

Obstacles to Women's Rights to Education: The Taliban Regime and Its Policies on Women's Education in Afghanistan

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Abstract

In Afghanistan, significant progress has been made in education, particularly after the formation of the interim government. However, challenges persist, including the gender gap in education. While strides have been made, girls' participation in schools and universities remains low, especially in rural areas due to cultural and traditional constraints. The Taliban's rule in the past has caused significant damage to Afghanistan's education system, particularly for women and girls. Despite promises of moderation, the recent return of the Taliban has not resulted in improved access to education for girls, further exacerbating the challenges faced by Afghan youth. Education is an indispensable force for societal advancement, shaping individuals and cultures. In the case of Afghanistan, progress has been made, but significant obstacles, including gender disparities and the impact of Taliban rule, remain to be addressed to ensure equitable access to education and empower Afghan youth.

Key Words

Education, Taliban, Islamic laws, gender gap, girls' education, cultural attitudes, gender equality

Introduction

The Taliban's rule in Afghanistan that implements their version of interpretation of Islamic laws has shown negative consequences for women's education, work, and rights. The Taliban's opposition to women's education is based on their extreme ideology, which considers women's role to be only at home (Telesetsky 1998). During their first round of rule, the Taliban imposed a strict ban on women's rights to education, work, and activities. This ban had consequences for the economic and social status

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of women. The recent return of the Taliban to power in Afghanistan has raised concerns about the potential impact of women on their education, work, and rights. Women are worried about losing their decades of gains in various sectors and returning to the dark time of the first round of Taliban rule. This article provides a comprehensive analysis of the issue of women's education under Taliban rule in Afghanistan, including the historical background, current situation, and potential results.

The education of women under Taliban rule is a complex and worrying issue. When the Taliban came to power in Afghanistan in the late 1990s, they implemented strict policies that severely limited women's access to education. Girls were forbidden to go to school, and women were not allowed to work outside their homes and could not even leave the house without a sharia mahram. Since the fall of the Taliban regime in 2001, efforts have been made to improve women's access to education in Afghanistan. The Afghan government, international organizations, and non-governmental organizations have worked to build schools and universities, train teachers, and provide scholarships and other support for girls and women. As a result, the number of girls who went to school increased significantly, and the literacy rate of women reached about 30%. However, there are still many challenges to improving women's access to education in Afghanistan, including cultural attitudes, poverty, and security concerns. The situation remains fragile, and there are concerns that the Taliban's recent return to power will once again limit women's education. The Taliban announced that they will allow girls to attend school, but it remains to be seen how this will be implemented in practice. Everyone's access to education is one of the basic rights of every citizen, and unfortunately, half of the society in Afghanistan is deprived of this right. Depriving half of society of education based on gender discrimination is the most cruel action of the Taliban in the era of satellites and computers at the threshold of the 21st century. The Taliban government do not pay any attention to the international community's studies on ending discrimination regarding women's education. They even do not accept the efforts of the international community to encourage the education of girls.

This study investigates the state of education in two rounds of Taliban rule in Afghanistan and how this affects society and women's education. The qualitative research method, especially the case study approach, was used in this study as it provides the possibility of a comprehensive exploration of complex social phenomena. The issue of women's education under Taliban rule is a multifaceted social phenomenon and requires a deep understanding of experiences, perspectives and contextual factors. By using

the qualitative method, a researcher can explore people's lived experiences and discover rich and nuanced insights (Gay et al. 2012). This approach has been chosen because it allows for a comprehensive exploration of the complex dynamics and contextual factors affecting women's education under Taliban rule in this particular field. A case study design was used to gain an in-depth understanding of the status of women's education under Taliban rule. Focusing on the specific context of Afghanistan, this study examines the policies, practices and cultural influences that shape women's access to education.

This study answers the following questions: How has the Taliban government affected girls' rights to education in Afghanistan? What are the Taliban's specific policies and practices regarding girls' education in Afghanistan, and how have they evolved? To what extent do Afghanistan's culture and social values affect girls' access to education, and what strategies have been effective in promoting women's education in this regard?

Methods of semi-structured interviews and a review of documents and news reports were used to collect the required data. The data was collected through semi-structured interviews with female activists and student girls through WhatsApp. Interviews were conducted remotely through platforms such as WhatsApp to ensure access and safety of participants. Key stakeholders include educators, activists, community leaders, government officials, and women directly affected by Taliban policies. These interviews provide first-hand accounts, experiences, and perspectives on the impact of the Taliban regime on girls' rights to education. According to Gay (2012), by conducting interviews, a researcher can collect first-hand reports and views from various stakeholders who have direct or indirect knowledge of the issue. The interviews provide an opportunity to understand the experiences, challenges and strategies related to women's education from the perspective of female students and female activists.

A review of relevant documents including official reports, policy documents and news reports was conducted to collect the relevant data. This review provides a historical context and insights into evolving policies and practices regarding women's education under Taliban rule. In addition, data was collected through domestic and foreign media reports, magazine articles, reports of international organizations, and authoritative websites of national and international institutions related to women and education.

In this study, thematic analysis was used to analyze the data collected from interviews, documents and reports. Thematic analysis is a suitable method for organizing and analyzing qualitative data collected from

interviews and document review, and it provides the possibility to identify recurring themes, patterns and commonalities in the data. In addition, the thematic analysis helps to discover the meanings, experiences and basic perspectives related to women's education under the Taliban regime and provides a comprehensive and deep understanding of the research questions. This approach involves identifying patterns, themes and commonalities within the data. This analysis focuses on understanding the extent of Taliban influence on girls' access to education, examining specific policies and practices implemented over time, and revealing the impact of Afghan culture and social values on women's education. Thematic analysis allows for a comprehensive interpretation of the data that leads to meaningful and coherent findings.

Who is the Taliban?

The Taliban is an armed group with extreme Islamist ideas. It was formed in Kandahar, Afghanistan, in 1994 and was overthrown by the USA-led coalition in 2001. At first, there was a group of Mujahideen who fought against Russia like other Mujahideen, and it slowly turned into a fast-growing Pashtun movement that ruled Afghanistan for two rounds. The founder was Mullah Muhammad Omar, one of the local clerics who led this group until he died in 2013. The Taliban believe in a government that is governed by *Amir al-Mu'minin* (The leader of the believers). They interpret the *Amir al-Mu'minin* in its fundamentalist meaning: The leader does not need to be elected by the people, and therefore he will not be accountable to anyone. Based on this intellectual theme, not only women but all citizens of the property and obedience of *Amir al-Mu'minin* are considered citizens with rights. The concept of religious legitimacy of *Amir al-Mu'minin* as the highest authority of the country does not recognize elections or an elected government (Gopal 2008).

Taliban ideology is based on a rigid interpretation of Sunni Islam that believes in establishing an Islamic Emirate in Afghanistan. Regarding the education of women, the Taliban believe that women should not be exposed to non-religious teachings because this is considered against Islamic teachings. They also believe that the main role of women should be inside the home, and the education of women can lead to their liberation and empowerment, which, in their opinion, is a threat to their fundamentalist ideology. The Taliban's rule was based on its strict interpretation of Islamic Sharia. Public executions and whippings were common, and women were

largely prohibited from studying or working and were forced to wear a *burqa* in public. The Taliban banned Western books and movies and destroyed historical monuments of other traditions and cultures, including the 1,500-year-old Buddha statue in the Bamiyan province (Elias 2007).

The Taliban's interpretation and practice seem contradictory to Islam which emphasizes education and teaches that individual and social development and progress are dependent on education. There are many Quranic verses and the Prophet Muhammad's sayings (*hadith*) on education. God has assumed that every Muslim has the right to study and learn, regardless of gender. *Iqra* (Read!) is the first word that God revealed to the great prophet of Islam, Muhammad, indicating the importance of learning. Considering the importance of science and knowledge, the religion of Islam has assigned the task of teaching them to Muslim men and women (Paivandi 2019).

Afghanistan is home to different ethnic and linguistic communities: Pashtuns, Tajiks, Hazaras, Uzbeks, Turkmens, Baloch, etc., each with its own unique cultures and traditions. Afghan culture has a significant impact on women's education in the country. Historically, Afghan society has been deeply conservative and patriarchal, with traditional gender roles limiting women's access to education and public life. The traditionality of Afghan society and discrimination between men and women are two of its cultural and social inadequacies.

There is a change in attitude towards the education and work of women and girls in different provinces and communities. There are some communities and regions where people have a high level of education and encourage girls to continue their education, which leads to the development of society. For example, the Hazara community has more educated women and girls compared to other communities because the leaders and elders of this community have always supported women and girls in education (Emadi 2000, 2002).

In addition, there are groups in Afghan society that limit women's access to education, consider girls' work and education a source of shame, and view women to be the second sex. In a way, Afghan women have become familiar, and sometimes they have gotten used to this tradition. A large part of Afghan women in rural centres are from different ethnicities have a special view on women's rights, and think in a patriarchal manner. For example, Pashtun people, and specifically in the current state of the Taliban government, more than any other people or religion, explain and justify their special approach to women by relying on the "Pashtun

Wali” ritual, in which it is practically impossible to give independence to women in Pashtun tribes. The identity of women can be defined next to that of men, and for this reason, they use women and girls as tools in tribal fights and even to pay off debts (Braakmann 2005, Yousafzai 2013, Windriani 2017, and Wahyono 2021). However, it is important to note that not all Afghan cultural and religious traditions are inherently against women’s education. Many communities in Afghanistan have a long history of supporting women’s education and, despite significant challenges, have made significant progress in improving women’s access to education over the past few decades.

State of Women’s Education Under the Taliban Rule

The issue of women’s education under Taliban rule in Afghanistan has been the subject of extensive research by researchers and experts in various fields, including education, gender studies, and international development. Before the Taliban came to power in the mid-1990s, women had made significant gains in education, with more girls attending school and women participating in higher education and the workforce. However, the Taliban’s strict interpretation of Islamic law has led to significant restrictions on women’s education and other rights. Many studies have been written about education and women in Afghanistan (Ghasemi 1998, Chung and Partridge 2023, Yousafzai 2013, Goodson 2001, Gunaratna 2002, Schulz and Schulz 1999, Telesetsky 1998). In addition to researchers and experts in this field, the institutions, organizations, and countries involved in Afghanistan consider issues such as women’s access to education, respect for basic human rights and freedom, and respect for the rights of minorities as the most important conditions for recognition. The Taliban came to power in Afghanistan in 1996 and immediately implemented strict Islamic laws. One of the most important restrictions imposed by the Taliban was on women’s education and work. They believed that women should not be educated and should only stay at home to take care of their families. The Taliban forbade women from going to schools, universities, or any other educational institution (Schulz and Schulz 1999).

The ban on women’s education under the Taliban regime had a devastating effect on women’s access to education. According to UNICEF (1996), only 5% of women in Afghanistan were literate, compared to 38% of men. This gap increased during the Taliban regime. Lack of education has also limited women’s economic opportunities and contributed to their marginalization in society. Various organizations have worked to improve

women's access to education in Afghanistan. One such organization is the Afghan Women's Network (AWN), which was founded in 1995 to defend women's rights. AWN has worked to increase women's access to education by establishing schools and providing educational resources. The organization also provides women with vocational training that helps them earn a living and support their families (Afghan Women's Network 2015). Another organization working to improve women's education in Afghanistan is the Afghan Institute of Education (AIL). AIL was established in 1995 and provides education and health services to women and children. This organization has established more than 80 schools and trained more than 9,000 teachers. AIL also provides vocational training and literacy classes for women (Afghan Institute of Learning 2012). The United Nations has also played an important role in improving women's access to education in Afghanistan. In 2001, the United Nations launched the "Back to School" campaign, which aimed to provide education to girls who were denied the opportunity to attend school. The campaign created community-based schools and provided educational resources to students and teachers.

The educational restrictions on women during the Taliban era had significant consequences for society. Women were denied the opportunity to develop their potential, and many lost critical skills and knowledge that could have helped them improve their lives and contribute to their communities. In addition, the lack of educated women has contributed to Afghanistan's overall economic and social underdevelopment (Spink 2005). In the second period of their rule, the Taliban continued to repeat the tragedy of the first. According to reports, the Taliban has imposed restrictions on women's education, work, and activities since the first days of their rule. Women are forbidden to go out, work in offices, or attend schools and universities. All of these barriers have raised concerns about their long-term impact on women's educational and career opportunities in Afghanistan. In addition, the Taliban have imposed new restrictions on women's activities in public places. Women are required to wear a veil when leaving the house and be accompanied by a *sharia mahram*. This has raised significant concerns about women's safety and ability to access basic services such as health care. After the restrictions imposed by the Taliban, a group of women in Kabul and other provinces started a civil protest, but unfortunately, these demonstrations were violently suppressed, and these women faced the violence and mistreatment of the Taliban. This has caused significant concern about the safety of women and the possibility of widespread human rights violations under the Taliban regime.

Taliban Rule 1996–2001 and 2021–present

The first period of Taliban rule began after the overthrow of the Mujahideen government in 1996. When the Taliban came to power, a dark period for Afghanistan's education began, and it didn't take long for the anti-human policies of this group to reveal their true face. Dictatorship and terror reigned. The use of devices such as photography cameras, filming, video, and television was declared forbidden. The period of this group can be described as the dark age of education. Because they were alien enemies with knowledge. Especially new knowledge and new phenomena never had a place in that regime. During the same period of power, schools, especially girls' schools, were closed. Women and girls were officially forbidden from going to offices or working outside the home and were forced to stay at home. In boys' schools, the Taliban replaced the main themes of the curriculum with Islamic teachings (Matinuddin 1999). The pessimistic policies of the Taliban had significant effects on the freedom and lives of women. According to Emadi (2002), on September 28, 1996, the Taliban announced the order of their Amirul Momineen through Radio Sharia that women are completely prohibited from working and girls can no longer go to school. About 250 women in Herat province disobeyed this order. As a result, they were brutally beaten by Taliban forces for not respecting Islamic rule. During the first period of Taliban rule, women were only allowed to work in the medical field, especially in the Kabul Medical School, where they could treat and care for female patients. These five years were dark in terms of women's access to education. In 2001, the Taliban announced that women could receive education after implementing a special law, but they did not implement such a law until the last day of their rule (Khawajamir 2016).

On August 15, 2021, the Taliban came to power in Afghanistan again. Their return to power destroyed the two decades of achievements in the fields of freedom of speech, democracy, the right to work and education for women, establishing relations with the world, freedom of the press, and other developments. The Taliban claimed that they would behave more moderately than before and that women would be allowed to study, work, and engage in social activities, but these promises were nothing but deception. In the first days of their rule, the Taliban announced an interim government and the interim cabinet of the Taliban did not have any female members. The Taliban issued a statement asking women to stay at home. However, women's demonstrations with the slogan "women's rights are equal to men's" occurred in different parts of Afghanistan to demand their rights to education, work, and freedom.

A women's rights activist said about the provision of their rights by the Taliban: "Afghan women's demand from the Islamic Emirate government is not to ignore women, not to trample on women's rights, and not to take away opportunities from Afghan women under various pretexts". She further added: "We want that if the government is inclusive, if you want the system to survive and not collapse, the role of women in the government of the Islamic Emirate should not be ignored." The Taliban's restrictions on education of millions of Afghan women and girls have various consequences for women, society, and the future generation. In the short term, it limits women's and girls' opportunities for personal growth and development and hinders their ability to contribute to their families, communities, and wider society. Lack of education also contributes to poverty and economic insecurity, which can have significant social and economic consequences.

For the development of a society, women and girls must be educated to present a literate generation to society. The position of mothers in the structure of a society is vital, and the progress or failure of a society can be attributed to the right or wrong upbringing of mothers and parents in general. In addition to these restrictions, it can lead to a significant loss of human capital and limit the country's ability to develop and compete in the global economy, and investing in women's education can have a positive effect on improving social progress and reducing poverty.

In general, the condition of women's education in the first Taliban regime was dire and women were mostly deprived of education and public life (Saigol 2002). The situation under the current Taliban regime is changing, but there are concerns that women's education and participation in public life will be limited again, despite the Taliban's promises. It remains to be seen whether the Taliban will allow women to fully participate in education and public life or continue to impose restrictions on women's rights.

The influence of women's education in society is greater than that of men because a woman, in her role as a mother, is considered to be the main part of a child's upbringing, and with her behaviour, she determines the child's future. In human life, raising a child is of special importance. Women give birth to tomorrow's generation. In addition, women can play a role in society in two ways: raising righteous children and handing them over to society. As half of society, their role and presence are in the political, economic, cultural, and scientific fields. Woman is the foundation of human existence and life. A woman is a role-playing architect and a master artist at laying the foundation and structure of human personality (Eagly and Carly 2004).

However, during the two periods of Taliban rule, women and girls were denied the right to education, which is one of the fundamental rights of every citizen, and other political, social, and civil rights. After the Taliban came to power, all social, economic, and political fields in the country are facing serious problems. In the two years of their rule, the Taliban could not provide the simplest social services to the people. In contrast, an increase has been found in the violations of human rights, the disappearance of previous government employees, the arrest of women, house-to-house searches, the suppression of minorities, and cases that violate human and Islamic rights. The commitments given to women at the beginning of their rule were forgotten. The creation of strict Taliban laws caused women and men who were eager to study for a better future for their children to immigrate through illegal means.

The Taliban's Views of Women's Education

The findings of this study show that there is a deep divide within the Taliban group regarding the education of girls, and this may be one of the factors behind the closure of girls' schools. On March 21, 2022 (the beginning of the Afghan school year-education year), the Taliban withdrew from their decision to reopen girls' schools, one day before the start of the school year. The Taliban leadership cancelled the announced decision to reopen the schools and said that a comprehensive and Islamic plan is needed to reopen the schools for girls. This decision led to protests in Kabul and widespread international condemnation. But on that day, the female students returned to their homes with disappointment and tears in their eyes.

Regarding the closure of schools, a student said behind the door of her school:

"When I heard the news of the opening of schools yesterday, I was very happy... I cried to God, but today I was very upset. What can I say? I didn't say anything. What can I do? They destroyed our dreams. We are girls. We wish to study, become doctors, and become engineers, but they don't want anything".

A teacher at a girls' school in Kabul said: "I see my students crying, and they don't want to leave the class. It hurts me so much to see my students cry". A university student said: "The day the announcement was broadcast, we felt bad, and my friends and I felt that we were an extra part of the society that wanted to remove us. I can participate in the demonstration, but I fear harming my families, I cannot participate in the demonstration."

Regarding the closure of schools and universities for women, the United Nations and international organizations remained silent and only expressed their condemnation by distributing leaflets. Afghan women and girls hoped that these institutions would impose strict sanctions and restrictions on the Taliban.

Opposing Views of Girls' Education

The findings show that among the Taliban group, some members are strongly Islamist and extremist and against women's work and education. These are most of the leaders and fatwa givers in this group. Among them are Amir al-Mu'minin, the Minister of Higher Education of the Taliban, and the Minister of the Propagation of Virtue and Prevention. The Minister of Higher Education of the Taliban in an interview with the media said: "Education of girls is a foreign culture, and it was transferred to Afghanistan during the time of Amanullah Khan and Zahir Shah". In addition, he called the education of girls in conflict with Islam and Afghanistan and added that Amanullah Khan tried to promote Western prostitution and revelry by creating education for girls. After the publication of this interview, this Taliban minister was sanctioned by the European Union on March 7, 2023, in connection with the rapid violation of human and women's rights.

Opinion in Favor of Girls' Education

Among the Taliban group, the members who have educational qualifications are in favour of women's work and education, and most of them are young and educated people. Among them are the Minister of Interior, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, the Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, and the head of the National Olympic Committee. The deputy foreign affairs minister said: "Education is mandatory for both men and women. Noble scholars are present here; no one can deny his assumption. This is an absolute assumption. No one has any reason to say that I do not accept this; there is no religious reason. Dozens and hundreds of fatwas are available. Our property is full of scholars, and everyone agrees on this. The educational environment should be improved as soon as possible, and the gates of schools in Afghanistan should be opened to everyone as soon as possible"(Tolo News 2022).

The chairman of the National Olympic Committee of Taliban is among the younger members and the moderate group of the Taliban who agree with the opening of girls' schools. In addition, the families of some

members of the Taliban group live outside the country and are busy studying there, but millions of girls in Afghanistan have been deprived of education. As a result, in addition to the two sides of the Taliban, there are other issues related to women's education that have not yet been resolved. This group officially claimed that they were no longer against girls' education, in practice only a few of their officials allowed girls to be educated until puberty.

Taliban's Effect on Women's Education and Work

The Taliban's rule in Afghanistan has had a profound effect on women's education and work as it imposes restrictions on women in both periods under their rule. This militant group took control of Afghanistan in the 1990s and implemented strict Islamic laws, including restrictions on women's education and work. This group strongly affected women's rights and access to education and left their futures uncertain. During the two periods of Taliban rule in 1996–2001 and 2021–now, many women and girls were deprived of further education and work, and this regime applied severe gender segregation, which practically prevented girls and women from attending schools and universities. In addition, the curriculum taught under the Taliban regime was heavily influenced by their ideology and prioritized religious subjects while neglecting other subjects such as natural and social sciences, mathematics, and modern languages.

The education and labour situation in Afghanistan improved after the fall of the Taliban regime in 2001. Women in Afghanistan made significant progress in the last few decades. Participation and presence of women in politics, work, education, sports, and social and cultural activities are among the most important achievements of women. In addition, during this period, hundreds of thousands of girls received the right to education, and tens of thousands of girls went to university.

Women in Afghanistan achieved progress in their education, work, and other rights after the first rule of the Taliban. Most of the girls and women went to schools and universities. In addition, programs such as raising awareness and upgrading women's skills were also held. During this period, women were able to participate in the Houses of Representatives, urban and rural councils, and other government organizations. While women were barred from participating in political issues in the past, now a large number of women are active at the political level. Women actively work in various economic sectors such as agriculture, commerce, public and private organizations, etc. While women faced

limitations in the past, they are now present in many sectors. Women in Afghanistan are also active in various artistic and cultural fields. They are present in fields such as music, poetry, painting, literature, etc. However, the Taliban's return to power in 2021 has raised concerns about the future of women's education in Afghanistan. While the Taliban have made statements that they are willing to allow girls to go to school under certain conditions, reports of Taliban fighters attacking and killing female students and teachers cast doubt on the veracity of these statements. During the two periods of Taliban rule, women have faced an uncertain future in the field of education. During the first period of Taliban rule, from 1996 to 2001, the group banned girls from going to school and women from working outside the home. The Taliban also destroyed schools and universities that allowed female students and teachers.

Denying women's education is a violation of their fundamental rights and an obstacle to social and economic progress. Education is essential for the development of individuals and society as a whole, and women's education is vital for achieving gender equality and women's empowerment. Therefore, efforts should be made to ensure that women in Afghanistan have access to education and work and to protect their rights. This requires the support of international organizations and governments, as well as the promotion of gender equality in society. Today, many Afghan women and girls seem affected and disappointed, and only through these efforts can they hope to create a future in which they have the opportunity to reach their full potential and grow and develop.

To address the challenges facing women's education in Afghanistan, especially under the Taliban regime, it is necessary to adopt a multifaceted approach with the participation of various stakeholders including the Afghan government, international organizations, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and local community, Islamic institutions and organizations, Islamic countries and Muslim scholars and scientists should challenge the ideas of the Taliban about women's education and call them for negotiation and debate. International organizations should impose restrictions and sanctions on the Taliban government and officials that prevent girls from studying, training and working. Campaigns and awareness programs should be done to highlight the importance of girls' education and to eliminate misconceptions and stereotypes that prevent them from accessing education. This program to encourage community participation and support girls' education can help create an environment conducive to their enrollment and retention in schools. The international community should continue to provide financial and technical support to

Afghanistan to strengthen the education system and ensure equal access to education for all. International organizations and donors can work with local partners to implement effective programs and initiatives that address the specific challenges faced by women and girls in accessing education. By implementing these recommendations, Afghanistan can make significant progress in promoting women's education, closing the gender gap, and empowering women and girls to use their capacities as active participants in the development of their country. However, it is important to understand that sustained efforts and long-term commitments from all stakeholders are necessary to overcome entrenched challenges and ensure sustainable change.

Conclusion

This article has demonstrated that the Taliban government has harmed women's education in Afghanistan in both periods of their rule. However, it is important to continue to support the right to education for women in Afghanistan, both now and in the future, and work towards a society that values and supports the education of all its members, regardless of gender. In addition, there is a need for local communities to cooperate to remove cultural barriers and promote gender equality in society, and efforts should be made to interact with this group through the dialogue and interaction of influential scholars and elders within the framework of Islamic laws to ensure that girls can get education. It is important that they go to school safely and without fear of violence. This may include negotiating with the Taliban to allow access to education or providing security and protection for schools and students.

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