

# How the world should oppose the Taliban's war on women and girls

**Twelve months after their takeover, Afghanistan's rulers have slammed the door on educational opportunities and leadership roles for girls and women. But is isolating the country the right response?**

**W**hen the Taliban seized power in Afghanistan in August last year, many people rightly feared a return to conditions under the group's first government, between 1996 and 2001. Back then, all girls' schools in the country were closed, and women couldn't work, or have any role in public life. Rape and violence were commonplace.

For now, girls' primary schools are still open, and some women are working. The blanket ban has not yet returned, in part because today's Afghanistan is not the country of 2001. An explosion in knowledge, technology and job opportunities in the intervening years nurtured a generation of ambitious and capable young people. They are now in an existential fight to stop their country going back in time. They, especially the girls and women among them, need the world's full support – in cash, in other resources, in whatever way possible. Countries that have opted to isolate the Taliban in protest against their repressive policies should evaluate the impact of this course of action, and ask whether it has been working.

The Taliban's repression of girls and women is a daily reality. Universities are open and classes have resumed, but they are segregated by gender and women cannot, officially, teach men. Nor can women be managers or supervisors in workforces that include men. This makes it difficult for them to be professors or principal investigators. Most cannot hold roles in senior administration or technical support. Women have had to accept pay cuts and demotion to keep their jobs. Courses and research projects have had to be terminated if a male teacher or researcher cannot be found, creating chaos and uncertainty for students.

And, as has been widely reported, teenage girls are banned outright from being educated in schools. Hundreds of teachers have set up informal, often secret, schools so that girls can continue to learn. But the reality is that unless the ban on girls' secondary education is reversed, within a few years there will be no more girls going through secondary school, and no more women



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going on to higher education and research.

These developments have left governments and scientific collaborators grappling with what kind of relationship they want with the Taliban leadership. Some countries, including China, India, Iran and Pakistan, host students and researchers of all genders from Afghanistan at their universities. China is also providing funding for Afghanistan's higher education, partly through its Belt and Road Initiative. Earlier this month, China's ambassador to the country, Wang Yu, is reported to have opened a new auditorium and teaching building at Kabul University.

By contrast, governments in Europe and North America are focusing more on essential humanitarian aid. They have ended funding for research, training and bilateral scholarships (those approved on a government-to-government basis) in Afghanistan. These actions have had at least two unintended consequences that need to be explored to guide future action. The first is that the Taliban have so far stood firm on their refusal to let older girls study and women resume leadership positions. Pressuring the regime by denying funding does not seem to have worked. The second consequence is that universities have suffered, because researchers can no longer collaborate as they once did with their international peers. Afghanistan's scholars are at grave risk of returning to a closed world.

Why has isolating the Taliban not changed their behaviour? What differences of opinion exist between various factions of the Taliban, and why? Has cutting off funding also severed links to those in the group who might be advocating a different and relatively open-minded agenda? Answers to these and other questions must be sought through systematic evaluation and assessment.

## Boost positive change

At the same time, countries should explore what more they can do to support positive developments that could lead to the future that Afghanistan's young people want and deserve. One such development is an expansion in online learning. The American University of Afghanistan, ordinarily based in Kabul, is starting to offer fully online courses. This gives people of all genders from across the country access to the university's faculty members and courses, something that was not possible before. Some of the courses are being offered by researchers who had to leave Afghanistan to start new lives abroad. Other universities could study this experience and expand the courses available.

Realistically, the Taliban might be in power for some time. Those researchers who have chosen to stay in Afghanistan know this, and are bravely engaging with the leadership, aiming to demonstrate that equal rights, research, scholarship and dissent are valuable in nation-building.

As Afghan political scientist Obaidullah Baheer wrote last week in *The Washington Post*, it is high-risk work. It will take time, and it needs global support. That support can't come if Afghanistan is isolated by the international community, as it was in 1996. Afghanistan has changed, so it makes sense to review the global response so far, and assess whether it needs to change, too.