

Education for Afghan Girls Under the Taliban: Status and Issues for Congress

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On March 23, 2022, the Taliban government reversed its previously-announced intention to resume secondary education for Afghan girls. The last-minute policy change has prompted widespread U.S. and international criticism and drawn renewed attention to the status of women and girls in Afghanistan, a longstanding issue of congressional concern. The Taliban decision, together with other recently-imposed restrictions, raises questions about how Taliban policies on women's rights may be evolving, as well as about the group's responsiveness to outside pressure. Many Members of Congress have expressed deep concerns about the fate of Afghan women and girls (a [focus of prior](#) U.S. development efforts), and the issue has significant policy implications for Congress and for U.S. approaches to the Taliban's rule.

Taliban Policy on Secondary Education for Afghan Girls

The [August 2021 Taliban takeover](#) sparked [fears](#) among many Afghans and [others](#) that the group would prohibit education for all Afghan girls, as they had during their repressive 1996-2001 rule. During their two-decade insurgency, the Taliban [allowed](#) for some girls' education in areas under their control where local communities advocated for it, but also conducted numerous [attacks](#) against girls' schools.

Weeks after taking power, the Taliban ordered secondary schools to re-open to boys, arguably introducing a de facto [ban](#) on girls' education at that level ([primary](#) schools reopened to girls earlier, with strict gender segregation). Taliban officials [spoke](#) of reopening girls' secondary schools "as soon as possible," [giving](#) late March 2022 as the date for their intended return. Meanwhile, [secondary education](#) for girls [restarted](#) in several [provinces](#), mostly concentrated in northern Afghanistan where non-Pashtun ethnic populations and less restrictive views of women's rights predominate.

Leading up to March 23, the Education Ministry [announced](#) that schools would be open for all students. On March 23, however, with some girls already present, the Taliban [reversed course](#) and announced that schools for girls would remain closed. Many observers voiced [shock](#) at the about-face. In some provinces where girls had been going to school, the March 23 reversal [appears](#) to have banned their attendance. The Taliban have given [multiple](#) and sometimes [conflicting](#) reasons for the decision, including shortages of religious uniforms and female teachers.

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It remains unclear what prompted the reversal, particularly given the Taliban's opaque decision-making processes. [One analysis](#) attributes the decision to the advocacy of hardline conservative clerics within the group, who apparently persuaded Taliban supreme leader Haibatullah Akhundzada (himself a religious cleric). Other Taliban figures, however, reportedly [support](#) secondary education for girls (and some educate [their own daughters](#) abroad), revealing potential divisions within the group along generational, geographic, and political lines. The evidently greater influence of the group's traditional leaders (over that of "[pragmatists](#)" who urge greater engagement with the international community) suggests that outside actors may have limited leverage over Taliban decisions.

The Taliban takeover ushered in a "[general curtailment](#) of Afghan women and girls' fundamental human rights and freedoms," and their decision on girls' secondary education comes amid several other moves that may portend a more repressive official stance on women's rights more broadly. Those moves include [blocking](#) women from boarding flights at Kabul airport without a [male chaperone](#) (related to the group's former [order](#) that women be accompanied by a male relative while traveling) and [segregating](#) Kabul parks by gender. Some women are attending [private](#) and [public universities](#) under various restrictions and in fewer numbers than before.

U.S. Response and Issues for Congress

The Biden Administration [criticized](#) the Taliban decision, with a State Department spokesperson [describing](#) the Taliban's "deeply disappointing and inexplicable reversal" as "a potential turning point in our engagement." The United States also [canceled](#) meetings on economic issues with the Taliban.

Some [Members of Congress](#) also criticized Taliban's actions, with one [calling](#) on the Administration to "hold the Taliban accountable" and [others](#) drawing attention to the Keeping Girls in School Act (H.R. 4134/S. 2276). A group of [21 senators](#) called on President Biden "to show the world we are prioritizing the rights of Afghan women and girls" and demonstrate that "there must be clear consequences" for the Taliban's action, including possibly pushing to end [exemptions](#) for several Taliban officials from a U.N. travel ban (in place since early 2019).

Other potential U.S. measures and options for congressional action might include additional [U.S. sanctions](#), further restrictions on the disposition of [Afghan central bank assets](#), or conditions on U.S. assistance (including to prohibit U.S. support for education to which girls do not have access), though it is unclear how, if at all, those actions might influence the group's decisions. While some have advocated concrete consequences for the failure to open schools, others have [suggested](#) that additional international pressure or advocacy could be counterproductive, hardening the Taliban's position and allowing the Taliban to reframe secondary education for girls as a foreign demand.

The Biden Administration has requested funds in its [FY2023 budget proposal](#) to bolster education, among other sectors, in Afghanistan, though no U.S. development or other government personnel have operated there since the August 2021 closure of U.S. Embassy Kabul. Such funds would likely support programming carried out by nongovernmental [organizations](#) that have provided education to Afghan children with support from the World Bank-managed Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund and United Nations agencies; these agencies have also [directly supported](#) Afghan teachers. The World Bank reportedly [suspended](#) hundreds of millions of dollars in programming in Afghanistan in response to the Taliban decision. The United States had previously [stated](#) that it would pay the salaries of Afghan teachers if the Taliban reopened schools to girls.

As they consider a way forward, Members may consult a number of executive branch reports related to U.S. policy toward Afghan women and girls mandated in legislation in the 117th Congress, including:

- a report that includes a “comprehensive strategy for how U.S. military capabilities and partnerships could be used to promote the rights of women and girls in Afghanistan” (H.Rept. 117-118); and
- a report that details plans to, among other efforts, “protect and strengthen the rights of Afghan women and girls.” (Sec. 7044 of P.L. 117-103).

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