

RESPONDING TO THE TALIBAN'S REVERSAL ON GIRLS' EDUCATION

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Just hours after reopening girls' high schools in Afghanistan for the first time in seven months earlier this week, the Taliban ordered them shut down, sparking outrage over the policy reversal.

Excluding any girls from education is fundamentally unacceptable. Afghan girls deserve the same rights and opportunities as Afghan boys, and their exclusion should be an immutable red line for the international community. By breaking its commitment to Afghan girls, the Taliban is sending a message that it has not evolved over the last two decades like it claims. It undermines their attempt to gain credibility on the world stage and should be met with a clear international response.

The Taliban's decision undermines the international legitimacy it seeks. The decision to restrict education breaches international human rights obligations to which Afghanistan is a state party, including the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), and the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC).

RECOMMENDATIONS

Below are the recommendations of Afghan women leaders via the Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace, and Security and its Onward for Afghan Women initiative.

- 1. Establish a clear, coordinated red line.** World leaders and multilateral organizations should establish and communicate an unambiguous red line with clear punishments. By a specified date:
 - a. Girls' middle and high schools must be reopened;
 - b. Girls' primary schools must remain open; and
 - c. All girls should be free to attend school with an environment that is conducive to their attendance – free of armed forces around school and Hijab checks on the street designed to prevent girls from entering the building.
- 2. The United States should use its leverage with governments in the region to:**
 - a. Sanction Taliban leaders' travel.** Limiting the mobility of Taliban leaders around the region is a major pressure point. The international community should impose and announce travel sanctions on Taliban leaders to cut off their access to the region and the world.
 - b. Sanction Taliban leaders' finances.** Regional countries should announce their intent to impose additional sanctions on Taliban assets, banks, and Taliban families within their borders if the Taliban's decision on girls' high schools is not immediately reversed.
 - c. Announce opposition to the Taliban's actions.** Regional and Muslim countries — in particular Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, and Indonesia — should use the March 31st High-level Pledging Event on Supporting the Humanitarian Response in Afghanistan at the United Nations as a platform to defend girls' education and make clear that it is consistent with Islam. Privately, they should note this is critical if Afghanistan wants to be recognized as a peer in the region. This includes further incorporating girls' education, women's employment, and the basic human rights of Afghan women into all diplomatic and economic negotiations with the Taliban.

- 3. Support alternative education mechanisms.** Afghan girls should not be deserted regardless of the political decisions, as the Taliban cannot be trusted to uphold their commitments. Therefore, the international community should simultaneously support alternative educational models, such as online education, so that Afghan girls can continue to learn regardless of the outcomes of the above actions.
- 4. Utilize the upcoming pledging conference as a communications platform.** The March 31st High-level Pledging Event on Supporting the Humanitarian Response in Afghanistan at the United Nations presents a critical opportunity for world leaders to speak to the Taliban loudly, clearly, and in one voice about the importance of reversing their decision on girls' high schools. This should include targeted investments in non-state Afghan organizations that have a better understanding of key levers of influence, opportunities for advocacy, and how to engage the Taliban to ensure development assistance is sustainable.
- 5. Recognize the connection between international security and girls' education.** Persuading the Taliban to reverse its decision is essential to regional and international security because girls' education is not only about literacy and professional skills, but also about mobility, tolerance, conflict resolution, and basic human rights – the nucleus of a peaceful society – and preventing extremism and terrorism.

GIRLS EDUCATION AND THE ISLAMIC FAITH

Before engaging with the Taliban on this issue, it is critical to understand that it is violating its own words with regard to Sharia and Islam. Neither can reasonably be used to justify restricting girl' education. Islam not only allows girls and women to receive an education, but the Quran puts a very high priority on knowledge and education of both men and women.

“Education is the only way to empower them, improve their status, ensure their participation in the development of their respective societies and activate their role to be able to take responsibility for future generations.”

- Dr. Yousef bin Ahmed Al-Othaimeen
Secretary-General of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation

In Islam, education is a divine command for both men and women. All the sacred sources of Islamic teaching – the Quran, the Hadith, and the Sunnah – leave no doubt that women, like men, are obligated to increase their knowledge and pursue it. Preventing girls from receiving education is preventing them from fulfilling their divine obligation commanded by *Allah* and intervening with their *Akhirah* (afterlife).

Education of girls and women is a requirement of the *maqasid* and *masalih mursalah*, or the pursuit of public good, because educating girls has important benefits to their families, communities, and the entirety of the Muslim community around the world – the *ummah*. Since the overall purpose of *Sharia* is to do good work and pursue justice, girls' education must be a central component.

Girls' education has a long tradition in Islamic history. The Prophet made an effort to educate women and girls and encouraged his wives and daughters to learn and be educated, both in Islamic sciences and in medicine, poetry, and mathematics, among others. Muslim women were also critical to preserving and transmitting the hadith scholarship, founding schools and universities, and contributing to science, technology, and health fields.

Other predominantly Muslim countries prioritize girls' education. In Kuwait, the UAE, Bahrain, and Libya, more girls are in secondary school than boys. Among predominantly Islamic countries, Tunisia, Indonesia, and the UAE have some of the highest female literacy rates, with 96.1% in Tunisia, 92.1% in Indonesia and 95.8% in UAE — statistics unheard of in many other parts of the world. These countries support girls' education at all levels, including at the university level and in all fields. In fact, the percentage of women pursuing an education in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics fields is higher in the Middle East in comparison to the West.