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Who's afraid of educated girls?

The recent internet blackout is only the latest example of the Taliban's increasingly brutal assault on the rights of girls and women

Four years after the Taliban excluded girls and women in Afghanistan from secondary and higher education, the regime shut down the internet, depriving them of one of their last opportunities to learn. What started as a ban in a few provinces to 'prevent immoral activities' escalated to a nationwide internet blackout on 29 September. While access was restored on 1 October, many Afghans say that service remains slow and unstable.

The nearly 2.2 million Afghan girls barred from attending school beyond the primary level now live in fear that they will lose their last lifeline to an education. Remote learning is one of the few available alternatives (together with underground and homeschooling) for these girls to receive a secondary education while remaining in the country.

Over the last four years, Education Cannot Wait (ECW), (which I used to chair), UNICEF, and strategic partners have provided an education to 160 000 Afghan girls excluded from the classroom by scaling up community-based and accelerated learning programs in remote and underserved areas. But many of these programs have an online component and thus are almost impossible to continue when the Taliban curtails access to the internet. While the regime has yet to give an official explanation for the recent shutdown, it knew that such a cut would deny Afghans – in particular, girls and women – access to knowledge from the outside world.

Cracking down on women's rights hard

The internet blackout is only the latest example of the Taliban's increasingly brutal assault on girls' and women's rights. After banning girls over the age of 12 from getting an education, the regime barred women from most forms of employment, excluded them from nearly all public spaces, and prohibited them from traveling anywhere without a

male chaperone. The Taliban's draconian dress code requires women to wear burqas covering them from head to toe.

By 2024, the Taliban's edicts became even more repressive. Women – already banned from speaking in public – were prohibited from praying aloud or reciting the Quran in the presence of other women. In 2025, as part of a broader ban outlawing the teaching of human rights and sexual harassment, the Taliban removed books written by women from universities. This included titles like *Safety in the Chemical Laboratory*, which the regime found to be of 'concern' due to 'anti-Sharia and Taliban policies.'

Against this backdrop of tightening restrictions, access to the online world was one of the few freedoms Afghan girls and women were allowed. 'The only hope left for us was the internet and online learning,' one woman from the northern province of Takhar explained to the BBC. 'When I heard that the internet had been cut, the world felt dark to me,' she added. Another woman, who lives in an eastern province, described feeling 'helpless' in the face of internet outages: '[My sisters and I] dreamed of finishing our education and helping our father financially, but now... we all sit at home doing nothing.'

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The Taliban's cruel policies and human-rights violations have long-term consequences not only for Afghan girls and women, but also for the country's economic growth. According to UNESCO, the lost income from the exclusion of women and girls from education will total $9.6 billion – equivalent to two-thirds of today's GDP – by 2066. Such a huge loss would be catastrophic for a country where roughly 85 per cent of people live on less than $1 a day, and around half the population needs humanitarian assistance to survive.

This is not the future Afghans want. A recent United Nations Women report found that 92 per cent of the country's population supports girls' secondary schooling. Afghan girls continue to risk arrest by sharing their powerful testimonies and demanding the right to study in ECW's #AfghanGirlsVoices campaign.

The UN must urgently classify gender apartheid – defined as 'inhumane acts committed within the context of an institutionalised regime of systematic discrimination, oppression, and domination by one group over another or others, based on gender, and committed with the intention of

maintaining that regime' – as a crime against humanity. Such a move would represent an important step toward holding the Taliban accountable for its systemic efforts to segregate, control and silence girls and women in Afghanistan.

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Muslim-majority countries have vociferously criticised the Taliban's education ban. Qatar, which has long served as a mediator between the regime and the West, expressed deep concern about the policy. Saudi Arabia also condemned the decision, which it described as 'astonishing in all Islamic countries' and as 'contrary to giving Afghan women their full legitimate rights, foremost of which is the right to education.' The United Arab Emirates pushed for the ban's swift reversal, denouncing it as a violation of 'the teachings of Islam.'

Islamic teaching does indeed support girls' education. '*Iqra*,' meaning to read, is the first word of the Quran. 'The seeking of knowledge is obligatory for every Muslim,' states Al-Tirmidhi, Hadith 74, one of the six canonical teachings in Sunni Islam and a sign of the faith's deep commitment to learning by men and women alike. In accordance with these beliefs, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation is working 'to unite scholars and religious authorities in the Islamic world against the decision to prevent girls from education.'

Although the Taliban's internet blackout was abruptly lifted, the expansion of its assault on girls' education into the online realm is a worrying development. The regime's leadership, in particular its religious leaders who reside in Kandahar, must be reminded as often as possible that there is no foundation in Islamic law for the Taliban's efforts to revoke the right to learn. And the international community must take steps to hold the Taliban accountable, especially as its activities penetrate well into Pakistan, and before it pushes its inhumane policy to yet another new extreme.

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