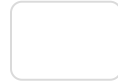


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'I Can't Tell': Sexual Abuse At Taliban-Run Madrasahs Fuels Fear, Dropouts

By [RFE/RL's Radio Azadi](#)

Male students who enrolled in Taliban-run religious schools say that sexual and physical abuse has led some to end their pursuit of an education in Afghanistan.

The students, all of whom were aged 10 to 17 and spoke to RFE/RL's Radio Azadi on condition of anonymity out of fears of repercussion, [described](#) numerous instances in which they and fellow classmates were pressured to engage in sexual acts with teachers and subjected to corporal punishments.

The reported cases took place in western and southwestern Afghanistan at Taliban-run madrasahs, part of the network of religious schools that the extremist group has expanded significantly as part of its drive to foster religious education more in keeping with its hard-line Islamist views.

One 16-year-old student, a resident of Farah Province, described being propositioned by a teacher at the madrasah he attends.

"One day at school a Taliban member who teaches there made an inappropriate offer, but I did not accept it," the boy told Radio Azadi, using inexplicit language to describe sexual abuse, a culturally taboo topic in Afghanistan. "When the lessons were over, he bothered me again."

The boy said he reported the incidents to a "qari," a person who has memorized the Koran and serves as a religious authority at the school, to no avail.

"I told the qari that the teacher was doing bad things to me, and the qari told him not to do these things, that he was a teacher," the boy said. "The teacher admitted doing it, but it had no effect. He has continued to do bad things and made sexual requests to numerous students at the school."

Another student in southwestern Afghanistan, a 17-year-old in the 10th grade, gave a similar account of his experience during his six months studying at a Taliban-run madrasah.

"A Taliban member who teaches at the school proposed having a relationship with me and said some other things that I did not accept," the boy said.

After being refused, the teacher swore and issued threats, the boy said, adding that his fellow students have faced similar treatment.

"He also harassed several of my classmates, and one of them left the school," the boy said. "He told me I should not go to school anymore because the same teacher is harassing me."

The boy said the experience has left him "damaged" and unsure of whom he can confide in. "I can't tell my family," he said.

The Taliban has come under widespread criticism for the severe restrictions it has placed on the daily lives of the Afghans since seizing power in August 2021. In its pursuit to impose its extreme interpretation of Islam, the Taliban has restored many of the draconian rules it was infamous for during its first stint in power from 1996 to 2001.

The ban on the education of girls past the sixth grade, and the erasure of women's role in society stand out among the measures the Taliban has taken. But other steps -- including prohibitions on music and idolatry through art, and pressure against students and teachers -- have affected all walks of life regardless of sex.

Since the Taliban returned to power, many educators have left the country, while female teachers have been left at home without work due to restrictions on women's freedom of movement and their ability to teach males.

Meanwhile, the Taliban has steadily worked to replace secular state schools and informal madrasahs with a system of religious schooling. The system does allow for girl students, including those of university age, but critics say it falls far short of the standards of modern education for girls and boys alike and often promotes extremism.

According to a [report](#) on Afghanistan issued by the United Nations in February, the Taliban has established 6,836 madrasahs for males and 380

for females and was expected to finalize a standardized religious curriculum in time for the new school year beginning this month.

The recruitment of madrasah teachers is also in full swing, according to the report, following a decree by the Taliban's spiritual leader Mullah Haibatullah Akhundzada to have 100,000 new madrasah teachers in place.

In December, Human Rights Watch gave a [stinging assessment](#) of the state of education in general, saying that in addition to the obstacles to the education of girls and women, the Taliban had "also inflicted deep harm on boys' education" in Afghanistan.

"Many boys were previously taught by women teachers; the Taliban has prohibited women from teaching boys, depriving women teachers of their jobs and often leaving boys with unqualified replacement male teachers or sometimes no teachers at all," HRW said. "Parents and students said that corporal punishment, which has long been a problem at Afghan schools, has become increasingly common. The curriculum in many schools appears to be under revision to remove important school subjects and promote discrimination."

The rights watchdog said the circumstances had "led many boys to leave school altogether" and "left boys struggling with mental health problems such as anxiety and depression."

Shortly after the Taliban regained power, the United Nations highlighted the dire situation for children in Afghanistan, including exposure to sexual violence and increased risk of students dropping out of school.

Difficulties in ensuring the protection of children are exacerbated, according to the UN, by the Taliban's [refusal](#) to consider people below the age of 18 to be children, as is the international standard, instead using the onset of puberty as the basis for adulthood.

Younger madrasah students in western and southwestern Afghanistan below or at the age of puberty said they were not spared physical abuse and sexual harassment from teachers.

One young man who spoke to Radio Azadi said he recently learned that his young brother was being subjected to sexual abuse at a madrasah in western Afghanistan.

The young man said his brother was being assigned extracurricular "homework by a teacher, or to put it bluntly, he was being asked for sex, [the teacher] fondled his hands and feet and kissed him."

As a result, the young man said he told his brother not to go to school

anymore.

Fear of sexual harassment and sexual and physical abuse were cited as a common factor leading boys in western and southwestern Afghanistan to give up their studies.

"Some teachers harass our students and make immoral requests," said one 14-year-old boy who also described common methods of corporal punishment at his madrasah. "They strike our faces or beat our hands and feet under the pretext of disciplining us for not learning our lessons properly."

The boy said many students were studying hard in fear of being taken to a special room for punishment, and that "some even drop out of school."

Another student, aged 10, said his teacher separated him and other students from their class to beat the soles of their feet.

Afterward, he told Radio Azadi, he stopped going to class because he was afraid. And upon hearing about the incidents, his and his classmates' parents "did not allow us to go to school."

The Taliban authorities did not respond to requests for comment on the allegations of abuse at madrasahs it has established. And efforts to speak to individuals aware of the situations at madrasahs in other areas of Afghanistan were met by refusals to comment due to fear of reprisals.

A women's rights activist who asked that her name not be published told Radio Azadi that families have no avenue to lodge complaints about the abuse their children encounter at Taliban-run madrasahs because they, too, would face threats.

The activist said that not only had she been made aware of sexual harassment against both girls and boys at Taliban-run madrasahs, but the curriculum also serves to "increase the level of extremism in the country."

Reducing the risks of both threats, she said, would require greater oversight by the Taliban authorities and ideally, she said, a reduction in the number of madrasahs.

Najib Amini, a civil society activist in western Afghanistan, said that for now, the onus falls on families to be aware.

"Children are subjected to sexual abuse in madrasahs established under the Taliban regime," Amini said. "Families have an important and essential role in this regard. If they do not want their children to be abused in schools, if they want their children to get a basic education...then they

should not send their children to madrasahs under the control of the Taliban."

Written by Michael Scollon based on reporting by RFE/RL's Radio Azadi

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