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Afghanistan: Taliban ban women from universities amid condemnation

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Image source, Getty Images

Image caption,

Female students in the capital - Kabul University and others reopened in the spring following the Taliban takeover

The Taliban have banned women from universities in Afghanistan, sparking international condemnation and despair among young people in the country.

The higher education minister announced the regression on Tuesday, saying it would take immediate effect.

The ban further restricts women's education - girls have already been excluded from secondary schools since the Taliban returned last year.

Some women staged protests in the capital Kabul on Wednesday.

"Today we come out on the streets of Kabul to raise our voices against the closure of the girls' universities," protesters from the Afghanistan Women's Unity and Solidarity group said.

The small demonstrations were quickly shut down by Taliban officials.

Female students have told the BBC of their anguish. "They destroyed the only bridge that could connect me with my future," one Kabul University student said.

"How can I react? I believed that I could study and change my future or bring the light to my life but they destroyed it."

Another student told the BBC she was a woman who had "lost everything".

She had been studying Sharia Islamic law and argued the Taliban's order contradicted "the rights that Islam and Allah have given us".

"They have to go to other Islamic countries and see that their actions are not Islamic," she told the BBC.

The United Nations and several countries have condemned the order, which takes Afghanistan back to the Taliban's first period of rule when girls could not receive formal education.

The UN's Special Rapporteur to Afghanistan said it was "a new low further violating the right to equal education and deepens the erasure of women from Afghan society."

The US said such a move would "come with consequences for the Taliban".

"The Taliban cannot expect to be a legitimate member of the international community until they respect the rights of all in Afghanistan," said Secretary of State Antony Blinken in a statement.

"No country can thrive when half of its population is held back."

Western countries have demanded all year that the Taliban improve female education if they wish to be formally recognised as Afghanistan's government.

However in neighbouring Pakistan, the foreign minister said while he was "disappointed" by the Taliban's decision, he still advocated engagement.

"I still think the easiest path to our goal - despite having a lot of setbacks when it comes to women's education and other things - is through Kabul and through the interim government," said Bilawal Bhutto Zardari.

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

The Taliban's leader Hibatullah Akhundzada and his inner circle have been against modern education - particularly for girls and women.

There has been opposition to this stance from more moderate officials, and analysts say this issue has been a point of factional division all year.

Yet on Tuesday, 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.

It added that it would soon provide such a setting and "citizens should not be worried".

However in March, the Taliban had promised to re-open some high schools for girls but then cancelled the move on the day they were due to return.

The crackdown also follows a wave of new restrictions on women in recent months. In November, [women were banned from parks, gyms and public baths](#) in the capital.

A university lecturer and Afghan activist in the US said the Taliban had completed their isolation of women by suspending university for them.

"This was the last thing the Taliban could do. Afghanistan is not a country for women but instead a cage for women," Humaira Qaderi told the BBC.

The Taliban had just three months ago allowed thousands of girls and women to sit university entrance exams in most provinces across the country.

But [there were restrictions on the subjects they could apply for](#), with engineering, economics, veterinary science and agriculture blocked and journalism severely restricted.

Prior to Tuesday's announcement, universities had already been operating under discriminatory rules for women since the Taliban takeover in 2021.

There were gender segregated entrances and classrooms, and female students could only be taught by women professors or old men.

However, women were still getting education. Unesco noted on Tuesday that from 2001 and 2018 - the period between Taliban rule - the rate of female attendance in higher education had increased 20 times.

Several women have told the BBC they gave up after the Taliban regained rule because of "too many difficulties".

Issue splits Taliban

Analysis by Yogita Limaye, BBC South Asia correspondent

There has been speculation for over a month now that the Taliban government would ban university education for women.

One female student predicted it a few weeks ago. "One day we will wake up and they will say girls are banned from universities," she had said.

And so, while many Afghans might have expected that sooner or later this decision would be taken, it still comes as a shock.

Last month women were barred from parks, gyms and swimming pools. In March this year, the Taliban government did not deliver on its commitment to open secondary schools for girls.

From conversations with Taliban leaders over the past year, it is evident that there is disagreement within the Taliban on the issue of girls' education.

Off the record, some Taliban members have repeatedly said they are hopeful and working to try and ensure girls get an education.

Girls were allowed to sit for graduation exams for secondary schools two weeks ago, in 31 of Afghanistan's 34 provinces, even though they haven't been allowed to be in school for more than a year.

That provided a glimmer of hope, which has now been extinguished.

Media caption,

Women in Afghanistan face an uncertain future following the Taliban's takeover