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Afghanistan: Taliban arrest women protesting against university ban

🕒 22 December 2022



| Watch: Students in Afghanistan protest for the education of women after university ban

By James Gregory and Aalia Farzan

BBC News

The Taliban have arrested five women taking part in a protest in the Afghan capital, Kabul, against the ban on women attending universities.

Three journalists were also arrested. Protests are also understood to have taken place in the Takhar province.

Guards stopped hundreds of women from entering universities on Wednesday - a day after the ban was announced.

It is the latest policy restricting women's education since the Taliban returned to power last year.

Girls have already been excluded from most secondary schools.

The new ban was implemented with immediate effect by the higher education minister on Tuesday, with public and private universities ordered to bar women from attending.

The education ministry said its scholars had evaluated the university curriculum and environment, and attendance for girls would be suspended until "a suitable environment" was provided.

Later, the Taliban minister of higher education, Neda Mohammad Nadeem, said on state television that women were banned from university for not following the dress code.

"They were dressing like they were going to a wedding."

Footage shared on social media on Thursday showed about two dozen Afghan women dressed in hijabs marching through the streets of Kabul, raising banners and shouting slogans.

The group had initially planned to gather in front of Kabul University, the country's largest and most prestigious educational institution, but changed location after the authorities deployed a large number of security personnel there.

Several women involved in the protest have told the BBC they were beaten or arrested by female Taliban officers.

One of the protesters told the BBC she was "beaten badly", but just managed to evade being taken into custody.

"There were too many Taliban female members among us," the woman said under the condition of anonymity.

"They beat some of our girls and arrested some others. They were about to take me too, but I managed to escape. But I was beaten badly."

Another protester said two people had been released since being arrested, but several remained in custody.

Some men have responded with acts of civil disobedience in solidarity with the protesters. About 50 male university professors at public and private institutions have resigned their positions, while some male students have reportedly refused to sit their exams.

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The Taliban had promised a softer rule after seizing power in August 2021, following the US withdrawal from the country. However, the hardline Islamists have continued to roll back women's rights and freedoms in the country.

Women-led protests have become increasingly rare in Afghanistan since their return. Participants risk arrest, violence and social stigma for taking part.

Before Tuesday's announcement, universities had already been operating under discriminatory rules for women.

There were gender-segregated entrances and classrooms, while female students could only be taught by women professors or old men. They were also only allowed to apply for a **limited range of subjects**.

Women were blocked from studying engineering, economics, veterinary science and agriculture, while journalism was severely restricted.

The UN's education and culture organisation, Unesco, says that the rate of female attendance in higher education had increased 20 times between 2001 - the year the Taliban were ousted by the US intervention - and 2018.

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