

YOUNG **HUMAN RIGHTS** **REPORTER** **OF THE YEAR**

The Uncertain Future of Female Education in Afghanistan

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2001 was a year when many Afghan girls' lives changed. Their homeland, already a Taliban-run war zone, was invaded by troops from the United States, the United Kingdom, France and Australia. Both the Taliban and the war have killed many innocent Afghan citizens. Even now, explosions are commonplace in the life of the country's average civilian. Yet, Afghanistan is given hope for its future by recent gains in girls' education. Since 2001, its female literacy rate has increased threefold and the number of Afghan girls enrolled in schools has increased from 5,000 to 2.4 million.

In 2010 and 2011, just two years, 2,281 schools were built. Afghan girls' education requires protection, as well as progress. Fawzia Koofi, the MP for Afghanistan's Badakhshan Province, has recalled, "I was studying medicine when the Taliban came in 1996. That was my last day as a student. All of a sudden I was at home. You can see everything from your window, but you can't taste it, you can't touch it. I felt like a dead body." She plans to stand as a presidential candidate in 2014, and the very fact that she, as a woman, is able to do so is testament to Afghanistan's recent progress in women's rights.

The Taliban may have curtailed her medical career, but she has forged a new one in politics. Although, there is much progress still to be made for females in this field, also, as she states: "There are 18 committees in our parliament, and I'm the only woman chair." The Taliban has made its objective, pertaining to girls' education, crystal clear: in 2009 every month 50 schools were attacked. All of these schools taught girls. Girls have been targeted, and subjected to acid attacks. Head teachers have been assassinated.

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Afghanistan's population is situated largely in rural areas, and these rural districts are often subjected to violent Nato-Taliban confrontations. In the southern and eastern provinces, the Taliban forced many new schools to close – the province of Zabul had 61% of its schools closed in 2011, due to insecurity. These rural areas are also the ones most likely to possess conservative attitudes towards female education. Only so much progress can be made in twelve years.

Afghanistan's female literacy rate remains one of the lowest in the world, and a lack of investment in female teachers prevents many girls' attendances. Much of the girls recently enrolled in schools are long-term absentees. The combination of family pressure, due to deep-rooted prejudices against female education, and the high risk of harassment or persecution for attending school, is a major deterrent to many young girls.

Afghanistan's gains in female education, if left unguarded may struggle to endure the withdrawal of the international community, scheduled for 2014. The £60bn in humanitarian aid donated to the country since 2001 has rewarded its investors with crucial progress in girls' basic human rights. This progress must be allowed to continue. Education is a right, not a privilege, irrespective of gender.