

WEEKLY ANALYSIS

Issue Number - 396
(Oct 1 – 7, 2022)

GIRLS' EDUCATION; A GREAT CHALLENGE FOR THE ISLAMIC EMIRATE



Weekly Analysis is one of the CSRS publications analyzing significant weekly political, social, economic, and security events in Afghanistan and the region. The prime motive behind this is to provide strategic insights and policy solutions to decision-making institutions and individuals in order to help them design better policies. Weekly Analysis is published in Pashto, Dari, English and Arabic languages.

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Center for Strategic and Regional Studies (CSRS)



GIRLS' EDUCATION; A GREAT CHALLENGE FOR THE ISLAMIC EMIRATE

INTRODUCTION

Since August 2021, girls' schools above the sixth grade have been closed by the Islamic Emirate. However, this has been the hottest issue at the national and international level since last year, but recently the statements of some high-ranking officials of the Islamic Emirate have drawn more attention to this issue than ever before.

The issue is now considered a severe challenge for the Islamic Emirate because it seems that the decision on this has become difficult for the Islamic Emirate leaders due to the internal difference. Besides that, this issue is a significant source of dissatisfaction with the caretaker government of the Taliban at the national and international levels, and therefore, it's believed that any decision in this regard will determine the fate of the current government.

Authorities of the Islamic Emirate have constantly said since last year that they are not against girls' education. Still, they are working on solutions and mechanisms to solve the existing technical problems in this regard. That is why at the end of the last 2021-22 school year, the Ministry of Education announced that it would give female students a year of advancement without studies and taking exams.

With the beginning of the 2022-23 school year, the extension of the ban on girls' education above the 6th grade entered the issue into a new phase, and there were increasing suspicions and concerns that the Islamic Emirate may not allow girls' education from now onward. The Islamic Emirate authorities preferred silence regarding this issue on other important occasions. For instance, the silence about girls' education in the grand meeting of religious scholars in Kabul, particularly in the final declaration of the meeting, exacerbated this concern.

Still, the Islamic Emirate has not announced its clear position on the opening or closing of girls' middle and high schools. Until recent months, the reasons for closure were called technical, but recently, some officials in their statements somehow explained the exact reasons for not opening girls' schools.

The former Acting Minister of Education, Mawlawi Noorullah Munir, while speaking at a press conference in Uruzgan province on September 11, 2022, [mentioned](#) cultural restrictions as the main reason for the closure of girls' schools above 6th grade. He said people in remote areas do



not want to send their young daughters to school. He says, “If you go out of the city and ask elders in rural areas, you will know what percentage of people are ready to send their 16-17-year-old daughter to school. We know the culture of this society. The governments which did not respect this culture, uprisings have arisen against them. According to him, despite this, they are trying to create an appropriate environment where people will not object, and education will start according to its principles. After this statement, he was fired from the Ministry of Education, and the former head of the Kandahar Ulama Council, Mawlawi Habibullah Agha, was appointed as the Acting Minister of Education.

The former Acting Minister of Education made these statements after several schools in Paktia province were opened for girls students by the people and the school administrators. Still, they were closed again after the spread of its opening news. Widespread public reactions were seen on social media and thousands of Afghans, including political figures and religious scholars, rejected the minister’s statement. Girls’ school students and people protested in Paktia after the reclosure of the schools. These schools were closed at a time when girls’ schools above the sixth grade had been opened in some other provinces, but the government has not taken any action to close them.

Most recently, during a meeting in Kabul on 27 September (2022), Sher Mohammad Abbas Stanakzai, the political deputy of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, requested the opening of girls’ schools as soon as possible. He said that education is obligatory (Fardh) for both men and women, and girls’ education does not go against Islamic rules. However, in the same meeting, the Acting Minister of Vice and Virtue, Mohammad Khalid Hanafi, rejected his statement and said that modern education is permissible (Mubah). His words showed that girls’ schools had been closed by order of the Emir of the Islamic Emirate, as he said that it is obligatory to implement the order of the Emir.

As the 2022-23 school year is about to end, not only the girls’ schools are not expected to be opened this year, but there is no clear picture for the next year either, and there are concerns that next year these schools will also remain closed. Now the question is, what will be the consequences and effects of extending the ban on girls’ schools for the Islamic Emirate at the national and international levels? What is the Islamic Emirate’s policy in this regard, and where is the main problem? These and similar questions have been addressed in this paper, along with explaining the Islamic perspective of girls’ education, a historical overview of girls’ education in Afghanistan, and the necessary recommendations in this regard.



BACKGROUND OF GIRLS' EDUCATION IN AFGHANISTAN

If we look at the developments of the past century, not only in the field of education but also in other walks of life, the living conditions of Afghan women have seen various ups and downs. In some stages, they have lived under extreme restrictions. Still, in some periods, they enjoyed radical freedom, particularly in urban areas where they even broke Islamic and cultural boundaries in most cases. Therefore, the education of girls in Afghanistan has also faced challenges and problems due to various political changes throughout history, the main cause of which was the political and security instability in the country and the intellectual differences and policies of the rulers of the time. Another problem was that women had been used for propaganda throughout these periods.

For the first time during the reign of Amanullah Khan, girls were provided education, and the [first](#) primary school for girls was opened in Kabul in 1920, with 40 female students at the beginning. During his rule, Amanullah Khan provided opportunities for girls' education inside the country and sent some girls abroad for education. In 1928, Habibullah Kalkani [closed](#) the girls' schools during his 9-month government period. He also declared it forbidden for women and girls to leave their houses without Mahram and issued a decree that those girls who were sent abroad for education in the era of Amanullah Khan should return to the country. Historians believe that later Nader Khan, looking at the experience of Amanullah Khan's period, banned women's education so that this issue would not create problems for his rule.

During the 40-year rule of Muhammad Zahir Shah, opportunities for [women's education](#) and development were once again created, and politically, women reached the positions of ministers and other high-ranking positions for the first time; However, these developments were mostly limited to the major cities of the country. If we want to present a picture of women's education at that time, the figures show that in 1957, the number of female students in rural areas was 153; However, in the last years of Muhammad Zahir Shah's era (in 1969), the number of female students across the country reached 10450 who were studying in 173 schools. This situation continued during the first republic in 1973 and then in 1978 under the former Soviet-backed government.

During the four-year period of the Mujahideen, when the civil war reached its peak, girls' education did not [stop](#). Still, a fatwa was issued that prohibited mixed-gender education and work. During this period, the security situation made it impossible for women to study and work with peace of mind. After the Taliban came to power in 1996, everything changed fundamentally, and more restrictions were placed on women's work and education.

After 9/11, when the Taliban regime was replaced with the US-backed government, fundamental changes were seen again, particularly for women. Therefore, until August 2021, women's work



and education were widely provided. Still, in this period, the unlimited freedom of women, particularly in cities, was abused, while in the rural and remote areas, women still had a hard life. They were mostly deprived of education due to security problems in remote areas.

Analyzing the situation of girls' education in the last two decades [shows](#) that it has progressed significantly in quantity. For instance, the number of illiterate women was decreasing year by year. According to the statistics, 31200 literacy centers were active throughout the country in 2009, in which more than 395000 female students were learning from 8860 female teachers. Still, this number dropped to half after six years, as 216000 female students were learning from 4200 female teachers in 17400 literacy centers across the country in 2015. Likewise, progress was seen in women's education and higher education. According to some figures, in 2009, the number of female students in private and public universities was 12950, and the number of female teachers was 454. Still, these figures show a multifold increase in 2015, which were 63974 and 1614, respectively.

THE ISLAMIC EMIRATE'S POLICY ON GIRLS' EDUCATION

If we look at the two eras of the Taliban's rule, there is no doubt that the education of girls in both periods has faced problems due to harsh policies. However, in one way or another, the process of girls' education was going on and has not stopped completely. Although their policies regarding the education and higher education of women in the previous period were more strict than the current era of the Taliban, but even then this process did not stop completely. Currently, girls' schools are open officially to the 6th grade all over the country and unofficially in some provinces above the 6th grade. In these two periods, the Taliban did not completely oppose girls' education but limited it to some extent and emphasized that they are not against girls' education whenever it complies with the principles of Islamic Shariah. In this regard, we will take a brief look at the current policies of the Taliban later, but here we will take a quick look at the past period in the following lines.

If we look at the [statistics](#) of education during the previous Taliban period, it seems that while the percentage of female education has decreased year by year, this process was still going on in one way or another. Many charitable agencies had a role in keeping them active, among which the Swedish Committee can be mentioned. According to figures, before the rule of the Taliban in 1990, the percentage of female education was 34, but in 1999 (during the rule of the Taliban), this percentage dropped to 7 percent. According to the UNESCO 1999 report, 875000 people were studying in 3100 schools and non-formal centers of primary education across the country, of which 64000 were female students. According to this report, out of 23820 teachers, 2565



were female. However, this five-year period of Taliban rule is known as a period in which girls' education faced problems in Afghanistan.

After August 2021, when the Islamic Republic under the support of the United States and NATO collapsed and the Taliban came to power again, girls' schools above the sixth grade were closed again. Still, the authorities of the Islamic Emirate have never officially opposed girls' education since that first day. They have always said they are working on plans and strategies to open girls' schools. One reason is that if the Islamic Emirate was against girls' education and higher education, or if the girls' education was against Islamic law, then it would not have allowed girls to study in higher education. Now the doors of the universities are open to all girls and boys.

Now that a year has passed since the closing of secondary and high schools for girls, Islamic Emirate's authorities' statements imply a disagreement between the leaders of the Taliban about the education of girls above the sixth grade. It seems some Taliban leaders are against girls' education above the sixth grade. They believe that above 6th grade, girls enter puberty and should stay at home. This position is also evident from the book of Sheikh Abdul Hakim Haqqani, the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of the Islamic Emirate, about the system of the Islamic Emirate. In his book, he preferred that women should learn from their relatives in their homes, and if they study outside the home when there is a dire need, either the teacher should be a woman, or there should be a complete curtain between male teachers and female students. Some Taliban leaders' statements show that the vast majority of the current leaders of the Taliban support girls' education in all stages. Still, they have not yet succeeded in convincing the opponents of girls' education.

A Taliban official named Sheikh Faqirullah Faiq, whom the media introduced as the head of the Taliban Ulama Council in Kabul, [said](#) that the Taliban Emir is not against girls' education and will soon open girls' schools above the sixth grade. What he considered the reason for extending the ban on girls' schools was mixed-gender education; But the questionable thing is that girls' schools have been entirely separate in the last 20 years, and there is no school where girls' and boys' classes are together, so it is not assumed that this is the reason. Even if the boys' and girls' schools are mixed, it is effortless to separate them.

The Islamic Emirate held a grand meeting of religious scholars in June 2022, in which the supreme leader of Taliban Sheikh Hibatullah Akhundzadah also participated and addressed but did not make any reference to the education of girls. It is said that one of the requests of the meeting participants was to include the issue of girls' education in the final declaration of the meeting, however, this request was not taken into consideration and it was said that discussions are still going on among the leaders in this regard. In this meeting, silence on the issue of girls' education also caused doubts and worries about the policy of the Islamic Emirate on girls' education.



GIRLS' EDUCATION IN ISLAMIC SHARIAH

After two officials of the Islamic Emirate recently made clear statements about girls' education during a meeting in Kabul, extensive discussions were raised about girls' education in Islam.

In his speech, Sher Mohammad Abbas Stanekzai, the political deputy of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Islamic Emirate and the head of the negotiating team of the Taliban with the United States in the past years, said that the education of girls is not against Islamic law. He said if anyone believes it goes against Islamic Shariah, they should raise their voice because, according to him, the supporters of education are all openly defending their position. He called male and female education an absolute duty (Fardh) and requested the opening of girls' schools as soon as possible. However, in the same meeting, Khalid Hanafi, Acting Minister of Vice and Virtue, rejected the argument of Mr. Stanakzai and divided education into religious and non-religious parts. He said that non-religious or modern education is permissible (Mubah), but following the order of the Emir is obligatory. His statement showed that the girls' schools had been closed by order of the leadership of the Islamic Emirate.

After these statements, many religious scholars strongly rejected Mr. Hanafi's view. In the light of the Sharia texts, they called modern or non-religious education a collective duty (Fardh Kifaya) on men and women. The gist of some of these arguments is that the acquisition of knowledge in the Islamic Shariah is either individual duty (Fardh Ayn), collective duty (Fardh Kifaya), or it is the fundamental right of the people that is given by Allah and no one can take it away from them. According to Hanafi jurisprudence, for instance, based on the text of Raddul-Muhtar, a reliable book of Hanafi jurisprudence, learning the sciences and arts related to life's needs is obligatory as much as sufficient for society. Based on the book, so many people should learn them in order to solve the problems of society and the needs of the people. This does not mean that it is not permissible to exceed the level of sufficiency. Especially when Islamic societies face many challenges, it is impossible to fight these problems and difficulties without modern education.

In this way, not only is there no Shariah argument about the illegality of women's modern education even in a weak hadith, but based on Islamic Shariah and especially Hanafi jurisprudence, it has been called a collective duty or Fardh Kifaya. Some people simply give reasons for the need for female doctors. Still, religious scholars call this a misunderstanding and say that every society needs not only female doctors, but educated women in various fields.



Now, it is widely believed that only some of the Islamic Emirate leaders are against the education of girls due to their strict interpretation of the Islamic Shariah and call it illegal; But at the same time, there is the argument that if the education of girls is illegal, then why did they allow girls to study in universities?! And this shows that there is no consensus among the leaders of the Islamic Emirate on this radical position.

CONSEQUENCES OF BANNING GIRLS' EDUCATION

In the past year, one of the main causes of dissatisfaction with the Taliban at the national and international level is the ban on girls' education above the sixth grade. The belief is that if the ban on girls' education above the sixth grade continues, it will gradually increase the problems and challenges to the new caretaker government at the national and international levels, including but not limited to the following possible results:

First: After the establishment of the caretaker government of the Islamic Emirate, along with some dissatisfaction with the Taliban, there was also optimism at the national and international levels, because on the one hand, it put an end to the war in the country and on the other hand, they treated the officials and employees of the previous government very leniently, But the extension of the ban on girls' education affected this optimism and angered many within the ranks of the Taliban. If the ban on girls' education continues, it may lead to serious differences and disagreements within the Taliban.

Second: The current world has the status of a village and without interaction with the rest of the world, the Islamic Emirate can't continue for a long time. The education of girls is one of the issues that has made it difficult for the international community to recognize the government of the Islamic Emirate. Countries of the rest of the world cannot convince their citizens that the Taliban respect human rights.

Third: If the ban on girls' education continues, many Afghans will slowly think of leaving the country, because the current generation does not want their daughters and sisters to be deprived of education. In the past few months, there have been cases where some people left the country because of the ban on their daughters' education. Therefore, this will speed up the brain drain of Afghans.

Fourth: Currently, the opponents of the Islamic Emirate do not have valid guises for the armed opposition, but the ban on girls' education is one of the reasons that the opponents of the current government can use at the national and international levels to strengthen their ranks and position,



because there is already a belief that the Taliban are against modern education or at least give little importance to modern education.

Fifth: The authorities of the Islamic Emirate have occasionally cited the lack of a safe environment as the reason for not opening girls' schools and have repeatedly promised the people that schools will be opened for girls. Therefore people are waiting; But without a doubt, if there is a decisive decision not to open girls' schools, it seems that the majority of Afghans will come out to protest and stand firmly against such a decision.

Sixth: The most important thing is that the modern education of women in different fields is considered very important for the development and self-reliance of the country. Right now, there is a dire need for educated women in medicine, education, higher education, various fields of governance and many other fields, and if the ban on girls' education is extended, this need will increase year by year and people will face more and more problems.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In light of the above discussion, considering the profound importance of this issue, the following steps should be taken:

- Considering the severe effects of girls' education on the country's political and security stability and long-term development, the Islamic Emirate must consider girls' education as one of the country's priorities.
- The Islamic Emirate should take action as soon as possible to eliminate the existing internal differences and disagreements about the issue of girls' education and start serious discussions in this regard.
- By eliminating internal differences and other problems regarding girls' education, the leadership of the Islamic Emirate should clarify its policy through a decree as soon as possible and clarify the date and manner of starting girls' schools.
- A clear and effective strategy should be prepared to compensate for the backlog of lessons due to the closure of girls' schools for more than a year.
- Until now, technical problems were said to be the reason for the non-opening of girls' schools. If it is one reason besides others, action should be taken to resolve these problems as soon as possible.
- There is no opposition to the non-mixed education of girls and boys. In fact, in the last two decades, girls' schools have been separated, but if this problem is one of the technical



problems that led to the closure of girls' schools, so at least the number and details of these schools where this problem exists should be publically announced.

- Among technical problems, sometimes economic issues are also mentioned. To fill the financial gap, it is possible to talk with international organizations and it seems that the international community will provide more assistance in this sector.
- In the past year, a large number of educated women have left the country along with other Afghans, and before that, there was a problem of shortage of female teachers. However, many educated women are still in all regions of the country. It is necessary to fill this gap and create suitable facilities for teaching by educated women.

The end

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Contact Us:

Email: info@csrskabul.com - csrskabul@gmail.com
Website: www.csrskabul.com - www.csrskabul.net
Phone: +93786009699

