens-graffiti-defies-taliban-55n26p9gd>.

A unified positioning globally and in the country regarding this matter among people continues to be overlooked by the Taliban leadership, who continue to rule the country in a hostage-taking style.

INTERNATIONAL RESPONSE AND DIPLOMATIC PRESSURE

Diplomatic pressure and sanctions have been applied to encourage the Taliban to respect basic human rights, including those of women. However, the effectiveness of these measures remains a subject of debate, as the Taliban's restrictive edicts against women and shrinking civic space for people continue.

The issue of saving lives and human rights must not be placed in a zero-sum relationship.

At the same time, the massive humanitarian crisis facing Afghanistan makes international engagement with the group that maintains control over the country inevitable. Donors must engage

with the Taliban on how the most vulnerable parts of the population can be saved from starvation, food insecurity and malnutrition, and the importance of female aid workers in this process must be emphasised on each of these occasions. Such engagements need to be highly principled. The actors involved should clarify their position for saving lives and not aim to normalise the Taliban's discriminatory acts against women and girls. The issue of saving lives and human rights must not be placed in a zero-sum relationship. Actors involved in both humanitarian services and those advocating for rights to education and jobs must realise they speak about the same people who deserve both to be alive and have a dignified life with fundamental rights secured by the ruling regime.

Therefore, any form of political engagement with the Taliban beyond humanitarian issues would be considered a major surrender of the international community from its universal norms and values, such as the rights of half of the population. The reopening of secondary and high schools and universities and allowing women back to work must become a pre-condition for any form of political engagement with the Taliban. Ordinary Afghans have a clear understanding of the deal the international community made with the Taliban that resulted in their return to power. Hence, their performance to offer statesmanship, respect, and dignity of the 40 million people living in the country, including women and girls, and securing human rights of people, are fundamental principles of political representation which do not exist in today's Afghanistan.

WHAT IS AT STAKE MOVING AHEAD?

As the third year of the Taliban's rule unfolds, the future remains uncertain for Afghan people, especially women and girls. It is crucial for the international community to maintain pressure on the Taliban to ensure that the damage of depriving girls of secondary, high school, and university education is managed well, and that further continuation of such restrictions is avoided. Diplomatic efforts, humanitarian aid, and sustained advocacy for women's rights should continue to be at the forefront of global action.

Support for women and youth within Afghanistan and beyond in refugee communities is equally vital. Local organisations, activists, and women's groups are pivotal in aiding, raising awareness, and fostering resilience in the face of adversity.

Empowering Afghan women and youth to participate actively in their country's future is a key step toward achieving lasting change.

It is up to any state and global higher education institution, the private sector etc., that opposes the Taliban regime's restrictive rules to offer scholarships for Afghan youth, especially women, to prepare them for a future where they must deal with the massive man-made crisis that the country and the world is facing now.

Women's movements worldwide must unite and stand up against this oppressive regime until they accept respect for women and girls and their fundamental rights in Afghanistan. This solidarity is most important now than at any time before to ensure that the radicalisation of a whole

country and its spread across the world is avoided.

It is imperative for the international community to remain committed to address women's rights and ensuring that Afghan women are not left behind in the quest for a stable

and inclusive future. Only through sustained efforts, both within Afghanistan and on the global stage, can we hope to see a brighter future for Afghanistan and beyond.

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About the Author:

Dr Orzala Nemat is an internationally known Afghan scholar, women rights activist, and think tank leader. Dr Nemat emerged as a grassroots woman leader in the late 1990s and has dedicated her life to promoting peacebuilding, human rights, and strengthening democratic values in Afghanistan. She is an expert in political ethnography, holding a PhD in Development Studies from the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) and an MSc in Development Planning from the University College London (UCL). Dr Nemat recently founded and is leading Development Research Group Limited (DRG), which aims to promote the multi-disciplinary concept of development studies in the developing world through research and evaluations, open-access teaching, and mentorship.

Dr Nemat served as the director of the top research think tank in Afghanistan, the Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU) from 2016-2022. She led several global research projects in Afghanistan during her tenure, including a sizeable five-year project, "Drugs and (dis)Order: transforming war economies into peace economies" funded by Global Challenge Research Funds (GCRF) and UKRI. Nemat is a member of the Inter-Agency Humanitarian Evaluation independent team assessing the current humanitarian aid in Afghanistan and she frequently writes and takes part in academic and policy debates on violence, conflict, gender, humanitarian, and development related issues. Her publications can be found here: <https://soas-uk.academia.edu/OrzalaNemat>.

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Women without Borders (WwB) is an international nonprofit organisation headquartered in Vienna. Since 2001, WwB has been building capacity through women leadership and empowered dialogue efforts to address gender-based violence and violent extremism, the world over.