

## Books under watch

## Story of a war on knowledge



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## OPINION EXCLUSIVE

Five years after the Taliban returned to power, Afghanistan's situation is no longer limited to the banning of girls from education or the exclusion of women from universities. A broader process is now taking shape: an attempt to control who can receive education, what can be taught, and what people are allowed to read.

In today's Afghanistan, books are no longer merely cultural commodities. A book can preserve an alternative account of history, carry a competing idea or simply have been written by a woman. Any of these characteristics may be enough to place it under scrutiny, censorship or even a ban.

The latest figures from the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) indicate that approximately 2.4 million Afghan girls remain excluded from secondary education. Five years after the Taliban's return, Afghanistan remains the only country in the world where girls and women are formally barred from secondary and higher education.

But the story does not end at the school or university gates. In 2025, the Taliban took the unprecedented step of banning hundreds of academic books from universities. A published list contained 679 titles, including 140 books written by women. At the same time, 18 academic subjects were banned or removed from university curricula, including subjects related to human rights, women's rights and a range of political and social concepts.

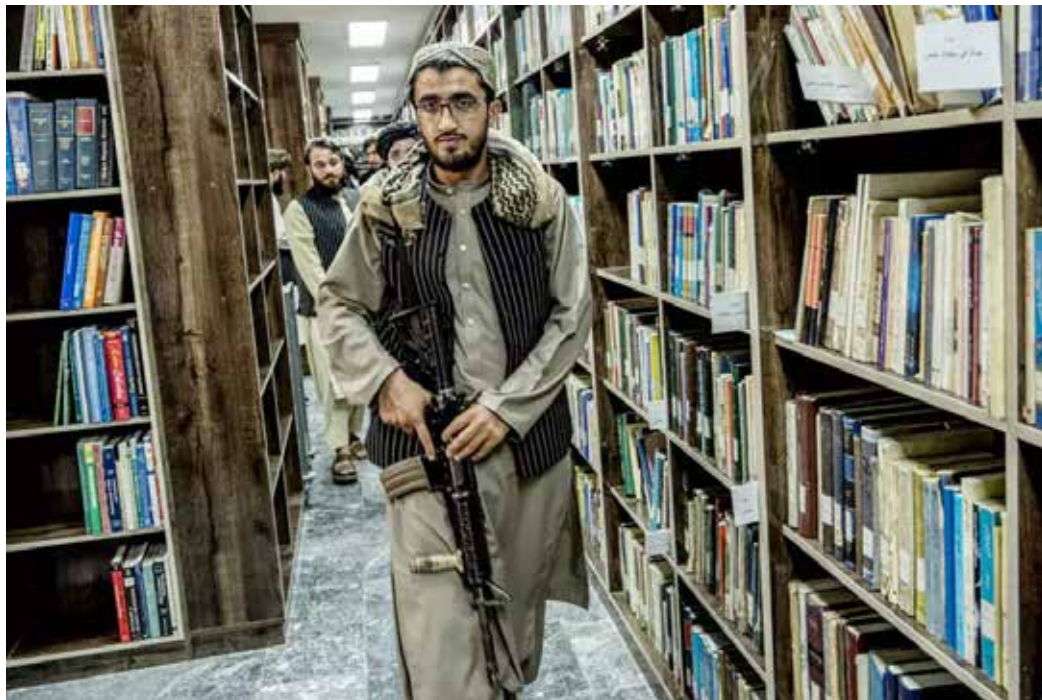
This may be one of the clearest signs that Afghanistan's cultural situation is changing in nature. The Taliban have not merely closed the doors of schools to girls; they are also attempting to redefine the boundaries of permissible knowledge.

### Targeting right to know, not just books

During the first years after the Taliban returned to power, the international community largely focused on one question: Why were girls being denied the right to continue their education? Five years later, another question must be added: For those who are still allowed to study, what sources of knowledge will remain available to them?

The question matters because an education system deprived of diverse books and sources cannot easily sustain a culture of critical thinking. The Taliban argue that educational reforms are necessary to bring curricula into line with Afghanistan's Islamic and cultural values. Critics, however, argue that when a government itself determines which works are "appropriate" and which are "inappropriate," books cease to be merely cultural products and become objects of ideological and political control.

Reports concerning the list of 679 books banned from Afghan universities indicate that the policy extends far beyond explicitly political works. Academic and



specialized publications were also among the titles removed. This suggests that the issue is not simply the suppression of books critical of the Taliban. Rather, the very structure through which knowledge is produced, transmitted and consumed is being reshaped.

From this perspective, books have become part of a broader struggle over the future of Afghan society.

### Erasure of women from classroom to bookshelves

Perhaps the most symbolic aspect of this policy is the treatment of books written by women. When 140 books authored by women are removed from university resources, the issue goes beyond the disappearance of hundreds of titles. At a deeper level, it concerns the role of women in the production of knowledge:

How can a woman who is barred from university become a university professor? How can a woman prevented from participating in academic life continue to work as a researcher? And when women's scholarly works are removed from educational resources, what image of women's contribution to knowledge will be presented to the next generation of Afghan students?

This cycle risks gradually erasing women from Afghanistan's academic memory. UNESCO has

repeatedly warned about the consequences of the Taliban's education policies. In January 2026, the organization reiterated that restrictions on the education of girls and women remained in place and that Afghanistan continued to be the only country in the world where secondary and higher education is formally prohibited for women and girls. In this sense, the exclusion of women from education and the removal of women's works from educational resources can be seen as two sides of the same policy: restricting both the consumers and the producers of knowledge.

### Libraries no longer just libraries

In any society, libraries are places where people gain access to different sources of information and ideas. Under an ideological political system, however, they can become some of the most sensitive cultural spaces. A library gives readers the freedom to choose. A reader can pick up one book, compare it with another and arrive at a conclusion that differs from the official narrative of the government. That is precisely what makes libraries important spaces for intellectual diversity.

For this reason, the control of libraries in Afghanistan is part of the same broader process unfolding in schools and universities. In

recent years, various reports have documented the removal of books deemed "inappropriate" from Afghan libraries and bookstores. In January 2024, reports also emerged that tens of thousands of books had been collected from publishers and bookstores in Kabul. Likewise, the process of reviewing books has continued into 2026. Taliban officials continue to refer to committees responsible for examining books and granting publication permits.

There is an important distinction here: the Taliban do not oppose the existence of books as such. Their objection is to books that fall outside the ideological framework they approve. That distinction is essential to understanding the Taliban's cultural policy.

### Book market has not disappeared

Afghanistan today should not be portrayed as a country in which every bookstore and library has disappeared. Such an image would not accurately reflect the current situation. Bookstores continue to operate, book markets have emerged and Taliban officials have even expressed support for the expansion of the sector. In 2025, a new book market opened in Kabul, while Taliban officials spoke of policies intended to support book printing and distribution. But the central issue



A Taliban security personnel leaves after an event at the Central Public Library in Kabul, Afghanistan, on May 19, 2025.  
● WAKIL KOHSAR/AFP



Such a transformation may serve a government's short-term interests, but its long-term costs will be borne by society as a whole. Afghanistan's future doctors, engineers, economists, teachers and researchers need to develop in an environment where questioning, experimentation and comparison are possible. Without such an environment, universities cannot effectively produce the skilled workforce a country needs for development.



Afghan women chant slogans in protest against the closure of universities to women by the Taliban in Kabul, Afghanistan, on December 22, 2022.  
● STRINGER

lies elsewhere. A market in which books must first pass through such an ideological filter is no longer a free marketplace of ideas. A publisher may know that releasing a particular title could create problems. An author may limit what they write about before putting pen to paper. A bookseller may decide not to stock a work that could later be confiscated. In such an environment, censorship does not necessarily begin with the seizure of a book. Sometimes it begins with the fear of publishing one. That is the phenomenon that can prove even more powerful than an official ban: self-censorship.

### A university with fewer books

Universities are among the most important victims of this process. After the Taliban returned to power in 2021, Afghan universities were closed to women. In the years that followed, the content of higher education also underwent significant changes. The list of 679 banned books published in 2025 is significant because it demonstrates that restrictions are not limited to who is allowed to enter a university. The sources students are permitted to consult have also become matters of political decision-making.

When subjects such as human rights, women's rights and certain concepts related to governance and social sciences are removed from curricula, universities gradually risk changing from institutions designed for inquiry and criticism into institutions primarily responsible for transmitting an official narrative.

Such a transformation may serve a government's short-term interests, but its long-term costs will be borne by society as a whole. Afghanistan's future doctors, engineers, economists, teachers and researchers need to develop in an environment where questioning, experimentation and comparison are possible. Without such an environment, universities cannot effectively produce the skilled workforce a country needs for development.

### Five years on, a generation being lost

In 2021, when the Taliban once again seized power in Afghanistan, there was still hope that some of the restrictions imposed on society would prove temporary. Five years have now passed. UNESCO estimates that approximately 2.4 million Afghan girls remain excluded from secondary education. This figure is not simply about education; behind it lie millions of lost opportunities to enter universities, pursue careers, conduct research and participate fully in professional life.

For a child, five years can represent almost the entirety of secondary education. For a society, it can mean the emergence of a generation that grows up without meaningful access to school, university and a broader academic environment. The consequences are not merely cultural. Restricting women's education means reducing Afghanistan's human capital. A country seeking development needs teachers, doctors, nurses, engineers, economists, researchers and administrators. When half of the population is