

Speaker 1 ([00:00:25](#)):

The program will now begin.

Amb. Melanne Verveer ([00:00:28](#)):

Hello and welcome everyone to the second in a series of virtual events on Afghanistan. Part of our new initiative Onward for Afghan women. Today's focus is Afghanistan's Education Crisis Under the Taliban: Ensuring Access for Women and Girls. I'm Melanne Verveer, and I'm the director of the Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace, and Security. When the Taliban were last in power almost two decades ago, one of the first things they did was ban women and girls from school. And when they were ousted from ruling Afghanistan in 2001, one of the primary goals for the country was to ensure that women and girls would again have the right to go to school. And they did in significant numbers. Over the last 20 years, girls made up almost 40% of students in the country. The numbers of women in higher education also grew significantly. But now with the return of the Taliban to power, women and girls face a harsh new reality. Most of Afghanistan schools are closed for the winter break, except for those in the south.

Amb. Melanne Verveer ([00:01:51](#)):

The Taliban has claimed that when the schools reopen everywhere in March, they will be open for women and girls. But there are questions about the veracity of this claim. In some parts of the country where schools are open, girls have, for the most part, not been able to attend. There have been wrenching stories that we can read just about every day from women and girls, not able to return to the classroom, their human rights violated, their aspirations extinguished. If schools are allowed to reopen for women and girls, what will the nature of the schooling be under the Taliban's extreme Islamic code? What will the curriculum be like? The Taliban object to male teachers for girls and to mixed classes of boys and girls. How will the shortage of female teachers be addressed? What kind of education will be practiced? Since the Taliban have returned to power, tens of thousands of Afghan teachers have not been paid. How will this crisis be addressed? To answer these and many other questions, and to provide solutions and recommendations,

Amb. Melanne Verveer ([00:03:13](#)):

We will hear from some of the foremost Afghan experts in the field of education, now living in exile. Our new initiative, Onward for Afghan Women, aims to elevate and equip Afghan women leaders, wherever they are now living, with opportunities to continue their advocacy on behalf of all Afghan women and girls. And you can follow our work at onwardafghanwomen.org. We are joined today by some 500 participants on Zoom and more are tuned in on Facebook. We have already received many pre-submitted questions, but you are also able to submit questions throughout the discussion by using the chat function on your screen. And now to begin our discussion, my colleague, Palwasha Hassan, a new senior fellow at our Institute at Georgetown, is joining us with the opening remarks. She is the Director of the Afghan Women's Educational Center, a major NGO in support of Afghan women's access to education and to other services, a tireless advocate for women's meaningful participation in politics and peace building, including in peace negotiations, in the constitutional loya jirga and Afghanistan's reconstruction forums. Palwasha was deeply involved in all of these engagements. So Palwasha, we turn it over to you now and your great expertise on this issue.

Palwasha Hassan ([00:04:57](#)):

Uh, thank you, Ambassador, and, uh, very good morning to all the, uh, panelists and audience who are joining us today for the event. Um, as you, uh, mentioned very well amongst the several Taliban

restrictions imposed on women that including, uh, banning them from work, jobs, site homes, mobility without a maharam is still, uh, another issue, um, uh, is education is still a haunting issue, um, for women in Afghanistan, uh, uh, banning of secondary school and higher education, although, uh, as a concession to international community, the Taliban agreed to reopen universities for girls to attend, uh, with segregated spaces, uh, recently, uh, at least in six provinces. Um, they, uh, they started that, uh. However secondary schools are yet to start, um, in all the even warm places because we have two, uh, uh, school years in Afghanistan, uh, in warm and cold places is different.

Palwasha Hassan ([00:06:09](#)):

Uh, so, um, and there is a very eager, uh, waiting for, uh, this, um, if there is anything, um, close to reality that, um, these schools will reopen to girls. Um, the issue is that during the six years of Taliban previous rule, um, uh, we know that for six continuous years, uh, girls were deprived from education. Um, and then, uh, the continued breaching of, uh, promises the Taliban, uh, has made, uh, on, uh, issues like general amnesty, um, and then, uh, uh, curtailing of, uh, freedom of expression, uh, continuation of, uh, extra judicial uh, killing and disappearance of activists. Uh, these are the issues which leave little trust or no trust, um, of women and general Afghan public on the promises, which are made that the spring, the school will restart for girls. Uh, of course we have all other issues, like what will be curriculum, um, what will be the condition and all those things, um, which is part of the overall coding and restriction that the Taliban has, uh, introduced in Afghanistan.

Palwasha Hassan ([00:07:29](#)):

Uh, this is happening where, uh, uh, despite of, uh, uh, a huge and remarkable improvement, like 9 million children in last, uh, 20 years were able, with the support of international community and, um, uh, democratic regime in Afghanistan, uh, they were able to join, uh, schools, um, uh, still, we had like 3.5 million children out of school in that time, uh, where majority were girls, almost 60%. So now this newer issue is adding up to the already existing, um, uh, lagging behind, um, uh, situation that we have on the part of education for girls in Afghanistan. Uh, just to move on the positive side in, in, um, last four decades, uh, in Afghanistan of conflict, uh, women haven't been just sitting there. And, uh, there have been a lot of experiences, including under Taliban regime and those who can recall, uh, the underground schools, uh, that shows how much resilience is there underground.

Palwasha Hassan ([00:08:40](#)):

Uh, and women are always looking for something new to make sure that, uh, uh, girls in Afghanistan have the same chance as they had once for their education. And I think in today's panel, we have several of these women who have, uh, have different and innovative ways of continuing, continuing their struggle. Um, uh, we have Maria Raheen today with us, for instance, where, uh, she has been Dean of, um, uh, university and, um, beside her, uh, position on the teaching, it's also important that she supported the leadership courses for young girls to, uh, be brought up as, uh, educationist and, um, leaders in different sphere. Uh, we have, um, Deema with us with all the whole background of, uh, AWEC for 31 years on girls and women education. And, uh, uh, we have Shabana with a very innovative way of, um, uh, schooling for girls, um, uh, which she continues with, um, on that role for a long time.

Palwasha Hassan ([00:09:56](#)):

And hopefully we can, uh, be joined by our, um, uh, other participant who is yet, uh, here, but this whole innovation of long distance learning and online, uh, learning exists. And I think these are some of the experiences that we need to build on, and, uh, it will, will be important for, um, uh, our, uh, panelists to

share this with audience, uh, and, uh, raise the, uh, awareness on the possibilities of continuing, uh, struggle of Afghan women. And we will stop on where we left on August 15. I think there is, uh, very high potential among the, uh, diaspora plus who has recently left. And we have to make that connection back to Afghanistan and girls education in particular, because that is the key to change. And I think very huge, uh, reception in the communities as well for girls education. And we shouldn't lose that synergy because just a small number of men, uh, are men who are taking the power in the country to hijack everything, uh, for the people and especially women and girls and Afghanistan. So with that, I would stop and like to hear from everybody else. Thank you.

Amb. Melanne Verveer ([00:11:15](#)):

Well, thank you so much. Uh, Palwasha and you had, uh, walked through the, uh, background of some of our, uh, panelists who are going to begin speaking to us now, uh, and we will begin, uh, our conversation with Shabana Basij-Rasikh, a leading voice for Afghan women in girls education and the co-founder and president of the School Of Leadership Afghanistan, better known as SOLA. It is the first and only Afghan-led private boarding school for girls. Shabana knows the value of an education. Born and raised in Taliban-controlled Kabul, she dressed as a boy and attended school in secret since education for girls was forbidden. After graduating from university, she committed herself to creating educational opportunities for girls. And now, with the return of the Taliban, Shabana has evacuated her students and staff, and they are temporarily relocated in Rwanda where their education is continuing. Shabana has received global recognition for her work, including the Malala Medal in 2018. Shabana, we turn to you now. Thank you for your leadership on these issues. I know many of us, uh, are always happy to read your editorial comments, uh, in various newspapers. So thank you for keeping this issue of Afghan education for women and girls, uh, on, uh, on top of everybody's radar screens. Shabana?

Shabana Basij-Rasikh ([00:13:00](#)):

Uh, thank you, Ambassador Verveer and, uh, good morning, um, to everyone. Um, it's an honor to, to, uh, join you all for this, uh, really important discussion, um, on the, uh, crisis of, uh, you know, education in Afghanistan and particularly, um, the, uh, added challenges and obstacles facing, um, girls in Afghanistan and, uh, what are some of the opportunities to address those. Um, um, I will, for those who don't have a background on SOLA, I will briefly, um, mention that SOLA, um, uh, as the first and only private, uh, boarding school for girls in Afghanistan, we have nearly a hundred students, um, representing, uh, 28 of the 34 provinces and, uh, in a incredibly, um, uh, difficult time when Afghanistan is the only country on earth where girls' access to a secondary education is outlawed. Um, SOLA as, um, an all girls, um, middle and high school is, uh, continuing to educate, um, Afghan girls and, um, we're, uh, extremely proud, um, of that as an institution and hope that, um, the situation changes for, for the rest of, uh, girls in Afghanistan, uh, who, whose desire to continue with their education is ever vibrant.

Shabana Basij-Rasikh ([00:14:28](#)):

Um, to, uh, you, you asked a very important question in your remarks, Ambassador Verveer, that, um, if schools were to open under the Taliban, what, what, what would that look like for girls? And it's important, um, it's an important question because for us to face, um, the, uh, harsh reality of the education crisis in Afghanistan, we need to look further back, um, in order to be able to look forward into what the, uh, uh, opportunities for solutions are. And even, uh, in the past, uh, 20 years of, um, incredible investment in Afghanistan, um, only 34%, roughly 34% of Afghan girls, uh, across the country were, um, in school or had access to school. So a significant majority of Afghan girls, um, were deprived of that opportunity, um, to be in school. Um, there are a lot of reports, um, that speak to, um, some of the reasons behind, behind that obviously, um, under the umbrella of an incredibly corrupt system.

Shabana Basij-Rasikh (00:15:48):

Um, but one of the major, um, reasons why a lot of girls who were not able to continue with their education in Afghanistan was a shortage of teachers and especially, uh, shortage of female teachers, uh, followed by more than 60% of schools across Afghanistan, um, did not have, uh, access to water and sanitation facilities, which, um, as you can understand, um, it is an explanation for why a lot of girls, as they reached puberty, um, dropped out of school significantly at that age. Um, we then also had, um, issues such as lack of distribution of books, schools lack basic materials. Um, it didn't stop girls and communities across Afghanistan from, uh, from teaching girls in open space, in a lot of villages, uh, but shortage of books and stationary, and, um, teachers were a significant barrier. Uh, we obviously had other issues such as security, and in some cases, um, traditional barriers, uh, beliefs that, uh, prevented girls from, um, uh, accessing education, but they were by no means the dominant factor.

Shabana Basij-Rasikh (00:17:02):

Um, so it is incredibly alarming, um, that the Taliban are, um, further limiting, um, some of, um, some of the criteria for what it would mean for girls to get back into school. And the most alarming one for me is, um, the, um, possibility that girls could only be taught by female teachers. Um, everyone understands that with such a condition, um, even if schools were to reopen, um, a lot of girls will not be able to, uh, sit in a classroom because we already have such a significant shortage of, uh, female teachers. Um, like I said, this is a problem that we've had for a long time. So we need to think about what are some of the ways, um, that it could be addressed. How can we, how can we accelerate girls' access to, um, education in a place like Afghanistan. Assuming, and this is a major assumption,

Shabana Basij-Rasikh (00:18:01):

uh, a lot of us are, uh, remain incredibly, um, concerned, um, about the actual possibility of school reopening, uh, time will tell, uh, we have to wait. Um, well, part of the reason that we are concerned is that in, uh, like Dr. Palwasha Hassan mentioned, um, in, in the warmer, uh, regions of Afghanistan schools are meant to be in session, and yet those girls are not back in school. So, um, our fixation on, uh, schools opening in the colder region, um, you know, I am, I'm, I'm not yet convinced I have to see it, uh, and then will believe it. But for the time being, um, there are many opportunities, uh, to address, um, girls', uh, access to education or accelerated, even in these difficult circumstances. Um, you look at, for instance, SOLA's model as an Afghan women led, uh, operated boarding school and entirely Afghan women space.

Shabana Basij-Rasikh (00:19:07):

Um, we have, you know, it was no accident that we, uh, have girls from 28 of the 34 provinces represented by our student body. It meant, um, that families from across Afghanistan, um, believe in this model of education. Um, but if you look closely into some of these obstacles that girls face, um, in different parts of the country, a boarding school model becomes a significant solution, um, to some of these issues. Um, for instance, take a province, uh, like Paktika in southern Afghanistan, uh, where we have a significantly, um, low number of female teacher years. I believe it's a handful of 16, uh, female teachers out of the 1100 registered, um, teachers with the Ministry of Education in the previous government. And out of those 16 female teachers, only one had a high school degree and five others had only completed elementary level education.

Shabana Basij-Rasikh (00:20:11):

So when you think about a province like Paktika, um, and you add this, um, um, you, you know, you add this, uh, additional condition that girls can only be taught by female teachers, um, who is going to go to school in Paktika? Which are the girls that are gonna be able to access education? Um, this becomes a Catch-22. Um, if you don't have female teachers, you don't have female students in school, if you don't have female students graduating high school, you don't have the local production of female teachers. So how do you break this vicious cycle? Well, um, the possibility of a boarding school, um, that is led entirely by, um, uh, educated Afghan women breaks that cycle and in fact accelerates girls' access to education. I have spoken to numerous, um, uh, previous directors of, um, education, uh, in most of these provinces where, um, the percentage of female teachers was less than 20%, in most cases less than 5%.

Shabana Basij-Rasikh ([00:21:19](#)):

And a lot of them have spoken about, uh, boarding school, uh, or a boarding institute as a solution without even speaking, using the word boarding. Um, so there is a great desire by people, um, and they do envision that if there is a space created for, um, that is truly led, um, by women, um, that families across Afghanistan would be willing to send their daughters, um, to an institute or an institution where they can be educated and then go back to their provinces or their communities or their districts, uh, where they can be the first generation of female teachers and break that cycle. Um, I will keep my remarks here, um, look forward to hearing from others, but, um, uh, this for me, um, is not a new, uh, it's not an idea. It's actually a proven model. We have seen it with SOLA. We have seen, um, the deep sense of commitment that families make to their daughter's education once they're enrolled in, uh, SOLA. Um, those families are by no means exceptional families in Afghanistan. I mean, for us, I do think that they're quite brave and phenomenal families, but they represent people in their provinces. SOLA after all is one institution, and it should not be the only institution, um, uh, of its kind. There should be many institutions like SOLA, um, addressing girls' education the way we do. Thank you.

Amb. Melanne Vermeer ([00:22:54](#)):

Thank you, Shabana. And thank you for, um, setting the stage, so to speak for, uh, explaining the challenges, uh, in, uh, Afghanistan today in terms of the crisis in education for girls and women, uh, and also, uh, one possible, uh, workable, uh, proven solution, uh, the one that you mentioned, uh, that's based on the SOLA model. We're gonna turn now to Pashtana Durrani, a leading women's rights activist, teacher and Co-Founder and Executive Director of LEARN Afghanistan, an NGO focused on technology and very innovative means of getting schooling to rural areas across Afghanistan, particularly for girls. Through LEARN, Pashtana hopes to expand access to STEM and reproductive health instruction to Afghan girls and refugees with little or no access to education. She too has been recognized for her work, receiving the Talberg award. She is currently a visiting fellow at Wellesley College.

Amb. Melanne Vermeer ([00:24:09](#)):

Pashtana, thank you for being with us today. Uh, I wonder if you could explain how technology, uh, and innovation can be applied, uh, to education, particularly given the crisis, uh, in Afghanistan. Um, and I know that you are working on several projects. I wonder if in the work that you are doing, uh, you see potential for scaling up, uh, for expanding, um, some of that work to address the challenges we've been hearing about. And, and maybe, uh, just to throw in one more question, um, what is the international community getting wrong? Uh, what do you think, uh, we can do better, uh, to support more effective interventions, uh, for education?

Pashtana Durrani ([00:25:00](#)):

Thank you, Ambassador. First of all, I would like to start with the fact that I would really want my daughter to go to SOLA someday because that's like the dream. When I was young, I was in high school, so I was just done with my grade 10, and I applied for SOLA, and they actually wanted to interview me, but because of personal reasons, I couldn't further pursue in SOLA. So I would really want my daughter to go to SOLA school someday or my sister. Uh, so, uh, starting on more, um, more of the things that we work with or the way we function, um, in a general sense, I do echo what Palwasha says or what Shabana says, which is yes, every girl has the right to education. Every girl should have access to that public space. Um, she should be able to go to a boarding school,

Pashtana Durrani ([00:25:52](#)):

she should be able to go to a public school. She should be able to access all those educational opportunities that are universal in every other country, no matter what their GDP is, what their, uh, religion is or the way they function, because education is a right, a universal right, especially for girls. When it comes to LEARN, I like to say that it's more like, um, an emergency situation thing, or more like modeled towards countries, um, or areas that are, that are challenging, right? That are conflict, uh, written, or that need some sort of intervention, uh, which needs answer, uh, for that, um, sort of tough questions. In Afghanistan right now, one thing that we are doing right now is we are running these, uh, secret schools in, uh, different provinces. And we hope to expand to Tahar, Mazar, Faryab, Bamyan and Nangarhar, and these regions that we are working with right now.

Pashtana Durrani ([00:26:54](#)):

And as Shabana said, um, or Palwasha said that in the past six years, we have seen what with the Taliban, there were secret schools, right? And, uh, even right now, all these institutions reaching out to us from all these places are actually these, uh, community leaders. They want to reach out to us. We're not reaching out to anyone. They're the ones who want to educate their daughters. They are the ones they want to see someone leading their community the way Shabana leads it. Deema leads it, Palwasha leads it, or Pashtana leads it. You have to understand that Afghanistan is not a country that is hostile towards girls' education. It's political ideology, small group of men, conservative men who tend to politicize girls education, because that's the easiest one to do. The second thing that we need to understand is the fact that when it comes to LEARN, we focus more on STEM, but I also focus a lot on learning opportunities.

Pashtana Durrani ([00:27:49](#)):

I personally think a girl's voice becomes important when she starts earning, especially in a household. Um, I have seen it again and again, until she's not earning, uh, she can be a PhD, she won't be respected in her family. She could be wed off, uh, as early as 16 and nobody would even listen. In order to talk at the men's table, you have to earn like a man. I always say it, which is very misogynistic, but it is reality. Um, and this is something true. I come from a very conservative tribal family. My father passed away, uh, a year ago. And I'm gonna give my example because it's, uh, something that I experienced. The first thing I remember was the fact that my uncle's taking over and telling me, oh, we will handle it and everything, but no, they couldn't handle it. They were supposed to marry me off, my sister off. And like, you know, my brother was gonna take care of the farm and the land and everything.

Pashtana Durrani ([00:28:44](#)):

Why should that happen? Right? Why should every woman face that fate, if someone from our family, a father or a patriarch has to pass away. Now that can happen to a lot of Pashtanas in Afghanistan and it might be happening. You wouldn't even know. I had to take the lead because I was earning, I was running

my own nonprofit. I was earning, I was leading. I was working twice as hard to put my sister and my brother through school. Um, and I was working twice as hard to get whatever my father left us in equality, because he was like, I want my daughter and son to have the same equality. The reason I'm giving you this example, and I never talk about this, is the fact that how many more Pashtanas have to go through that misogyny, even in normal places without a Taliban, to get to the position, to protect their siblings, to protect their families, to get food on the table and actually help, uh, their own families bring out of poverty. That's the reason we need an education that actually feeds families.

Pashtana Durrani ([00:29:41](#)):

The reason we focus, the reason we educate hundred leaders per province so those hundred leaders could actually get educated, start having freelancing jobs, start stabilizing hundred families, uh, uh, out of poverty. And then those hundred families and those hundred girls start teaching another hundred girls. And then the snowball effects come into the rolling. And that's how you create leaders in Afghanistan. That's how you depend on women leaders. When they have the financial stability, they can then talk and negotiate other terms. Now on scaling, yes, we are scaling and I'm hoping to scale to all the 34 provinces. Um, I don't want to sound very sure of any because we used to have this model where it's provinces and then it's districts, and then it's villages. But I think it's doable. Maybe I'm just too passionate. So on districts level, uh, uh, on a provincial level, we are expanding this year within districts level.

Pashtana Durrani ([00:30:35](#)):

We hope to expand within the next two years and on the village level, we hope to expand within the next five years. I personally believe there should be a space, uh, where, uh, so when we come from a village and in our village, uh, there was always a place where all the women would gather around and have chai and talk and like, you know, gossip and everything, or talk poetry or talk about the radio shows that they would listen to. I personally think we could recreate those same spaces with digital spaces, where girls come together, they have chai, but then at the same time, they continue, uh, learning. They do freelancing jobs. That digital lab is highly equipped with solar panels so that electricity is not an issue. We are already working on an internet solution that hopefully Afghanistan will have within the next one year. We'll have internet, all across Afghanistan, but free internet, FYI, and fast internet.

Pashtana Durrani ([00:31:26](#)):

I promise. And last but not least, digital devices. There is a huge digital divide, even in the US, when it comes to digital devices. Not every girl has access to that high technology. So right now, I hope to do that within the next five years for each village, but within the next year for the whole, uh, Afghanistan, provincial capitals. That's the goal. That's the dream. We teach them simple things, freelancing, graphics designing, website development, logo development, um, translating for people, um, translating, assisting people with their jobs and everything. At the same time, we teach them normal stuff like bio, physics, chemistry, Pashto, Dari. Um, I'm hoping to expand someday to Uzbeki, I'm very passionate about it. So these are the sort of things that we teach in the general curriculum, but also a curriculum that would help them earn in the long run. Now, this model works in a sense where Afghanistan is coming into an economic crisis.

Pashtana Durrani ([00:32:24](#)):

It's also facing a lot of harsh conditions, and we are going to be seeing a lot of child marriages because a girl's worth is all in her young body. So in order to combat that, when a girl starts earning, nobody would

want that money out of the family. That's the reality. Now on, now that I have answered the scaling question, international community. I have a lot of criticism for them, but I think I would, uh, limit myself to what can be done instead of criticizing them. I think international community has to focus on what, uh, Shabana said, that you have to let the Afghan women lead. You have to let them do what is best for Afghanistan. You can't take that space. You can't talk on our behalf. We have to talk on our behalf. We have to do our own fight. We need, I wouldn't say we need a table on, uh, we need a chair on, on that table, a seat on that table.

Pashtana Durrani ([00:33:21](#)):

We demand that because that is my right. You know, in Pashto we say “koala”, which is like, you know, having rightful papers to the land. I had that for my father's lands, and that's why I can own them. That's the same thing I have for Afghanistan. That's the same thing Palwasha has, Deema has, Shabana has, or Maria has for Afghanistan, for our regions, for our communities. We belong to those communities. Our [unclear] belong to those communities. We know how context works. So let us do the talking, let us talk, uh, with the Taliban, let us talk with international community. Let us lead the educational models instead of, uh, donating billions and billions to people who would go and get paid 17, 18, \$25,000 for working in a conflict zone for what? Protect *me*, I'll go back and I'll work, but protect *me*, you know, because I'm the only breadwinner in my family.

Pashtana Durrani ([00:34:17](#)):

So the thing goes for a lot of other women, they don't want to abandon their countries. You didn't see us back in the day in the US, right? You're seeing us right now because I was not allowed to go to my office post-August. I was not allowed to go to the bank by myself. I was not allowed to work with my own staff. So we have to understand that what the international community best can do A) recognize our effort, amplify our work. Most importantly, and I'm gonna see it again and again, donate and fund things that actually work, that actually show you results, that actually shows you how many girls have learned, how many girls are in learning, how much can it be, uh, scaled, how much it progresses. Stuff like this is very important for us to understand. And most importantly, enable a dialogue. Let us do the talking instead of talking on my behalf. I'm gonna stop here and yeah. Thank you.

Amb. Melanne Vermeer ([00:35:08](#)):

Well, thank you so much, uh, Pashtana, you have, uh, filled your space with an awful lot of, uh, good ideas. A lot of enthusiasm, I must say as well. Uh, but, but that's what Onward Afghan Women is all about. Let Afghan women lead. And that is something, uh, that we should all make possible. Uh, and I think your work on, uh, closing the digital divide, uh, and, and very much the education contributing to economic empowerment, uh, very, very, uh, important, uh, lessons in all of that. We're gonna turn now to Deema Hiram, a long time champion for rights of women and girls to an education in Afghanistan. Deema's currently serving as the Program Implementation Manager of the Afghan Women's Educational Center. She's been working to re-enroll girls who were affected by the conflict, uh, back into school and to address the barriers that girls face to education in Afghanistan.

Amb. Melanne Vermeer ([00:36:13](#)):

Deema has also received much recognition, including the Malala Fund Champion Award. And she has spoken before the UN. So Deema, it's really great, uh, to have you with us because you do a lot of that hands-on work. Um, and I wonder if you could, um, give us a sense of what's happening on the ground. I know that you're in touch, uh, with many Afghans and civil society organizations. Uh, what are they

telling you about the challenges that they're confronting, uh, and then back to the international community again, uh, what advice would you have? There are, uh, many who would like to collaborate, uh, with civil society organizations, uh, and support their efforts in education, uh, like paying, uh, for teacher salaries, for example, how does one ensure that these kinds of interventions, uh, hopefully good interventions will have the impact that one desires?

Deema Hiram ([00:37:19](#)):

Uh, thank you so much Ambassador. I'm, it's been, it's an honor to be part of this important event. And, uh, and coming to your questions like, uh, AWEC, or Afghan Women's Educational Center, has a, um, or AWEC is working, as a woman-led organization beside other sectors. It's working in education for the last 30 years, implemented different education projects in almost more than 10 provinces of Afghanistan. AWEC is involved in different clusters in Afghanistan, in Afghanistan, including humanitarian clusters or gender-based violence, GBD clusters or education and emergency working groups. Through these clusters, AWEC is using these clusters to share the actual needs of the communities, particularly voices from the women and girls from a very grassroots level to the national international communities and advocating for their rights. Unfortunately, after the fall of Afghanistan education system, especially closing school girls by the new government, although after a period, they really opened the schools for the primary level, but the secondary and high schools are still not allowed to be open.

Deema Hiram ([00:38:33](#)):

I waved many follow-ups through different channels or platforms for advocating and reopening of schools for secondary and high school for girls. However, it's always been learned from the new government that they are working in some sort of, uh, new policies for the secondary schools for girls. Uh, the policies, all of the policies are not shared and publicly declared. Moreover, they announced that all schools for girls, including secondary and high schools will be reopened by the start of this new year. However, there are rumors that the [unknown] columns for the secondary and high school of girls will be changed. For AWEC's understanding of the ground, closing off schools, particularly for girls, cause psychological problems for girls. In addition to being imprisoned at home for a long time, they are also not optimistic for their results of education and their future.

Deema Hiram ([00:39:39](#)):

Like there are many questions that, uh, that, uh, that girls are, uh, are thinking about like, will our education be same as other, like, will our education be the same as other educated women or it'll be different? Will we be able to pass the entrance exam while we are away from education for about one year, what will be our future? We have not been able to take any courses or school at all. Majority of families cannot afford the education of their children. Uh, because the change of power, the Taliban negatively affected the income of people. Most families cannot provide food and basic necessities for themselves and their children. They will not be able to send their daughters to school at all. Uh, on the other side, security is another issue that girls and their parents are worried about. The girls and their families do not have trust in the Taliban due to unavailability of proper military uniform of forces of Taliban, families fear that arm groups still exist around their areas.

Deema Hiram ([00:41:00](#)):

They cannot trust them. Conflicts can occur any time. This means that a number of families are still not mentally ready to send their daughters to school. However, their announcement relevant, uh, to opening of schools for girls, made people, especially girls, hopeful that, uh, they will go to school by the start of

new year. However, their policies is not clear for the people to trust them and the, uh, international communities to support the schooling system of Afghanistan. And, uh, and, uh, to, and in response to your second question, like, uh, this problem needs impactful and sustainable solution to maintain the schooling system, particularly, uh, schooling system, particularly for girls beside budgeting for other sectors, the new government should have appropriate and sustainable support for education system. Since Afghanistan does not have a stable economy, this means the support of international communities and donors, which is negatively affected by the decisions of global actors relevant to the recognition of Taliban's government.

Deema Hiram ([00:42:18](#)):

Um, in order to have sustainable solution and attract international donors, the multilateral and government actors can have significant roles in different levels and ways like international donors. International donors, uh, should increase the percentage of funding towards education, particularly for girls education for long term because Afghanistan needs more funding and support and the education sector has compared to recent two decades. Although UNICEF played a pay, uh, the, like all the, uh, UNICEF plan to pay the salaries of Afghan teachers without transferring funds through the government, it has both positive and negative impact. It's positive is that somehow some teachers are receiving salaries and are able to resume their activities and continue their work. Uh, but on the other side, they think this fund will stop depending on the struggles of Taliban for recognition, or continuation of this process will make teachers dependent on international support and will limit the influence of government, which is realized by the Taliban as well.

Deema Hiram ([00:43:41](#)):

Well, in the short run, um, this process works, but it is not the real solution for the problem. Moreover, the national NGOs have played a significant role as a bridge between the people and the donor, who can further focus on education for girls. This will enable the local NGOs to sustain their roles in providing educational services, particularly to girls. Second, US government and allies can make the recognition of government of Taliban conditional to girls education. The recognition of their government by the US and its allies have permanent importance to Taliban, which is affecting the decision of other countries. Therefore it should be used as a force to oblige Taliban change your policies related to girls education, which is the actual needs of people. Moreover, Taliban claim that, uh, uh, they have prepared policy for girls education to start all girls school for the new year about which people are not sure, uh, people can't trust, uh, that Taliban will stick to their promises.

Deema Hiram ([00:44:56](#)):

Therefore it's an appropriate time to force Taliban, to openly declare and share their policy with people and international communities to understand their intention. It's important for US and its allies to understand the policy of Taliban about girls' education and decide accordingly. And the third, uh, Muslim countries involved in politics of Afghanistan have have close link with Taliban. These, uh, countries can also play vital role in this regard. They are also following the same Islamic sharia implementing in their respective countries. Their women and girls can access all the fundamental human rights such as education, employment, or movement, or participating in various governmental or non governmental sectors. Therefore these countries can negotiate with Taliban and convince them to be flexible and implement the actual Islamic laws where all human beings can access their human rights equally. Moreover, these countries can provide example of their context where women and girls go to school and universities, workplace, participate in decision making, and work in all areas where their presence is important as humans, as citizens of that country. Uh, by this I stop my remarks. Uh, thank you,

Amb. Melanne Vermeer ([00:46:29](#)):

Deema, thank you so much. And thank you for those very concrete recommendation, both in terms of conditionality and education, uh, but also the call to predominantly Muslim countries, uh, where they, uh, see Islam as a mandate for education, for learning for knowledge, uh, and not this extreme view radical view that the Taliban have and can potentially, uh, be more influential than they've been, uh, because they do not, uh, as, uh, agree to the same kind of, uh, views of, uh, educating girls and women. So I think those are very good points and there may be follow up questions on that. Uh, excuse me, we're gonna turn now to, um, Maria Raheen. We're going to look at higher education. Uh, she is a champion for women's education and political participation. Most recently as Director of Journalism and Mass Communication at Balkh University. Earlier, she founded the Taj Higher Education Institute, the first private university in Balkh, uh, which offered courses in medicine, economics, and the law.

Amb. Melanne Vermeer ([00:47:46](#)):

She's also the founder of, uh, the VR Organization of Balkh province, whose aim is to address human rights violations and barriers that prevent women from accessing, uh, accessing their basic rights. Uh, Maria, it's very good to have you with us as well, particularly also to be able, able to, um, fill out this discussion in many ways, uh, by focusing on the state of higher education. What is happening at this time, uh, in higher education? Are women able, uh, to continue their university, uh, education? What are you hearing from your fellow faculty and, uh, administrators who remain, uh, in Afghanistan? And what should the international community, uh, be doing to support, uh, access to higher education? I know your, your daughter, uh, is, uh, Parnian is going to, uh, help, uh, with the translation. Uh, so you'll speak in your language and then we'll hear from her in English. Uh, so thanks to the two of you, uh, and, uh, we look forward to your responses.

Maria Raheen ([00:49:23](#)):

So the only fact which got African women to a stage that today they're asking for their rights from the Taliban without any fear is their knowledge and education. In the past 20 years, there was chances for women to get awareness and literacy in its highest form.

Maria Raheen ([00:50:24](#)):

Some researchers were done recently, which was a very good, um, which shows, uh, some good news about the, um, rate of the literacy between Afghan women in Afghanistan.

Maria Raheen ([00:51:02](#)):

These researchers shows that approximately in these twenty years we've had 50% women with basic elementary literacy, 40% high school, and 1% in the doctoral. Which is absolutely great in a war torn society like Afghanistan,

Maria Raheen ([00:51:55](#)):

Recently, BBC reported the exit of 229 teachers from three credible universities of Afghanistan, Kabul, Balkh, and Herat universities. Lack of this scientific staff damages the educational process.

Maria Raheen ([00:52:28](#)):

Because each of these teachers had masters or doctoral degrees and had experience of more than 10 years. And maybe this is why the governmental universities are still closed. Right now only the private

institutions are providing studies for the students. But only a few number of girls can afford studying in private institutions

Maria Raheen ([00:53:29](#)):

Because all the services they offer is with the fees that the students should pay. And now the financial situation in Afghanistan is not in a stage that the families can afford supporting their girls to go to the private institutions to continue studying. Libraries are closed. Because of the, uh, because of the lack of active internet system, online studies are hard to provide. And finally the separation of male and female teachers and students have problems in this field.

Maria Raheen ([00:54:47](#)):

Also lack of proper security and protection of the Taliban that prevent them from starting any major movement, because

Maria Raheen ([00:55:09](#)):

Because it is possible that a new process of exclusions and killings will take place under the name of ISIS and their internal acquisition will severely damage the process. The imposition of compulsory hijab and some unnecessary religious issues on female teachers and students are also treating this process.

Maria Raheen ([00:55:54](#)):

Handing over the management of scientific resources to unprofessional people is another problem in this sector. Lack of interest in advancing effective scientific work, due to the unfavorable situation, the percentage reduction of professor salaries and the lack of refinement fields, even in the elementary level, fair trade simulations, beatings, and forced haircuts on boys are extremism that destroys the desire for education like the separation of boys and girls classes.

Maria Raheen ([00:57:25](#)):

And recently Taliban have officially asked the three credible universities in Afghanistan, four credible universities in Afghanistan, Kabul, Balkh, Herat, and Nangarhar universities, to separate the boys and girls classes, which have its own problems in the field.

Maria Raheen ([00:57:49](#)):

Even the teachers for these classes must be separated. The girls should be educated by female teachers and the boys should be educated by male teachers.

Maria Raheen ([00:58:11](#)):

This is a very serious problem because we have an expert teacher in a subject that can teach a class. And this is really important that we have only one teacher and she can only teach now the girls, and who is going to teach the boys. Or like this for the boys. We have one teacher that can teach that has expertise in a field. And now he's only able to teach the boys; now who is going to teach the girls?

Maria Raheen ([00:59:17](#)):

So, um, she has spoken with, uh, many professors in Balkh, Kabul, Herat, and Nangarhar universities. And they have said that the only active studying option for the students right now is the reopening of the public university for them. And the next option is the private institutions. First, starting the options. We

need the international society to put pressure on Taliban so that they open the university gates for the students.

Maria Raheen ([01:00:16](#)):

And for the education and private institutions, we have to, um, we have to provide some assistance from the charities for the girls who can't afford studying in the private institutions. I emphasize the institutions that work in the field of higher education at the international level. They must work inside Afghanistan to create the condition for girls to be integrated into private institutions and public colleges. Without global support, one cannot do that.

Maria Raheen ([01:01:18](#)):

Because the education system provided by the Taliban is non mother academic system. Online education is a good suggestion. We can mobilize all the scientific professionals that are outside Afghanistan, and they can start online lectures as an extracurricular education. We can get these lectures inside Afghanistan as an extracurricular curricular education. It's a new system.

Maria Raheen ([01:02:26](#)):

Inside Afghanistan, we can only open the public gates of universities and put pressure on the Taliban, which of course has its own limitations. Yeah, that was all.

Amb. Melanne Vermeer ([01:02:41](#)):

Well. That was a great deal, Maria. And thank you so much, uh, for that overview of the situation in higher education, uh, both what the Taliban attitudes and their actions, uh, are doing really to destroy, uh, higher education, and in terms of, uh, the concrete actions that are necessary now to reverse that, because the stakes are so high for Afghanistan if that does not happen. Uh, and I think your words about interventions with the Taliban on this very point, uh, in terms of integrating girls and women more significantly, um, as well as online possibilities and, uh, and supports that are gonna be critically needed if public education in higher ed is not gonna be, uh, possible. So thank you for that. And, and thank you Parnia for your translation. Uh, and now we're gonna move to our questions, um, from our participants today, who've been listening in and I'm sure have lots of questions, and I'll turn, uh, to Allie, uh, to tell us what those questions are. Anybody, uh, who wants to answer it, just, uh, give us a notice, raise your hand, or hit the icon for raise hand.

Allie Smith ([01:04:03](#)):

Sure. The first one, uh, asks "A big claim of the Taliban is that they have no objection to education for women, but there is a lack of women teachers and classes must be segregated. Shabana, and others covered this as a major barrier and called for the SOLA model as a workaround, but is there a solution through the formal education system? Um, and as a related question, should the international community be focusing on former channels, like interventions adhering to the Taliban's understanding of Sharia education, or should they be focusing on informal mechanisms that provide education for girls outside of the Taliban system?"

Amb. Melanne Vermeer ([01:04:42](#)):

Okay. Who wants to tackle that first?

Shabana Basij-Rasikh ([01:04:46](#)):

Uh, sure. I think, um, in a way submitting to the Taliban's demand that girls should only be taught by, um, female teachers or professors is just simply unrealistic. Um, uh, this is, this is purely an excuse on their part. They understand that this is a major problem in Afghanistan that already existed. And the truth is that the practice of Islam from Afghanistan predates the birth of Taliban as a movement. So they cannot pretend, um, that they have the upper hand in Islamic teachings or way of life in Afghanistan. People in Afghanistan are Muslims. They have been practicing Islam for a very long time. Uh, prior to the Taliban, there have been demands for, um, the classroom environment to be within, uh, Afghan cultural and Islamic norms. And they have been, um, so, uh, questioning this idea of women being taught only by female, um, teachers or professors, um, is important.

Shabana Basij-Rasikh ([01:05:49](#)):

There needs to be a pushback. Afghans are pushing back on that. Is there a preference in some parts of Afghanistan for that? Sure. Should that be respected? Yes. Uh, in order to open opportunities for girls, but that cannot be the norm. It should never be written into a law because it's already quite limiting. Like, uh, Professor Maria mentioned, um, you have certain expertise that are with male professors or teachers and not with female professors or teachers, and they need to be taken advantage of. At the end of the day, we don't live in our silos as men or women, um, uh, professional women, professional men also need to be able to learn to interact in that space. Um, uh, you know, so what happens once, once you get out of academia? Women can't be working in a professional space just with other women.

Shabana Basij-Rasikh ([01:06:43](#)):

So there needs to be a realistic approach and pushback. And quite honestly, the Taliban's demand for curriculum reform, they don't have the capacity. This is such a huge undertaking, um, that even in, in the previous administration with a lot of international expertise and support involved, it was already a significant challenge. Um, so for them, the only, under the guise of a curriculum reform or challenge, what will change, what we will get is, uh, extreme, um, radical, uh, version of, uh, curriculum that will be taught in schools, uh, similar to what we saw under the first Taliban regime, and obviously, um, under no circumstances, people in Afghanistan, uh, would want to accept that. And I wouldn't recommend, um, that we easily work with, with, with a solution like that.

Amb. Melanne Vermeer ([01:07:42](#)):

Anyone else wanna add to that? Otherwise, we'll go on to the next question, Allie.

Allie Smith ([01:07:50](#)):

Sure. This is from a state department official asking "If the international community agrees to pay teachers' stipends, but six months from now, girls are only able to attend schools in some, but not all of the provinces, should the international community continue to pay teacher stipends? What other "sticks" should they be considering in this carrot and sticks approach."

Amb. Melanne Vermeer ([01:08:18](#)):

Anyone? This is a much asked question.

Shabana Basij-Rasikh ([01:08:25](#)):

I'm happy to, uh, provide an opinion. I would love to hear others, uh, thoughts, but I think this idea of providing stipend, um, uh, first of all, I have to caution that, um, as an Afghan in exile, um, I, I understand my limitation of having opinions on this. At the end of the day, honestly, the people who should be

consulted on a question like this are Afghans currently in Afghanistan. Um, but I would say, um, providing a stipend, uh, for teachers, especially considering every other dimension of the problem in Afghanistan with the, um, the catastrophe that Afghanistan is right now, the, um, absolute collapse of the economic system in Afghanistan, um, it is a wonderful thing. It's a wonderful initiative. Um, I know that there were, there are some mechanisms where this could be potentially monitored. With the, with the previous, uh, uh, government, uh, there were efforts, uh, put in place to, um, collect biometric data on, on, uh, teacher, teacher, civil servants.

Shabana Basij-Rasikh ([01:09:34](#)):

Um, I know that was not, um, uh, completed, but, um, the former, um, Ministry of Education leadership should be consulted on what was done. Um, they will be in the best position to answer that. Um, but even, uh, providing, providing that, uh, stipend to teachers, it accomplishes a few things. It allows teachers to be able to maintain some economic stability in their household to be able to continue to, um, teach, even if they don't teach right now, if they're in colder regions of Afghanistan because of the winter break, um, it's a way of keeping them engaged. Um, this is obviously not talking evidence based, but this is really just common sense. Um, and, uh, it should be, um, obviously there are questions around, does it really get in the hands of teachers? That's a whole separate question, and it does remain a challenge when you don't have, um, monitoring boots on the ground, um, to ensure that actually, that fund is actually going to, um, the teachers, but this is where you could work with, um, international organizations and other NGOs, uh, working in Afghanistan, uh, to ensure, um, some level of monitoring and that these, um, stipends are in fact, uh, getting in the hands of, um, teachers.

Shabana Basij-Rasikh ([01:10:58](#)):

Um, I would, I would, I would be on the side of agreeing with, you know, providing stipends to teachers and I will let Pashtana take it from here.

Amb. Melanne Verwee ([01:11:10](#)):

Go ahead, Pashtana.

Pashtana Durrani ([01:11:13](#)):

Thank you, Shabana. I totally agree with her on the fact that yes, you have to pay the teachers, especially female teachers who have given their life, uh, to work as hard as they can to educate the girls in Afghanistan. I was talking to a teacher who was working with us in public school when we were working. And I was asking her, like, "what are you doing?" And she's like, you know, "I still go to the school. I still get engaged. I still talk to the principal." And she's an IT teacher who's teaching in our private school right now. And she's like, "I still continue to be engaged. I talk to the girls and hopefully things will resolve." So there is a hope for things, even if it's not on political sides, it's within the community of Afghan girls right now, especially. Sticks, uh I have a lot of suggestions on that.

Pashtana Durrani ([01:11:58](#)):

Um, the sticks would be A, uh, smart sanctions, stop sanctioning Afghanistan, start sanctioning Taliban, start sanctioning people who are in charge. Um, they don't want to, uh, they don't want to let girls educate, they don't want them to travel to the school? Don't let them travel the world. Don't let them fly to Norway. That's the best thing you could do. You literally put them, uh, out of the, uh, no fly list, or I don't know. I don't remember that, but that was a big controversy, right? In the UN they put them out. Why don't you put them back on that list? That's smart sanction for you right there. Um, apart from that,

uh, channels, money channels. For example, what is the sort of, uh, economic support that they're getting from China, Russia, Pakistan, Iran? Sanction those countries, ask those countries, "Why are you doing that?"

Pashtana Durrani ([01:12:47](#)):

Ask them. Like, you know, you have to bully them because they are literally supporting terrorists right now. Uh, those are the smart things you could do. Those are the sticks that you could do as a leader of the world. And apart from that, for every time there is a retaliation. You always see this pattern and I do want to highlight it. Every time there is an extrajudicial abuse, every time there is a girl who goes missing, every time, um, girls' education is, uh, put on hold. Every time you see teachers, uh, being put on hold and their work put on hold. And there's always a story revolving around the group, the regime right now, and them doing something else. You have to make sure that you follow up, you have a monitor, a rapporteur. Like, you know, that's the only privilege between the US and Afghans right now: that you have a passport with a country that's gonna stand up for you. And we have passports with a country that literally is banning our kind, and there's a gender apartheid going on. So you have to monitor the changes that is happening, but also monitor with, uh, the sticks. So, for example, within the next six months, if girls schools are not open in all regions, start sanctioning the leaders in those regions, all those Taliban. They shouldn't get money for anything, uh, all those channels that are supporting them right now, you could do that easily. You could have done that in the past two decades, but you didn't do, so at least do it right now. Those are the sticks you could do. Yeah.

Amb. Melanne Vermeer ([01:14:16](#)):

And Palwasha, did you wanna add anything?

Palwasha Hassan ([01:14:19](#)):

Um, yeah. Thank you. Um, besides, um, I think the, uh, very important point that, uh, Shabana and, uh, uh, Pashtana has mentioned, uh, that the, uh, stipend to the teacher should continue, even if students are not attending, because we should know that people have lost their jobs, especially women in Afghanistan lost their job. So if any of these salaries are going, that's important to be kept. But it's also important. I think all the panelists have given, uh, all the descriptions, it's not only one reason, uh, that is stopping, uh, girls from going to school. It's the policy, it's the fear, it is the terror, uh, several other aspects. Unless the families are, um, uh, content with the situation, they probably will create problems, uh, for girls to go to school. So I think, uh, we also have to give some of the support, uh, humanitarian support through these schools. So the family can, uh, benefit, uh, and the schools, uh, can be seen as places where, uh, what Pashtana was mentioning, uh, about economic incentive and all that, it's also important to make these schools useful in a different sense to the community, who are passing through multiple challenges. Um, and we have to, in this way, encourage girls going to school, um, uh, looking at the broader, uh, uh, challenges, not just like, okay "Teachers don't have salaries, so that's why schools are closed." There is more than that to it.

Amb. Melanne Vermeer ([01:15:57](#)):

Good point. Uh, all of these issues are complex. But I think, uh, it's fair to sum this, uh, response by let's not penalize the teachers, let's sanction those who are perpetrating a negative behavior and keeping girls out of school. Uh, Allie, next question please.

Allie Smith ([01:16:19](#)):

Sure. This question is asking about curriculum. "We know that some schools will be opening in a couple months. Are you hearing anything about specifically what the curriculum could be for women and girls?" And then another question here, uh, related, "What form of Islamic jurisprudence does the Taliban use in their guidance regarding education for women and girls? How can we integrate an understanding of these frameworks into the solutions that have been discussed? And are there arguments from Hanafi jurisprudence you would like to note that could be applied in these conversations?"

Amb. Melanne Verveer ([01:16:55](#)):

Well, Palwasha, please, you wanna start us off?

Palwasha Hassan ([01:16:58](#)):

Yeah. Um, as far as Taliban are considered, in theory you should follow the, uh, Hanafi jurisprudence. Uh, but there is a lot of contradiction when it comes to the practices. For instance, uh, uh, female judges. Uh, one of, uh, the, the only school which is supporting is that is the Hanafi school of thought or the religious sect that is supporting, um, them, and in Afghanistan this has been banned. So I think it's very much a conservative ruler perspective or, uh, what has been taught in some of the madrasas, uh, uh, in Pakistan where, uh, Taliban has went through that. And besides, like, even I would question that because for, uh, last 20 years, and most of them are young men who have been in war, I don't think even they had that opportunity to go through a proper madrasa education. So there is a confusion, and I've been advising in, um, um, some of my talks that Taliban also have to educate their own people on Islam, uh, and that's important for them.

Palwasha Hassan ([01:18:08](#)):

Um, uh, in Hanafi school, there is a lot of opportunity for women for social, uh, and public life, including that they could be, uh, teachers or, um, judges, uh, which is probably restricted in a lot of other schools and some of the Islamic practices. In Pakistan, for instance, for the first time have a female judge, but in Afghanistan, we had that for, uh, um, I dunno, maybe over 60 years now. Um, uh, so we have to go back to, reverse to our own practices. Uh, and, um, as our panelists were saying, Islam has been practiced in Afghanistan much before even a Taliban structure came into, uh, existence. And that is only within these last 40 years that these, um, uh, extreme Islamic and militant groups have come to exist. And, uh, every, everything here is very much Islamic in Afghanistan and we have to go back to touch our roots and the beliefs that we already had in our country. So I will stop here.

Amb. Melanne Verveer ([01:19:18](#)):

Uh, thank you, Palwasha and, and I just wanna say that part of the work, uh, that we're doing at the Georgetown Institute is work with scholars on this very issue, uh, and really, uh, making available, uh, both in language and in content, uh, the, the, uh, the ability for, uh, Afghans to be able to grasp how women's rights are consistent with Islam, uh, because what we hear from the Taliban for all the reasons we've been, uh, discussing today, uh, is that their view is a radical, extreme view, and one not shared by, by most of the predominantly Muslim countries, if not all of them. So that tool will be available and hopefully of use, uh, to the broader community. Another question, please.

Allie Smith ([01:20:13](#)):

Yep. This question is for Pashtana asking, "Are you facing pushback from the Taliban on your programs? Um, considering they are widely open across Afghanistan, is there resistance or security concerns and how are you reaching this many girls?" Um, and a question for Deema on gender norms asking "Even

before the Taliban took over, women and girls faced barriers to accessing education, including deep seated gender norms and needing family permission to attend school. Is anything working to address the issues and what more is needed?"

Amb. Melanne Vermeer ([01:20:52](#)):

Okay, so let's start with Pashtana on pushback.

Pashtana Durrani ([01:20:56](#)):

Uh, with the school that we have in Kandahar, uh, honestly that's an underground school, and a lot of security checks are already taken, um, in order for girls to go to school. And most of the time it's an institution in a very community-led place. Um, so that's very important for us. So like, you know, it's much more secure, I would say. On the implementing partner side, in Kabul, um, they have already got the permission because they run different sorts of classes, and our classes are embedded in those classes. So those are the two things that we are, I'm able to share. I can't share more details, but one thing that I'm gonna say is that, um, the Taliban don't know about our operations overall, it's a secret school. It's not an open school where the Taliban know that this is a school where girls go and get educated.

Pashtana Durrani ([01:21:49](#)):

They don't. So, yeah, and apart from that, I just wanted to, uh, mention, uh, lightly about two things. Uh, I saw a comment where she's like, um, the person asked if the model educational or the internet model doesn't work. Um, right now Afghanistan, if you do your research, uh, in Afghanistan rural areas have 365 days of sun, which enables us to access, uh, solar panels. If we checked last year's New Zealand model, where they created electric parks in Afghanistan, solar parks, actually. And they were actually very useful for all the agricultural channels, because we used that for our pupils and, uh, we did our research. So now the schools are actually using solar panels to help answer the electricity issue, even if we don't get, uh, electricity from Uzbekistan or Pakistan anymore, we can help that navigate through solar panels. And it's useful, very useful.

Pashtana Durrani ([01:22:46](#)):

The second thing is about internet. We are right now working with, uh, the SIM card companies to ensure that there are bytes available offline, and you can do it anytime you go on [unclear] website, you can download the PDF and that's it, you don't need more internet for it. Apart from that, we already have an offline app that's usable in video, audio, writing, and reading format. So that's also something that we're doing. Last, but not least, Afghanistan maybe, maybe will be the first country to be able to access free internet. I can't disclose the partners, but that will be happening within the next one year. Last but not the least, we are supposed to be, um, uh, launching our radio lessons within the next two weeks. And that not only enables us to reach a wider, uh, region, but it also helps us reach all sorts of students who cannot access education in all walks of life. So all those things are solutions that you could be ensuring or like, you know, answering or using or exploring just, uh, to answer the lack of education opportunities right now. Yeah.

Amb. Melanne Vermeer ([01:23:49](#)):

And, uh, Deema, can you take up the question on norms and attitudes that are, uh, also a big part of the challenge in educating girls?

Deema Hiram ([01:24:00](#)):

Uh, yeah. Thank you so much in terms of gender norms, uh, like, uh, at the beginning, uh, we, we had many issues in terms like, uh, in terms of gender norms and wrongs and practicing of wrong traditional, uh, wrong traditional practices, uh, in the community. Like at the beginning, uh, parents or the families were not allowing goals to continue their education, which is basic fundamental rights for every, uh, human being. Uh, but later on, uh, we worked through, uh, through different projects. Uh, we worked within the community to make them aware about what is the, uh, the rights of education when your child will be, get educated and what will be her future. Like, uh, we have, we make them able to understand in terms of Islamic perspective. So we use, uh, different, uh, community dialogues within the community at, uh, involving mullahs to let them talk about the gender norms or the rights that the woman or girls have in terms of, uh, getting education.

Deema Hiram ([01:25:13](#)):

And later on, uh, we, uh, we witnessed, or we, uh, we saw a positive change, uh, in many provinces. Like in Paktia, I remember, uh, at the beginning, uh, we were implementing one of our projects, but at the beginning, uh, uh, most of the families did not allow any, um, females to continue their education or to be part of the discussions. But after that, they, uh, they do not just allow their daughters. They did advocate for the other people as well to let their daughters to, uh, to be part, to be part of these discussions, to continue their education, uh, to, to be a role model for others. So, but, for the time being, we are facing challenges because we have to start from the beginning to make the people or the community, because, uh, now the situation is changed. Uh, we are not aware about the, about what will be the, uh, uh, what will be the, uh, the new policy, which will be introduced by the Taliban. So based on that, we have to work with the community to build that trust, to let their daughters continue their education.

Amb. Melanne Vermeer ([01:26:36](#)):

Thank you. Well, thank you so much Deema, and, and really thank you to everybody. Unfortunately, uh, we've reached the end of our time for this, uh, program today. Uh, but it's been rich, it has informed us, uh, tremendously, it has demonstrated just how complex, uh, these issues are. Uh, but also, and most importantly, why education of women and girls must be a priority, uh, and why we need to do everything that we can, uh, in ways that have been discussed today, and certainly in other ways that we haven't even been able to touch on, uh, to be able to ensure, uh, that this reality comes true, uh, even under the current terrible situation in Afghanistan. Um, I want to mention that tomorrow, uh, we will have another virtual program, uh, this one with the United States Special Envoy, uh, for Afghan Women and Girls and Human Rights, Rina Amiri. She was in Norway for the discussions that took place with Afghan civil society leaders, uh, Taliban, uh, representatives, uh, as well as others in the international community.

Amb. Melanne Vermeer ([01:27:54](#)):

Uh, so she will be able to brief on that tomorrow. Uh, and for those who are interested, uh, I hope that you will tune in for her, uh, and Maria Longi from USAID who, uh, was with her, um, for that session. Uh, I want to thank, uh, very much, uh, from all of us, uh, Palwasha, Shabana, Pashtana, Deema and Maria, for your words today, but even more for the extra work that you continue to do, uh, for the commitment that you manifest and for calling all of us, uh, to stay engaged and to stay engaged in ways, uh, that are effective, uh, and really make a difference. Uh, so thank you for that. And, uh, I trust that all of our, uh,

viewers today who are with us, uh, will tune in tomorrow for the debrief as well. So thank you all, and may better days prevail. Thank you. Bye.