



EDUCATION IS POWER FOR PEACE AND SECURITY IN AFGHANISTAN

*Take Action to Support the Rights
of Afghan Women and Girls*

by Natalie Gonnella-Platts

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Natalie Gonnella-Platts serves as the Director of Women's Advancement at the George W. Bush Institute

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Naheed A. Ahmadi, Mozhgan Wafiq Alokozai, Pashtana Dorani,
Roya Mahboob, Metra Mehran, Onaba Payab

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The cover art is by Afghan female artist Farahnaz, who studied Fine Arts at Herat University and is a mentor at Code to Inspire.

Resources

Many of the recommendations outlined in this paper reference engagement with Afghan-led programs working in support of quality education initiatives. While the situation requires strong vetting and due diligence, many of the most trusted and impactful are already registered charities in the United States, the United Kingdom, Europe and elsewhere; featured on suggested resource lists compiled by respected institutions; and/or have been long-standing members of innovative coalitions like the U.S.-Afghan Women's Council. Examples include but are not limited to the [Afghan Institute of Learning](#), [Digital Citizen Fund](#) (Afghan Girls Robotics Team), [Code to Inspire](#), [Eagle Online Academy](#), [Aschiana Foundation](#), [Razia's Ray of Hope Foundation](#), [LEARN Afghanistan](#), [Pathway Project](#), [School of Learning Afghanistan](#) (SOLA), the [American University of Afghanistan](#), and the [Asian University for Women](#).

For further information on some of these programs and how to support their efforts, please visit <https://www.bushcenter.org/publications/articles/2021/08/afghanistan-relief-and-resources.html>.



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INTRODUCTION

The Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan last year has produced a desperate humanitarian situation in the country. Nearly half of all households are experiencing acute food insecurity, maternal and infant mortality [rates](#) are rising quickly, and 97% of families are at risk of dropping below the poverty line.

Most concerning is the intentional and vicious erasure of women and girls from public life by the Taliban, especially the ban on girls' access to secondary education and the rapid deterioration of education quality across the country.

Afghanistan under the Taliban is currently the only place in the world where girls' education is banned. [Islamic scholars, activists](#), and the [leadership](#) of other Muslim-majority countries agree that gender-based exclusion in education is not justified.

In the aftermath of the international withdrawal, Afghan women have endured some of the most disturbing consequences of the Taliban's brutal pursuit for power coupled with indifference from the international community. Far more needs to be done to support Afghan women and children, especially in the education space.

What is happening to the women and girls of Afghanistan creates not simply a moral imperative, but a growing threat to regional and even global peace, prosperity, and security.

Every Afghan, regardless of gender, geography, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status, needs to see their fundamental rights respected and protected. For peace and prosperity everywhere – now more than ever – the administration, Congress, international policymakers, the media, and the private and philanthropic sectors each have a role to play.

“Only countries where all people are involved can be successful. When we look around the world and we see countries where half of the population is marginalized or left out, then we usually see countries that are failing.”

— Mrs. Laura Bush

Global Women's Network Summit, 2015

Central to this is the need to ensure the status and well-being of women and children in Afghanistan and elsewhere around the world are a meaningful component in foreign policy and national security strategies when dealing with the country. Too often, the promotion of women, peace, and security agendas and a whole-of-government approach to gender equity excludes meaningful and comprehensive action for girls' education. In Afghanistan, educational access is urgent not just for the women and girls who benefit directly, but also to achieve broader priorities focused on security and prosperity. Silence and inaction also constitute statements.

Dire as the situation may be, it is not hopeless. There are steps the United States and allies can take, along with civil society and others, to mitigate the suffering of Afghan women and girls and provide opportunities in an otherwise bleak situation.

WHY THIS MATTERS NOW

Over 20 years, Afghan women achieved more than most women's movements did elsewhere around the globe in such a short period of time, albeit from a low starting point. And yet, the Taliban are threatened by such progress. They see women's influence in the pursuit of a free and fair future for Afghanistan as a direct threat to their power. Autocratic regimes are built on patriarchy. They value men at the abject expense of

women's basic human rights. They embrace the use of inequity, propaganda, and fear to the detriment of development and well-being. Afghanistan under the Taliban is no exception.

The Taliban's subjugation of female Afghans is a barbaric strategy leveraged for the purpose of forcing obedience and establishing authority. It also reflects the Taliban's dismissive and Neanderthal attitudes toward half the country's population simply for being who they are. Their tactical dismantlement of 20 years of educational progress is a central and sadistic step in undermining dissent, innovation, and critical thinking.

“Every right of a dignified life is lost in Afghanistan.”

— **Metra Mehran**

Member of the Bush Institute's Afghan Education Working Group

For [over a year](#), Afghan women and girls have been segregated or excluded at every level of in-person study, with secondary and tertiary access especially impacted. Most can no longer leave their homes unaccompanied and uncovered to travel to school. And most women have been banned from working.

In addition to the gender segregation of primary and university classes and a complete ban on school attendance for female students in seventh to 12th grades, many public schools have also seen a significant change in standard curriculum. This includes the conversion of secular schools into male-focused madrassas, or religious seminaries. A serious concern, considering that many members of the Taliban in the 1990s [studied](#) at similar madrassas in neighboring Pakistan.

As a result of these and other restrictive actions, a [rising number](#) of young Afghan women and adolescent girls are turning to suicide and self harm, according to [testimony](#) before the United Nations Human Rights Council. Health care workers are seeing increases in requests for treatment in response to mental health concerns among Afghan women, [according to Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty](#). Save the Children [reports](#) that one year after the Taliban's return to power, girls in Afghanistan are experiencing isolation, hunger, and depression at greater rates than boys.

As a global community, we have seen how this story plays out. History is repeating itself in startling parallels to the Taliban's rise to power in the 1990s. Over the last year, the Taliban have continually stalled in fulfilling a series of promises around girls' education. They have enacted a growing list of edicts limiting the agency, rights, and well-being of women and girls across Afghanistan, much as they did more than 25 years ago.

While leverage against the Taliban's atrocities and growing humanitarian crisis may seem limited, one of the best ways the world can stand against their brutality and counter security concerns is through direct support for quality education for all Afghans.

After all, when women are educated, their families are more likely to be educated, their children are healthier, and their communities are stronger.

Critical thinking builds resistance. Knowledge bolsters agency. Education encourages freedom. The Taliban know this. Every authoritarian recognizes this connection. It's why tyrants and rogue actors discourage access to learning and free thought.

Simply put, educational empowerment challenges [autocracy](#), poverty, and terrorism.

Each additional year of school completed, especially at secondary levels, reduces early and forced marriage, infant mortality, and maternal morbidity. Children born to literate mothers are 50% more likely to survive beyond the age of 5 than those born to mothers who cannot read.

Mortality of children under 5 years of age in Afghanistan declined by half over the 20-year period through August 2021, “the fastest reduction in child mortality across all low-income countries,” [according](#) to World Bank data and the Financial Times. Child malnutrition and maternal mortality also significantly decreased. Teenage pregnancy rates plummeted.

Secondary education for all is a significant driver of regional and global security and prosperity. Education creates opportunity and encourages empathy, directly countering vulnerability to and influence of destitution, disenfranchisement, and extremism. Countries where all children have equal access to learning reduces vulnerability to natural disasters and the risk of conflict, as summarized by [the Malala Fund](#).

The [World Bank](#) asserts that “limited educational opportunities for girls and barriers to completing 12 years of education cost countries between \$15 trillion and \$30 trillion in lost lifetime productivity and earnings.” The Taliban ban on girls’ secondary education cost the Afghan economy over \$500 million in just 12 months, according to UNICEF [estimates](#).

Afghanistan has made great progress over the past two decades toward empowering women, strengthening democracy, improving access to health care, and providing education to millions of children. International donors have had a direct impact on the lives of many Afghans, offering them opportunities for economic growth as they strive for human rights. They have helped my generation desire peace and believe in the democratic standards of free speech and human rights.

— **Roya Mahboob**

Member of the Bush Institute’s Afghan Education Working Group

GIRLS’ EDUCATION AS A DRIVER FOR PEACE AND PROSPERITY

The Taliban regularly argue that women and girls’ participation in secondary education, employment, and other aspects of public life are at odds with Islam and Afghan culture. But both Islamic teachings and Afghan culture – particularly across the 20th century and beyond – demonstrate a different story.

The struggle for gender equality – including parity in education – was arduous but continuous in Afghanistan.

It wasn’t perfect by any means. Inequities, such as illiteracy and undereducation, remained expansive before the withdrawal, largely across geographic and socioeconomic divides. Girls [comprised](#) 60% of children not actively enrolled in school in Afghanistan before 2021, and only 37% of teenage girls were literate, [UNICEF](#) notes. But the Taliban argument that female inclusion in society, especially in terms of education and employment, is not in line with Afghan values is false, cruel, and harmful in many ways.

Education and opportunities for women and girls grew throughout the 20th and 21st centuries, furthering the vibrancy of Afghan culture. The major exceptions were the conflict-ridden 1980s and the rise of the Taliban in the 1990s.

Between the 1930s and 1970s, the Afghan education system significantly expanded, including increases in female primary and secondary student enrollment.

Reforms specifically benefiting women in Afghan society were rolled out after World War II. These included access to higher education, the voluntary removal of the veil, the creation of employment opportunities for middle- and upper-class women in specific sectors, the promotion of female literacy and girls’ schools, and the formal establishment of women’s organizations and movements elevating the rights, increased participation, and well-being of Afghan women across society.

In the 1960s, women were guaranteed the right to vote and run for political office. Not long after, three female senators and the first female minister were elected to serve in the Afghan government.

By the 1970s, women [comprised](#) over 60% of the 10,000 students studying at Kabul University. Around 80,000 female students were enrolled in literacy programs, and more than 400,000 female students were in schools, according to a [PBS report](#).

And despite two decades of significant disruption or complete bans on educational access in the late 20th century, by 2021, [school enrollment](#) went to more than 9.2 million students, including 3.5 million women and girls, from just 900,000 boys and no girls in 2001, as documented by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID).

Before the international withdrawal, women made up nearly [22%](#) of the workforce and [27%](#) of the Afghan legislative body, above the global average, according to World Bank data. Public approval for women's suffrage was at a record high of 89.3%, according to a [2019 survey of the Afghan people](#) conducted by the Asia Foundation. And overwhelming majorities of Afghans supported equal access to primary, secondary, and tertiary education (in a female student's home province).

Gender parity in education and universal access to education for all Afghans required more work even in 2021. But the gains over the previous two decades were tremendous. They demonstrated what is possible when the universal right to education is supported politically, economically, and socially. And many Afghans – both male and female – fully recognize this.

Afghan women are the champions of the movement of women's rights in Afghanistan. And they have just one weapon. That's education....If you want a developed country, we have to let girls study.

– Naheed A. Ahmadi

Member of the Bush Institute's Afghan Education Working Group

Even now, despite the risk of serious punishment by the Taliban, Islamic clerics, tribal elders, community leaders, male students and others have [visibly and vocally](#) stood in support of universal access to education for all Afghans.

A LIGHT AMID DARKNESS

The situation in Afghanistan is nothing short of haunting, compounded daily by the global community's growing apathy. But amid the darkness, a network of innovators, educators, and activists is giving its all to ensure hope and opportunity endure.

Afghan education advocates continue to fight on behalf of their students, their institutions, and the right of every Afghan to access quality education. Their incredible efforts in the face of unimaginable hardship are also providing broad assistance to vulnerable communities across Afghanistan and in refugee centers abroad through food distribution, health care services, hygiene products, and training and employment opportunities.

In an environment often described as impossible, these innovators are still pushing for change and harnessing the transformative power of education to uplift individuals and communities.

That is why visible support – including the reaffirmation of U.S. commitments for the advancement of women and children in Afghanistan – is critical. This includes vocal and sustained engagement from the most visible leaders and influencers in the United States and around the world. It also requires more consistent focus on the Taliban's human rights abuses during high-level gatherings and international forums. Security

and development are only possible through greater dedication to human rights and the equal and active participation of women and girls in Afghan society.

The policy recommendations outlined below are designed to combat growing education, equity, and human rights challenges facing at-risk Afghans – those in Afghanistan, those in refugee camps awaiting final resettlement options, and those who have reached their final point of permanent resettlement.

To aid these aims, the Bush Institute launched the Afghan Education Working Group in spring 2022, regularly convening

Afghan experts and innovators working in support of quality education opportunities for all Afghans. Participants include Afghan champions leading both virtual and in-person schools, international scholarship and fellowship opportunities, continuing education and adult learning platforms for refugee populations, policymakers, women’s rights defenders, and education activists.

Informed and developed by the collective experiences and demonstrated impact of this diverse network of advocates, these recommendations outline critical ways influencers across the globe can support equitable access to education for Afghans.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Executive Branch

The Biden Administration, together with other international policy influencers, must increase pressure on the Taliban leadership to open schools for all Afghans.

This includes addressing broader restrictions on Afghan women and girls such as lack of freedom of movement. Legitimate recognition of the Taliban must be subject to positive and sustainable change in their policies, especially on principles of human rights and gender equality. Though leverage in the wake of the international withdrawal has remained a challenge, opportunities exist.

In addition to existing sanctions and other measures of accountability, targeted pressure is needed now more than ever. The recent [stalemate](#) at the United Nations Security Council and the [Taliban’s frustration](#) over the expiration of individual travel waivers demonstrate that unexplored vulnerabilities at a more focused level could have impact.

Broad sanctions are important, but they are [hurting the Afghan people](#) far more than the Taliban leadership. The Taliban have already demonstrated their egregious disregard for the well-being of the Afghan people as the humanitarian crisis grows. And a haunting [list of human rights abuses](#) continues, including extrajudicial killings; repression of women’s rights and freedom of expression; and sexual violence and forced marriages. Meanwhile, despite high-level diplomatic and economic pressures, the Taliban and their families maintain businesses and financial assets outside Afghanistan and engage in other privileged activities.

“More than 3,500 international troops and 70,000 Afghan soldiers sacrificed their lives in Afghanistan for a mission to bring freedom and democracy to the country and change the fate of the Afghan people, especially Afghan women and children. Those sacrifices cannot go in vain. In 20 years, Afghanistan undeniably achieved a lot. It built democratic institutions and infrastructure that supported its people and advanced gender equality. Its influence on democracy and peace not only benefited the region but the security of the entire world. Now, we must work together to free Afghanistan again.”

— Onaba Payab

Member of the Bush Institute’s Afghan Education Working Group

This is where the United States and the international community can do more. Greater attention in tracking the [kleptocracy](#) and restricting the individual assets of Taliban members is imperative, particularly as other actors – including Russia’s [Vladimir Putin](#) and China’s [Xi Jinping](#) – seek to build [stronger ties](#) to the Taliban’s Afghanistan. Equally vital is the utilization of new and existing tools – like the Global Magnitsky Act – to more directly impede the ability to travel and financial standing of individual Taliban members. Additionally, the United States needs to apply greater pressure on existing allies who are enabling the corrupt acquisition and safekeeping of Taliban assets (and the assets of other autocrats) within their financial systems.

The Biden Administration should reconsider its decision to direct the frozen assets of Afghanistan’s central bank to the Afghan Fund, administered via the Bank for International Settlements (BIS) in Switzerland.

Amid the Taliban’s demonstrated inability to meet the basic needs of the Afghan population as well as growing security concerns, the United States and the international community have a responsibility to ensure that these seized assets – which belong to the Afghan people – are utilized exclusively for the benefit of the Afghan people, especially the most vulnerable.

Many advocates and economists fear that the Fund’s resources will reduce economic pressure on the Taliban and mitigate liability for their decisions rather than help those enduring most of the growing humanitarian crisis burden.

While the Afghan Fund’s focus on macroeconomic stability is important, so too are the basic needs of the Afghan people. These funds must be used to support food security, health and well-being, economic empowerment, and education initiatives administered via United Nations institutions and other trusted entities. As of mid-August 2022, nearly 57% of the [United Nations Humanitarian Response Plan for Afghanistan](#) – the “largest ever appeal for a single country for humanitarian assistance” – remained unfunded.

The State Department and USAID should expand their focus on partner-implemented education efforts in Afghanistan and in refugee settings.

Long-standing partners like UNICEF and nongovernmental organizations like CARE, among others, have been working to fill the void in access to education for both Afghan girls in country as well as those displaced. However, considerable resource gaps remain. These include increased support to enable and protect access to quality education for young Afghan evacuees and other refugee populations currently being hosted in third countries as they await final resettlement processing.

U.S. consular officers must consistently apply updated State Department guidelines on academic visa decisions for Afghan applicants.

In late 2021, the State Department issued [new guidelines](#) for consular officers in response to growing concerns from [American academics](#) and [higher education associations](#) about the repeated and often incorrect utilization of discretionary decisions around “immigrant intent” to depart the U.S. post study.

Nationwide, higher education institutions have stepped up in support of Afghan students and scholars, with a particular focus on women. But regular reports from university officials and Afghan applicants document repeated F-1 and J-1 educational visa challenges for female students, principally the statutory requirement of nonintent to immigrate. Even in [instances](#) in which full financial assistance is available (including tuition, living costs, and other incidentals), many Afghan women continue to face the likelihood of visa denial because of consular considerations around departure after graduation or program conclusion.

To demonstrate its seriousness in support of women’s and girls’ education in Afghanistan, the United States

should ensure a more universal and empathetic application of the revised guidelines. This includes clarifying the extent to which country conditions should be factored in to determine immigrant intent and expediting reconsideration processes to ensure that those who have been denied due to immigrant intent concerns receive a timely review of the original decision. Universities and nonprofits can also assist in supporting Afghan students through training resources that help prospective applicants better prepare for their required interviews.

The Taliban have already sadistically excluded women from most education opportunities within Afghanistan. The U.S. government must not reinforce these actions by means of restrictive visas and discretionary decisions that punish Afghan scholars and students who otherwise meet all other academic and security screening requirements for U.S. study.

U.S. Congress

The Afghan War Commission should include a thoughtful examination of U.S. commitments and outcomes on women's rights, education, and the strengthening of civil society in their investigation of U.S. engagement in Afghanistan over the last 20 years.

Created in late 2021 via the National Defense Authorization Act (S.1605), the commission's [mandate](#) is to study "all matters relating to combat operations, reconstruction and security force assistance activities, intelligence activities, and diplomatic activities of the United States pertaining to Afghanistan" from June 2001 through August 2021. This includes analysis of strategic, operational, and diplomatic decisions as well as recommendations for the way forward in Afghanistan and beyond.

If the commission aims to fulfill this laudable aim, the inclusion of the rights and well-being of Afghan women and the advancement of key pillars of civil society (like education), is imperative. Without them, a thorough examination of U.S. engagement in Afghanistan is incomplete.

Sixteen members with significant experience in national security were recently appointed by a number of congressional committees and members. Unfortunately, the composition of the commission does not include any members with significant expertise on the rights and well-being of women and children. Moreover, only two members are female.

To provide a full picture, the commission's membership should factor in societal and developmental challenges to underscore U.S. commitments to the women, peace, and security agenda.

As appointed members prepare to begin their important examination of two decades of U.S. engagement in Afghanistan, they should ensure the meaningful investigation of U.S. obligations – both successes and failures – to Afghan women and children in their efforts. Including perspectives, feedback, and insight from the Afghan people is crucial. Additionally, as support staff are appointed to aid the commission's efforts, greater emphasis on diversity and expertise on women's rights would lend critical perspectives.

Congressional leaders should allocate additional funding for humanitarian efforts in Afghanistan.

Administered through partners like UNICEF, UNHCR, the World Food Programme, and others, existing humanitarian contributions by the United States since the international withdrawal have benefited millions of Afghans. But additional support is desperately needed. For example, [62%](#) of education-sector needs remained unfunded as of the end of May 2022. When the United States leads, others follow. Increased allocations from Congress have immense potential to influence the mobilization of additional funding from allies.

Congressional leaders should increase funding for international education opportunities, especially those focused on vulnerable individuals like the Scholars at Risk program.

Existing tools like the Fulbright and [Scholars at Risk](#) programs create integral lifelines to opportunity and protection for vulnerable Afghan academics and students. Given the current circumstances in Afghanistan, increased appropriations supporting these types of efforts are critical and can demonstrate U.S. commitment to academic freedom, innovation, and gender equity in Afghanistan and beyond.

Increased support for both international education opportunities and humanitarian assistance are two critical areas where additional congressional funding can make a considerable difference in aid of at-risk Afghans and educational access.

Congressional leaders must be more vocal and intentional in their support for the equal inclusion of women in Afghan society, particularly around the issue of girls' education.

Many Afghan women feel their struggles have been forgotten amid broader political and security concerns around the globe. Visible acts of support – like the [2021 bipartisan letter](#) signed by all female senators – are important in keeping policymakers aware and accountable of Congress' priorities. Afghan women are fighting for their lives, and the increasing silence from American and international policymakers only emboldens the Taliban further as their human rights abuses continue to grow.

Elected Leaders From Coalition Countries

NATO allies should build on 20 years of support and reaffirm their commitment to quality education projects in Afghanistan.

Community-level advocates and organizations – many of whom have served as long-standing partners for NATO allies – continue to innovate and execute on their efforts. But they are in desperate need of additional resources. Humanitarian funding should be increased and designated to support teacher salaries, school infrastructure, and capacity development programs for girls' education.

Countries that support the advancement of women and girls, particularly those with female leadership, should take a more visible and active role in demonstrating solidarity for girls' education in Afghanistan by backing vetted advocates and organizations working to restore and advance access to education.

Female heads of state and government and countries that have prioritized gender equity in foreign policy efforts have tremendous influence in elevating the situation of Afghan women and girls among citizens and stakeholders. Now more than ever, their voices and visibility are critical in drawing much-needed attention to the Taliban's gender apartheid and demonstrating solidarity and support for Afghan women and girls.

Muslim-Majority Countries, Regional Stakeholders, and Faith-Based Organizations

The Organization of Islamic Cooperation and leadership across the Muslim world must visibly and collectively engage in support of Afghan women and girls.

Misinterpretation and manipulation of Islam and Afghan culture by the Taliban are creating a false narrative, stoking concerning trends in xenophobia and bias worldwide. No other Muslim country has banned access to girls' education. As innovators and supporters of quality education for all, those in the Muslim world should unite and engage more directly in aid of women and girls in Afghanistan, especially in support of gender equality in access to education. This includes but is not limited to the organization of an international ulema conference – bringing together a group of Muslim scholars who possess specialist knowledge of Islamic

theology and law – focused on education equality and the rights and well-being of women and children in Afghanistan and beyond. Invited participants should represent both male and female Islamic scholars.

Non-Muslim religious leaders should actively collaborate with their Muslim counterparts on behalf of girls' education in Afghanistan to promote interfaith solidarity for educational equity.

Demonstrated cooperation among faith-based institutions in support of girls' education offers tremendous opportunity to counter the Taliban's messaging and mobilize much-needed resources in support of Afghan women and children. It also would encourage empathy and dialogue among faith-based communities, dismantling bias and building connections at local, national, and global levels.

Advocates

High-profile influencers should use their platforms to create spaces for Afghan women and girls to be seen and heard, with a particular focus on the inclusion of minority voices.

Global advocates have an important role to play in using their platforms to shine a spotlight on pressing issues. They should use their influence to help elevate new and diverse champions for this cause. In so many capacities, the women and girls of Afghanistan are fighting for their lives and their livelihoods.

Intergovernmental Organizations

U.N. institutions and other international partners implementing humanitarian response efforts in Afghanistan must increase opportunities for engagement with women-led organizations and ensure female teachers are not barred from their roles as community educators.

U.N. institutions like UNICEF and UNHCR are doing tremendous work on the ground to address the basic needs of vulnerable communities. But increased capacity and assistance for education-focused initiatives are urgently needed. This includes but is not limited to support for schools, quality and comprehensive access to age-appropriate curriculum, and resource and capacity-building opportunities for female educators.

Dedicated Afghans continue to implement innovative solutions aiding quality education across Afghanistan, but they are often excluded from partnerships and capacity-building opportunities. As the nongovernmental organization sector in Afghanistan continues to shrink because of the economic crisis, funding cuts, and the Taliban's growing oppression, support for and partnership with women-led organizations is critical.

U.N. member states must expand sanctions and enforce harsher penalties on Taliban leadership.

Though most Afghans are food insecure, and adolescent girls and young women within Afghanistan are restricted from educational pursuits, senior Taliban leaders and their male and female family members continue to access economic and educational benefits. The international community must respond more assertively via expanded restrictions like upholding the expiration of waivers to the current travel ban. And the lifting of [existing restrictions](#) must be directly conditional on the status and protection of women and girls within Afghan society and broader human rights for all Afghans.

At the country level, [tools](#) like the Global Magnitsky Act (passed by 35 countries) offer additional levers of accountability in response to human rights violations perpetrated by Taliban officials. If more U.N. member states mobilized in passing similar legislation and collectively targeting human rights abusers, the impact of these resources would magnify, becoming even greater in their ability to confront abuse and corruption perpetrated by the Taliban and other rogue actors. Examples include significantly impeding the ability of these regimes to evade existing sanctions, further strengthening these restrictions.

The U.N. should ensure greater representation of diverse Afghan voices in decision-making and advocacy forums, particularly around issues of human rights and access to opportunity.

While the U.N. and other bodies have created space for Afghan voices to be heard, diverse perspectives are still needed. Very often, the most prominent influencers are the only ones offered a seat at the table. This is important, but so are the perspectives and experiences of those most impacted by the Taliban's egregious violation of women's rights and human rights more broadly. When talking about issues of education access and equity, students, educators, and advocates across diverse backgrounds must be meaningfully included and opportunities adapted to create space for their participation.

Nongovernmental Organizations

Global nonprofits should partner with Afghan-led organizations.

Partnerships matter. Rather than reinvent the wheel, global and Western-based nonprofits can be stewards for Afghan organizations, helping to enhance innovation and existing platforms, but also offering opportunities for best practice sharing and capacity-building support. As in other instances, strong vetting is important, but resources and recommendations exist.

Global nonprofits must be bold, take initiative, and remain agile, prioritizing the safety and comfort of students and families with the work that needs to be done.

Too many organizations are waiting for the Taliban to indicate what is permitted. The longer efforts are left to idle, the harder it is to engage. The Taliban are not homogenous, and Afghan education initiatives are operating within very different parameters across various provinces and municipalities. International organizations have leverage to engage due to the desperation on the ground. The Taliban clearly do not have the capacity to fulfill needs, especially around quality education, or provide necessities. Sanctions are also hindering international governments. But nonprofits – in partnership with vetted Afghan-led organizations – can have significant impact.

Corporations, Philanthropic Foundations, and Individual Donors

Private-sector institutions should establish a formal coalition of corporations, foundations, and vetted Afghan advocates working in support of quality education access for Afghan students.

Examples abound in other spaces where collective engagement has made a tremendous difference in advancing the work and impact of activists at local levels. The work of the U.S.-Afghan Women's Council is a notable example of the power and impact of public-private partnerships in this regard. [For more than 20 years](#), the USAWC has mobilized to provide a platform for Afghan women to advance their priorities in partnership and solidarity with American women and U.S.-based institutions. Organizations supporting democracy worldwide, such as the National Endowment for Democracy, the International Republican Institute, National Democratic Institute, and Freedom House offer possible blueprints and best practices in aiding dissidents and innovators in closed societies. And the technology sector has a tremendous role to play in enhancing and scaling opportunities, including in-kind support.

Corporations and philanthropic organizations should directly fund Afghan-led projects working to advance quality and gender parity in education for Afghan students in country, those displaced, and those in the process of permanent resettlement.

From virtual platforms and radio learning programs to underground schools, creative curricula, and teacher-training initiatives, education advocates continue to mobilize solutions in support of quality education for all

Afghan students. Though they remain committed to and agile in their pursuits, resource challenges are a sizable hurdle for sustainability and the scale of their efforts.

Additionally, donors should not agree to fund male-only educational systems. All children deserve access to quality education and certainly not at the expense of others. Donors have leverage to push for more inclusive education policies. Many young boys have stood up to protest the injustices of education apartheid. Donors must match them in their actions.

Corporate and philanthropic resources can provide a tremendous boost to proven projects, a number of which are listed in the resource section at the start of this paper.

Philanthropic organizations and individual donors should create and expand scholarship opportunities for secondary education, continuing education, vocational training, and university study for refugee populations, including Afghans.

Financial barriers to higher education and skills-training programs severely impact displaced persons and refugees. Despite the immense influence of immigrant populations on economic growth and educational systems at community and country levels, [only 5%](#) of refugees worldwide have access to higher education, according to UNHCR. Organizations like the Institute for International Education have created vital platforms like the [Odyssey Scholarship](#) to support refugee students seeking higher educational opportunities. School of Leadership Afghanistan (SOLA) has relocated its boarding school to Rwanda, accepting [admissions applications](#) for fully funded placements from prospective students both in Afghanistan and displaced in other parts of the world. The Asian University for Women (AUW) continues to enroll and support Afghan students in higher education programs hosted at its Bangladesh campus, as well as aid the needs of AUW students evacuated to the United States last August. And though the Kabul campus has remained empty for over a year, the [American University of Afghanistan \(AUAF\)](#) carries on empowering new and existing students via innovative programs that leverage online platforms and partner schools like the American University of Iraq Sulaimani, the American University of Central Asia, Bard College, and the soon-to-launch AUAF Doha branch campus. But the need for support currently outweighs the opportunities available on a global scale. Increased investment in and expansion of funding support for refugee students can yield tremendous impact for individuals, families, and communities at large.

Media

Global media outlets can do a better job of documenting the experiences of Afghan women and girls and providing a platform for activists to raise their voices.

International media have a tremendous reach and can shine a spotlight on the daily atrocities committed by the Taliban against the Afghan people. This includes the gross human rights abuses and gender apartheid perpetrated against vulnerable Afghans across the country. It would not only provide accountability and documentation of abuses, but also an opportunity for understanding and solidarity, particularly by engaging audiences worldwide who may not be aware of the egregious abuses and oppression instituted by the Taliban against the Afghan people.

Media and technology companies should partner with education-focused organizations to expand resources for Afghan girls still in country, as well as students idling in limbo in third countries.

For example, LEARN Afghanistan recently partnered with Radio free Europe/Radio Liberty platform Azadi Radio to offer on-air classes to students in grades seven to 12. An educational lifeline for students across Afghanistan, the Dari and Pashto classes cover core subjects like geography, chemistry, biology, and history.



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