

OPPRESSION THROUGH ERASURE: AFGHAN TALIBAN'S OPPOSITION TO WOMEN'S EDUCATION

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Abstract

The Taliban's ban on women's education is not merely a restrictive social policy but a deliberate political strategy of exclusion rooted in patriarchal authority, selective religious interpretation, and regime consolidation. This paper examines how and why the Taliban target women's education as a tool of control rather than treating the ban as a cultural or theological anomaly. It argues that the education ban operates as a form of institutional erasure, removing women from knowledge production, economic participation, and public legitimacy. Rather than framing discrimination only as ideology, this study identifies three interlinked mechanisms of erasure: legal exclusion (through decrees), epistemic exclusion (from knowledge and learning), and spatial exclusion (from schools and public life). These mechanisms undermine human security by entrenching long-term social, economic, and political dependency. Using qualitative analysis, the paper situates Taliban policy within broader debates on gender, power, and authoritarian governance. By integrating feminist political theory with governance analysis, this study moves beyond descriptive critique to explain why education, rather than other rights, is singled out as the primary site of control. The paper contributes to existing literature by theorising women's exclusion not simply as repression, but as a governance strategy designed to regulate knowledge, obedience, and regime legitimacy.

Keywords: Taliban, Women's Education, Patriarchy, Human Security

Introduction

Afghanistan has become a central site of gendered governance, where state power systematically excludes women from education, public life, and economic participation.¹ Since the Taliban's return to power in August 2021, decades of progress in women's education and social inclusion have been reversed. Before their takeover, women's enrolment in higher education had grown nearly twentyfold, reflecting both societal transformation and expanding female agency.²

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Today, Afghanistan is the only country in the world to enforce a complete ban on secondary and higher education for girls, signalling a deliberate political strategy of **oppression through erasure**. This erasure occurs across multiple, interrelated dimensions. **Legal erasure** is enacted through decrees that formally deny girls the right to study. **Spatial erasure** restricts women's presence in classrooms, workplaces, and public spaces. **Epistemic erasure** denies women access to knowledge production and intellectual agency.³ By targeting education, the Taliban suppress individual development while erasing women from Afghanistan's social, political, and economic future.

As of early 2024, nearly 30 per cent of girls had never attended primary school, and roughly 2.5 million school-aged girls remain out of classrooms, reflecting systemic exclusion with long-term consequences.⁴ Human rights organisations and UN Special Rapporteurs have called these policies gendered apartheid, which is an order of segregation and subordination of women in law and institutions.⁵ Denying education is not only discrimination, but it is also described as a form of gender persecution within international law.⁶ Human Rights Watch highlights the fact that these restrictions are driven by a mix of both theological literalism and deep-rooted patriarchy, and that female education is viewed as a threat to political control.⁷ This ban is a way of removing women from the institutions where knowledge, professional identity and public authority are produced, consolidating Taliban control whilst constraining the emergence of future female leadership. Understanding the reasons why education has been a key target is important to analysing the Taliban's wider project of social, political and intellectual erasure, as well as the mechanisms by which Afghan women are systematically marginalised.

Problem Statement

The Taliban's educational order banning women's education is part of a systematic departure from international gender norms, as well as the recent course of education in Afghanistan. While extant studies have documented the implications of such restrictions, less attention has been paid to the reasons why education, in particular, has emerged as a key site of control under Taliban rule. This research fills this gap by exploring the political, ideological, and institutional justifications for the Taliban's opposition to women's education and analysing how such policies change the nature of social, economic and political relations in Afghanistan.

Literature Review

The Taliban's initial rule in power (1996-2001) was characterised by an extreme system of gender regulation through restrictive interpretations of the Sharia law.⁸ Human Rights Watch reports on the ways women were confined in their homes, kept out of education and employment, and punished severely for perceived moral transgressions.⁹ Scholars describe these policies as organised human rights violations and institutionalised the subordination of women through fear, surveillance and coercion as a mechanism of governance and not just regulation by religion.¹⁰ These measures generated profound social and economic consequences, eroding women's autonomy and embedding dependency, poverty, and vulnerability within Afghan society.¹¹

Following the Taliban's return to power, these patterns re-emerged in a more bureaucratized and expansive form. Despite public assurances by Taliban officials, including spokesperson Zabiullah Mujahid, that women would be permitted to work and study in accordance with international norms, such commitments have been consistently qualified by adherence to Taliban interpretations of Sharia. In practice, this has allowed an opportunistic use of religious law, which maintains patriarchal rule while assuming claims of international legitimacy.¹²

Since 2021, the Taliban has issued more than fifty decrees governing women's dress, their mobility, education and employment. Key measures such as the banning of girls' education beyond grade six, and restrictions of women's independent movement in the absence of a male guardian have all systematically excluded women from public, professional and intellectual life.¹³ International organisations and scholars describe these policies as constituting a form of institutionalised gender exclusion, often referred to as "gender apartheid," reflecting the legal and political codification of women's inferiority.¹⁴ The enforcement of these edicts through intimidation and violence has only added to the coercive environment and thereby furthered compliance and social withdrawal.¹⁵

Recent studies also emphasise the broader socio-economic effects of these restrictions, including rising poverty, increased dependence on male relatives, forced and early marriages, and the informalization of women's labour through home-based activities such as garment production and carpet weaving.

These dynamics demonstrate that Taliban gender policy is not only a cultural or religious project but also a strategy of political control that restructures economic and social relations in ways that consolidate male authority and limit women's collective agency.¹⁶

Together, the literature reveals a clear continuity between the Taliban's first regime and their post-2021 governance: the exclusion of women from education, employment, and public space is not incidental but a deliberate mechanism of rule. While existing scholarship has documented the legal and material dimensions of this exclusion, this study extends this literature by conceptualising Taliban gender governance as a form of multidimensional erasure, i.e., legal, spatial, epistemic, and symbolic, through which women are systematically removed from visibility, knowledge production, and political subjecthood. This framework enables a deeper understanding of how gender repression functions as a central pillar of Taliban state-building rather than a peripheral by-product of religious ideology.¹⁷

Theoretical Background

This study is grounded in feminist political theory, which conceptualises gender not as a difference between people based on biology but as a system of power which structures access to authority, knowledge, and political subjecthood. Feminist scholars such as Cynthia Enloe have shown how regimes control women not only by law but also through institutions that permeate the daily lives of women and men and determine who can take part in economic and political life.¹⁸ Judith Butler makes a similar point that gender is created and reproduced through social and institutional practices that dictate who is allowed to appear, speak and be acknowledged as a legitimate subject.¹⁹ From this perspective, education is not merely a social service but a site where political agency and public legitimacy are produced. Access to schooling enables individuals to acquire knowledge, credentials and visibility to take part in the labour markets, governance and civil society. By keeping women away from education, the Taliban are not only regulating behaviour, but redefining who is entitled to a place in the Afghan polity.

This study conceptualises this process in terms of structural erasure, which works in terms of three interlinked mechanisms. Legal erasure is in the form of decrees that formally prevent girls and women from attending schools and universities. Spatial erasure is working by the physical elimination of women from the classroom, workplaces and public institutions.

Epistemic erasure is a consequence of this exclusion, which denies women access to knowledge production, professional authority and intellectual recognition. Together, these mechanisms lead to lessening the capacity of women to be social, economic, and political subjects in society, which strengthens patriarchal and authoritarian control. This framework also engages critically with dominant feminist debates on women's agency under patriarchy. Kandiyoti's concept of "patriarchal bargains" postulates that women may negotiate within such oppressive systems to achieve limited autonomy, to which they agree to comply.²⁰ Under the Taliban regime, however, systematic elimination of education, employment, and public visibility undermines the very arenas in which such bargaining could take place. When women are excluded from the institutions of learning and work through legal and spatial exclusion, opportunities for negotiation are eliminated at large.

Similarly, Saba Mahmood's argument about agency as being exercised in conformity and in religious practice assumes the existence of social spaces where women are able to enact such agency.²¹ In case of Taliban-ruled Afghanistan, the closing of schools, restriction on mobility, and removal of women from public life, these spaces are dramatically restricted. This implies that the Taliban's policies are not only a way of regulating women's behaviour but an active process of eliminating the conditions under which agency itself can be expressed. By theorising women's exclusion as erasure, rather than simple repression, this study contributes to feminist debates through demonstrating how extreme forms of institutionalised exclusion work as a strategy of governance. Education comes to the fore not because of the cultural symbolism of education in itself, but because education generates knowledge, visibility and future leadership, precisely the things that authoritarian regimes are trying to control.

Methodology

This study uses a qualitative approach to analyse the socio-political and ideological elements of the Taliban's resistance toward women's education. Qualitative methods are suitable as they reflect human experiences, cultural narratives, and institutional practices which otherwise cannot be measured quantitatively.²² Data were obtained through in-depth interviews with Afghan women and activists, offering first-hand accounts as knowledge-producers as opposed to illustrative anecdotes.²³

To complement this, the document analysis was based on Taliban decrees, UN reports, policy documents and historical records to trace the legal, institutional, and ideological processes of exclusion.²⁴ Secondary sources such as academic literature and NGO reports provided a context for policies that were implemented under both the Taliban's first (1996-2001) and current rule.²⁵ Public opinion surveys, as well as media sources, provided additional information on societal attitudes about female education. The data were thematically analysed in terms of mechanisms of erasure (legal, spatial, epistemic, and economic) that provide a holistic understanding of how systematic exclusion operates at different levels.²⁶

Data Analysis

- **Education, Power, and the Marginalisation of Women**

The Taliban view education in a gendered perspective, and gender inequality is a key element in their educational policies. Following the takeover, bans were put on girls' secondary education, which were later extended to universities and private learning centres. Besides that, young women have reportedly been prevented from going outside Afghanistan to pursue tertiary education. These measures are not isolated acts but a **progressive strategy of exclusion**, undermining access of women to education at all levels.²⁷ International Human Rights Law (IHRL) gives prominence to the right to education as a fundamental right, which enables equal participation in society socially as well as economically, and the ability to participate in a democratic society effectively. Conventions like the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), and the International Covenant on Economic and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) provide the right to education irrespective of gender as well as equal access to education, teachers, and educational resources. Contemporary interpretations of ICESCR Article 13 are noted to implicitly include gender equality. Conversely, some interpretations of Islamic principles, as purported by the Taliban, are explored in the literature as potential barriers to the international gender equality standard.²⁸ However, other sources suggest that the Taliban's ban is a distortion of Islamic legal principles.

The systemic restrictions imposed on Afghan women have prompted scholars and human rights actors to describe the situation in terms of **gender persecution** and **gender apartheid**. These terms have become keywords in human rights discussions to describe the systemic nature of gender-based discrimination and exclusion in Afghanistan. Gender Apartheid is understood as a system of governance based on laws and policies that enforce systematic segregation, subordination, and exclusion of women from public spheres.²⁹ Drawing from the Rome Statute and the Apartheid Convention, gender apartheid is characterised by an institutionalised system designed to maintain the domination of one group over another. The key elements include the segregation and subordination of women, the denial of fundamental rights, and exclusion from the public sphere. This can be imposed by either de jure or de facto authorities. The concept of gender apartheid differs from gender discrimination in its scale, institutionalisation, and gravity.³⁰

Gender Persecution, in contrast, is recognised as a crime against humanity under Article 7.1 of the Rome Statute. It involves the targeting of individuals or groups based on their actual or perceived gender and is often coupled with other variables such as religion, ethnicity, or social status. For gender persecution to be a crime against humanity, it must become part of a widespread or systematic attack directed against a civilian population and carried out with knowledge of the attack. In Afghanistan, the denial of education, arbitrary arrests, detention, torture and restrictions on women's freedoms may add up to gender persecution in the context of conscious denial of fundamental rights, going beyond physical violence to include social and epistemic marginalisation.³¹

Education is a target of the Taliban, not as a cultural constraint but as a strategic and calculated process of control. Legally, educational bans codified in decrees formally exclude women from institutional learning spaces, creating a framework of **legal erasure**. Simultaneously, the restrictions result in epistemic erasure in that restricted women's access to knowledge and participation in intellectual and professional realms, the regime controls who produces and disseminates ideas. This exclusion is physical (as manifested by spatial erasure) with women being denied access to schools, universities and workplaces, which mitigates their visibility and participation in public life.

Beyond the area of education, these restrictions act as a type of economic and social control that limits the participation of women in the labour market and reinforces dependency in a patriarchal system. Finally, by controlling knowledge access and shaping social norms, the Taliban strengthen **regime legitimacy**, portraying their authority as essential for maintaining societal “order” while marginalising alternative voices. These mechanisms are self-reinforcing, with the denial of education leading to the exclusion of women from wider society, which in turn leads to the solidification of Taliban control over social, political and economic structures.

- **Women's Resistance and Global Accountability Mechanisms**

Afghan women still proceed to extremes of resistance and advocacy despite restrictions. The literature observes that resistance is a continuum, and it takes some overt and organised political activism, or it is less overt and subversive. The use of social media sites and online activism plays a vital role in women's resistance efforts. As an example, hashtag activism has the ability to intersect a wide range of individuals in an ad hoc group around a common discursive space and political purposes. The requests of such activists are often connected with their rights, freedom, education, and work. The Taliban's actions against education activists, including the arrest of Ismail Mashal and Matiullah Wesa, who campaigned to educate girls, demonstrate the regime's sensitivity to resistance.³² Such acts of advocacy not only question the limitations in the present moment but also claim expanded agency and visibility for women in Afghan society.

The global community is still seeking ways of dealing with the systematic oppression of the Taliban and punishing the leaders. Strategies to be determined in legal terms involve the consideration of novel legal litigation in the existing courts, and possibly with gender inclusive definitions of the existing apartheid legislation. Another would be to initiate and sponsor a resolution by UN Member States requesting an Advisory Opinion of the International Court of Justice as to what constitutes gender apartheid, its scope and its legality. The legal recognition of gender apartheid as a crime against humanity is argued as a step that would enhance global mechanisms to hold oppressive regimes accountable. Complementary approaches include invoking universal jurisdiction to prosecute individuals for violations.³³

Efforts are also underway within international bodies like the Committee to propose language for General Recommendations (CEDAW) that address gender persecution and gender apartheid in relation to women's leadership and decision-making.

The exclusion of individuals, as seen in Afghanistan, has historical parallels in international law, such as the findings of the Nuremberg Tribunal, which established that the exclusion of groups could constitute a crime against humanity. The widespread and systematic nature of the Taliban's attack on women's rights, covering education, employment, movement, and political participation, is noted as crucial for classifying their actions as crimes against humanity. The Taliban's organisational structure facilitates coordinated attacks on women's rights, supporting arguments that denial of rights, including access to education and public life, may constitute crimes against humanity.³⁴ Framing the educational erasure as a form of structural erasure of Afghan women, this study underscores the need for global legal accountability to address both the overt violence and systematic denial of agency, visibility, and knowledge.

- **Consequences of Educational Exclusion for Afghan Women**

The Taliban's ban on women's education constitutes a **systematic and strategic form of social and epistemic erasure**, rather than a merely cultural or religious policy. Testimonies from Afghan women and activists reveal how these policies operate across multiple dimensions, reinforcing dependency, reducing public visibility, and constraining agency. Under the previous Afghan government, women participated actively in education, politics, and economic life, demonstrating both individual autonomy and collective agency. Since the Taliban's resurgence in 2021, these opportunities have been systematically dismantled through legal decrees, spatial restrictions, and limits on knowledge production.³⁵

One Afghan woman residing in Turkey explained that the bans extend beyond education, restricting women's participation in employment sectors such as banking, retail, and salons. Her testimony indicates that educational exclusion is linked to broader mechanisms of social control, whereby **denial of knowledge and labour market access maintains long-term dependency and reduces women's visibility in public life**.

This aligns with the theoretical framework of erasure: educational restrictions function simultaneously as **legal, spatial, and epistemic erasure** to consolidate authoritarian control.³⁶

Habib Khan, founder of Afghan Peace Watch, highlighted the historical regression in women's rights, noting that Afghanistan remains the only country to prohibit girls' education entirely.³⁷ He also critiqued the international response, particularly the United Nations' engagement with the Taliban on issues unrelated to gender, which he argues **reinforces the Taliban's capacity to exclude women from both national and international decision-making**.³⁸ Similarly, Malala Yousafzai has emphasised that framing the issue as a cultural or religious matter obscures its fundamental character as a human rights violation. Afghan women's exclusion from negotiations and policy discussions demonstrates how the Taliban's policies generate structural disadvantages, undermining women's agency and consolidating patriarchal authority at both national and transnational levels.³⁹

Psychological frameworks further explain the Taliban's strategic rationale. Bandura's Social Learning Theory suggests that behaviour is influenced by social and cultural reinforcement mechanisms; the Taliban's environment reinforces patriarchal norms, shaping perceptions that educated women constitute a political threat.⁴⁰ Maslow's hierarchy of needs highlights how denial of education restricts self-actualisation opportunities, limiting women's capacity for independence and participation in society.⁴¹ These analyses support the interpretation that educational exclusion is not only a legal or ideological imposition but also a **strategic mechanism of social and epistemic control**, central to maintaining Taliban authority (figure 1,2).

- **Taliban's Ideological Opposition to Women's Education**

Taliban's views on women's education are entrenched in their ideological construct, which blends Pashtun tribal culture, extreme religiousism, and politicised conservatism. This ideology emphasises cultural homogeneity rather than Islamic universalism. The Taliban are ideologically Deobandi and heavily impacted by the conservative Wahhabi movement, with strong gender roles and purdah (female seclusion).⁴² Their ideology confuses religious piety and patriarchal domination, and the education of women is a danger to them.

The Taliban are justifying their policies with the selective reading of Islamic readings, overlooking the Quranic teachings and the Hadith.⁴³ This ideological opposition is expressed through legal, spatial, epistemic and symbolic erasure, in line with the mechanisms proposed in the theoretical framework.

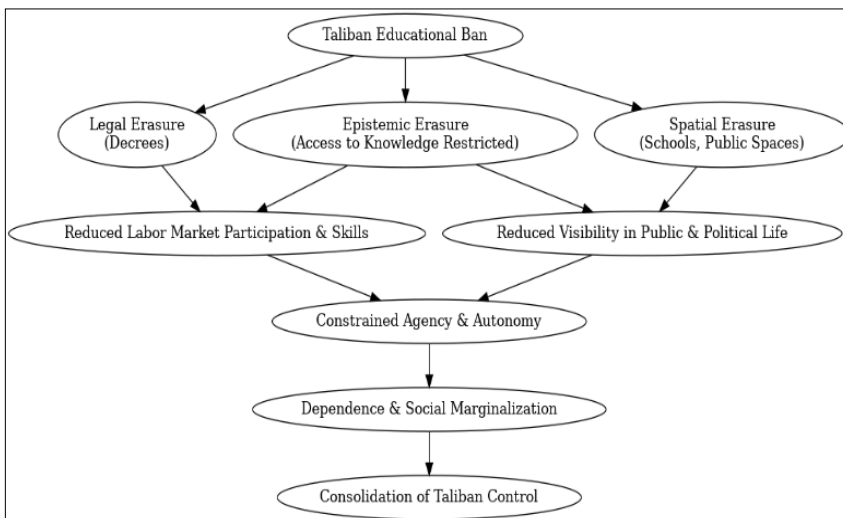


Figure 1: Flow of Taliban educational exclusion showing legal, spatial, epistemic, and symbolic mechanisms and their consequences for Afghan women

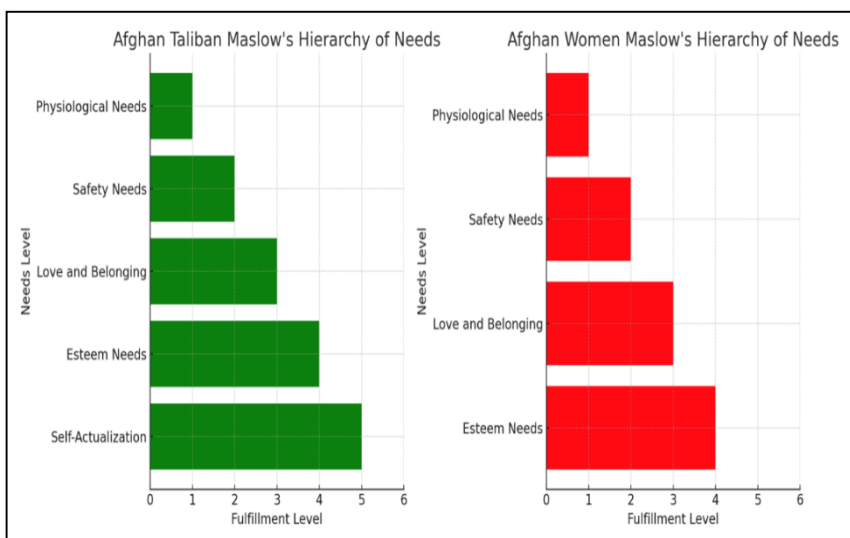


Figure 2: Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs: Afghan Taliban vs Afghan Women

| Maslow's Hierarchy for Afghan Taliban vs Afghan Women | |
|--|---|
| For Afghan Taliban | For Afghan Women |
| <p>Self-Actualization (Top of the pyramid): Achieving their ideological goals, including governance and enforcing their interpretation of Islamic law.</p> <p>Esteem Needs: Recognition and respect from their followers and supporters.</p> <p>Love and Belonging: Solidarity and unity among the Taliban members.</p> <p>Safety Needs: Security through territorial control and military strength.</p> <p>Physiological Needs (Base): Access to resources like food, shelter, and protection.</p> | <p>Esteem Needs (Second level): Denied respect and recognition due to restrictions on education and work.</p> <p>Love and Belonging: Limited to family and domestic spheres, with restricted social participation.</p> <p>Safety Needs: Constant threat of violence and punishment for non-compliance with Taliban laws.</p> <p>Physiological Needs (Base): Struggling with unmet basic needs like access to healthcare, food, and work due to the oppressive regime.</p> |

Outside religious reasoning, the Taliban perceive female education as a method of cultural manipulation and possible foreign influence. Therefore, educated women are seen as carriers of ideas that may challenge the established norms. That ideological position exemplifies a shaped identity that is focused on opposing the external cultural influences while having a firm grip on the societal order (Figure 3). The fundamental principles of opposition to women's education have remained consistent between 1996 and 2001 and post-2021. But the tools of trade, including digital surveillance and media control, have changed to further facilitate the epistemic and spatial erasure more effectively. Finally, it is not just the ideological aspect of female education that the Taliban oppose, but a strategic tool for consolidating **social dominance, gendered hierarchy, and long-term societal control**.

Figure 3: Intersections of Pashtunwali, Wahhabi extremism, and selective Sharia interpretation in Taliban ideology, showing mechanisms of women’s erasure

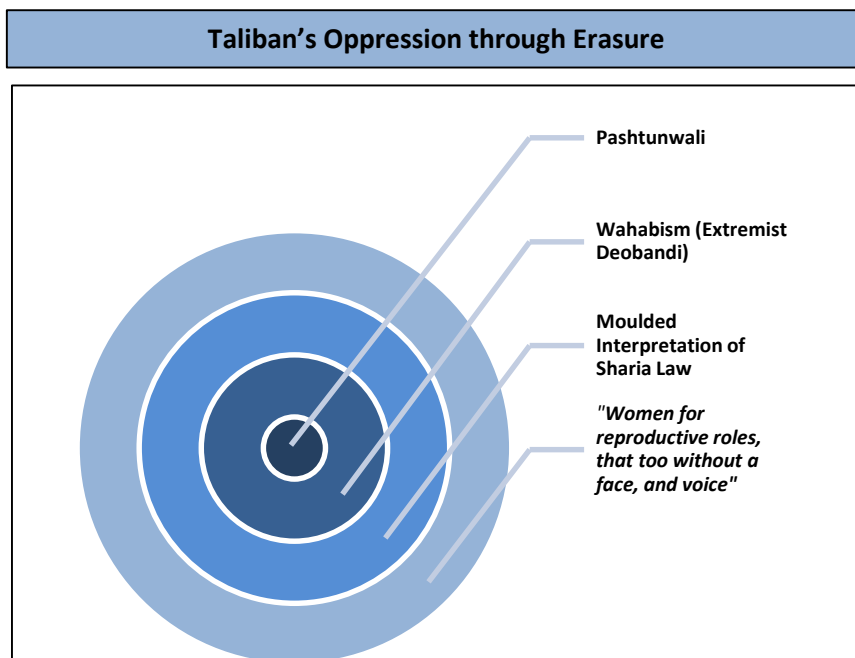


Table 1: Taliban Ideology and Educational Exclusion

| Ideological / Cultural Basis | Mechanism of Enforcement | Effect on Women |
|--|---|---|
| Deobandi and Wahhabi-influenced Islam, emphasising strict gender roles | Legal decrees banning girls' secondary and higher education | Legal erasure: women formally denied access to institutional learning |
| Pashtun tribal norms prioritising female seclusion (purdah) | Spatial restrictions: exclusion from schools, universities, workplaces, and public spaces | Spatial erasure: reduced visibility and mobility in public life |
| Framing female education as "Western intrusion" | Epistemic restriction: limiting access to knowledge production, | Epistemic erasure: constrained agency, curtailed skill development, and |

| | | |
|--|---|---|
| | intellectual participation, and leadership roles | exclusion from decision-making |
| Maintaining patriarchal dominance and regime control | Surveillance, intimidation, and selective enforcement of decrees | Social and economic dependency; consolidation of Taliban authority |
| Cultural narrative that female education threatens Afghan identity | Propaganda and ideological messaging through media and religious institutions | Symbolic erasure: women excluded from public discourse and societal recognition |

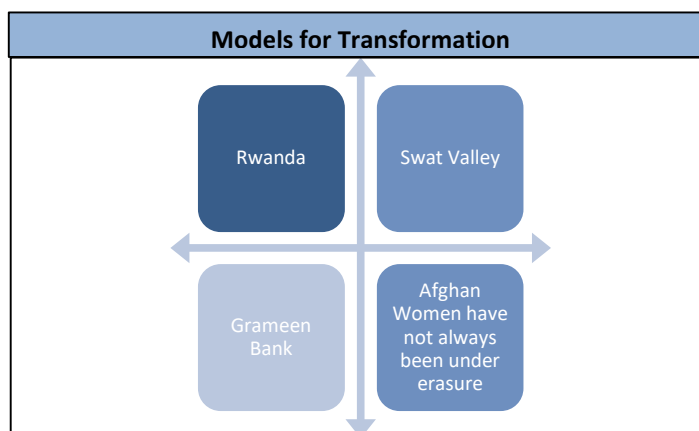
Table 1 illustrates the operations of ideological, cultural and religious structures of the Taliban based on legal, spatial, epistemic and symbolic processes of erasure, which create long-term social and economic dependency and strengthen male-dominated control. The women leaders and activists in Afghanistan are the first-hand people who can provide insight into the Taliban's systematic restrictions. Former Deputy Speaker of the Afghan Parliament pointed out that the Taliban had initially described themselves as a Taliban 2.0 that is a moderate group willing to co-exist, but then within a short time, had instituted oppressive policies against women. She pointed out that the protests by women do not end regardless of extrajudicial murders. The global response is also fractured: divisions between the global North and South, alongside concessions by the United Nations such as allowing the Taliban to exclude women from meetings in Qatar signal that **women's rights are not treated as universal human rights**, emboldening their oppressive measures.⁴⁴ This testimony illustrates how the Taliban's policies function as both a local and global issue, with implications that extend beyond Afghanistan's borders.

- **Lessons from Global Transformations in Women's Rights**

Historical and contemporary examples illustrate that interventions can transform societies where women have been subject to systemic oppression. Rwanda, which emerged from genocide in 1994.

Pro-women development policies ensured women's participation in governance; today, Rwanda boasts the world's highest percentage of women in parliament (over 60%).⁴⁵ In Pakistan's Swat Valley, Malala Yousafzai, with the support of the world, rebuilt schools when the Taliban stopped girls from attending schools, which enabled thousands of girls to enrol by 2015.⁴⁶ In Bangladesh, Grameen Bank's economic empowerment of rural women through microfinance programs raised levels of female literacy from 25% in the 1980s to 71% by 2022.⁴⁷ Post-2001 international interventions were afloat with women's education initiatives in Afghanistan.⁴⁸ These illustrations (Figure 4) are remarkable lessons for guiding the world in addressing the Afghan women's educational crisis. These cases offer a crucial lesson: **the denial of education under the Taliban is neither inevitable nor irreversible**. Comparing the Taliban's policies during 1996–2001 and post-2021 reveals both continuity and adaptation, while the core objective of controlling women's mobility and access to knowledge remains constant, the post-2021 regime has deployed more systematic, legally codified, and digitally monitored mechanisms of erasure. This fruition underscores that targeted interventions can challenge even deeply entrenched gendered oppression. Afghanistan's current crisis is not only a human rights emergency but also a global imperative.

Figure - 4: Models as a Guide for Afghan women's erasure Reversal



Conclusion

The Taliban's opposition to women's education in Afghanistan constitutes a deliberate strategy of **oppression through erasure**, employing legal, spatial,

epistemic, and symbolic mechanisms to marginalise women and undermine their social, economic, and political agency. Historical and contemporary evidence shows that these policies reflect a continuity of authoritarian, patriarchal governance, with education targeted because it empowers women, challenges male authority, and fosters social mobility. Integrating feminist and governance perspectives, this study highlights how structural and ideological mechanisms legitimise systemic exclusion, while Afghan women's testimonies reveal the tangible constraints on choice, autonomy, and participation. The Taliban's policies represent a strategic erasure of an entire generation's potential, threatening Afghanistan's stability and demonstrating that education is not a cultural concession but a **fundamental human right**. The findings emphasise the urgent need for coordinated international action to address both the national and transnational consequences of this gendered oppression.

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