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# Challenges Faced by Afghan Women in Academia: Discussing Solutions with Scholars from the Country

## Panel Discussion Report

A Virtual Event on July 06, 2024.

**Discussing and Fostering Diversity, Inclusion, Empowerment, Academic and Educational Opportunities**



## Moderator & Speaker

### **Sweeta Akbari, Ph.D.**

Dr. Sweeta Akbari is the founder and CEO of Scholars in STEM. Dr. Akbari moderated the event and actively participated in the discussion. She holds a Ph.D. in Chemical Engineering from Malaysia and is currently a postdoctoral researcher at Tampere University, Finland, as a fellow of The Institute of International Education's Scholar Rescue Fund (IIE-SRF) and the Finnish National Agency for Education (EDUFI). Dr. Akbari has previously served as the academic research advisor to the Ministry of Higher Education of Afghanistan. Additionally, she has been actively involved in advocating for women's rights and supporting students and scholars from Afghanistan.

## Main Speakers (Panelists)

### **Nazifa Faqeryar, Ph.D.**

Dr. Nazifa Faqeryar is working as an advisor and executive manager at FemsTech-Worldwide. She holds a Ph.D. in botanical chemistry from Japan and has served as a lecturer at Kabul University, Afghanistan. She has also worked as a postdoctoral researcher at Avignon University, France. Dr. Faqeryar has been a member of many academic and research committees at Kabul University and the Ministry of Higher Education of Afghanistan. Additionally, she teaches at the Woman Online University.

### **Mursal Dawodi, Ph.D.**

Dr. Mursal Dawodi is the founder and president of FemsTech-Worldwide, an organization actively supporting many female students in Afghanistan by providing access to courses, online education, and training in various technology-related programs. Dr. Dawodi holds a Ph.D. in computer science from Japan and is currently working as a researcher at the Technical University of Munich. She has previously served as a lecturer at Kabul Polytechnic University.

### **Marzia Hakimi**

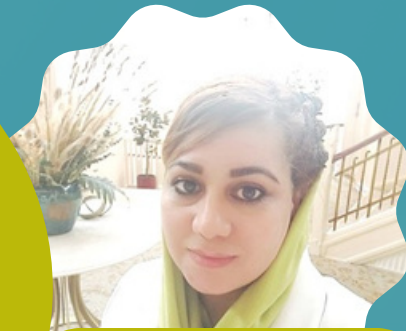
Marzia Hakimi is an academic affiliated with the University of Alberta, serving as a research associate in the Mechanical Engineering department of the Engineering faculty. She is a scholar of mechanical engineering at the University of Alberta and a fellow of The Institute of International Education's Scholar Rescue Fund (IIE-SRF). Previously, she served as an assistant professor at Herat University in Afghanistan for 11 years in the Mechatronics Engineering faculty.

### **Hassan Rahnaward Ghulami**

Hassan Rahnaward Ghulami previously worked as a Senior Lecturer at Bamyán University, Afghanistan, and as a research fellow at the International Center for Genetic Engineering and Biotechnology (ICGEB) in Trieste, Italy. He was a visiting Scholar at Risk at the University of Milan (UniMi) and is currently a research fellow at the University of Bologna (UniBo).

## Moderator

This panel discussion was organized to assess what is needed in addressing the challenges faced nearly three years after the university ban for girls and women in Afghanistan. Despite the persistent challenges, the discussion aimed to explore what can be done to address these issues and provide support for Afghan women in academia.



**Dr. Sweeta Akbari**

Founder and CEO  
Scholars in STEM

## Speakers



**Dr. Mursal Dawodi**



**Hassan Rahnaward Ghulami**



**Dr. Nazifa Faqeryar**

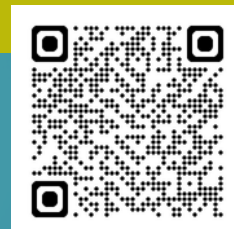


**Marzia Hakimi**



Through the Scholars in STEM initiative, we aim to create more equitable and inclusive education, professional development training, networking and e-learning opportunities for everyone, with a greater focus on women and girls in Afghanistan in all STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) fields.

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## Challenges Faced by Afghan Women in Academia: Discussing Solutions with Scholars from the Country

### Introduction

This report examines the major challenges faced by Afghan women and girls in higher education in Afghanistan. A detailed analysis and discussion with prominent Afghan scholars and academics in exile have led to comprehensive and effective solutions. The insights from these scholars are based on a multi-hour session, which included the following esteemed speakers:

- 1. Dr. Nazifa Faqeryar**
- 2. Hassan Rahnaward Ghulami**
- 3. Dr. Mursal Dawodi**
- 4. Marzia Hakimi**

Moderated by Dr. Sweeta Akbari, the discussion revolved around the following key questions:

1. What are the current challenges faced by Afghan women and girls in higher education in Afghanistan?
2. What needs must be met to reduce these challenges for women?
3. If internal and international organizations do not meet their needs, how can female students and researchers prepare to stay engaged in their academic and educational activities?
4. What expectations can we have from domestic academic institutions and universities?
5. What are our expectations from international organizations?
6. Have international organizations fulfilled their responsibilities correctly in this regard?
7. Have you completely lost hope in domestic academic institutions?
8. How about international organizations? Where have they fallen short?
9. Do you think global academic institutions have recognized Afghan scholars, especially women, on an equal footing with other global citizens? If not, what are the reasons?
10. What are the solutions?
11. What is the role of domestic scholars in seeking solutions?
12. What is the role of foreign (international) scholars, researchers, and specialists worldwide?



## Detailed Discussion

### 1. Current Challenges Faced by Afghan Women and Girls in Higher Education in Afghanistan

**Dr. Nazifa Faqeryar:** Dr. Faqeryar discussed her experiences during the first Taliban regime and its negative impact on her academic life. She emphasized that similar challenges are now faced by Afghan girls under the current regime, which requires multi-faceted efforts to address. Initiatives such as Women's Online University and Darakht-e Danesh have been established, but they are not enough. She highlighted the rise in child marriages, maternal mortality among young mothers, and unprecedented rates of suicide among young women due to educational restrictions and economic hardships.

**Marzia Hakimi:** Hakimi noted that even before the Taliban regime, social, cultural, and economic limitations were significant challenges. However, the current prohibition on education for women is the most significant barrier, affecting all sectors and exacerbating daily challenges. She lamented that even women in the teaching profession face wage cuts and job loss, further deteriorating their situation.

**Hassan Rahnaward:** Rahnaward argued that the challenges faced by Afghan women have deep historical roots and are compounded by the current socio-political climate. He stressed that societal attitudes towards women's education have always been regressive and that these challenges are part of a broader cultural and economic impoverishment.

**Dr. Mursal Dawodi:** Dr. Dawodi emphasized that the closure of educational institutions affects multiple generations. The limited educational programs available, such as midwifery and nursing, are insufficient. She stressed the need for women to be educated across various fields to have specialists and professionals in all areas.

### 2. Needs to Reduce These Challenges for Women

**Dr. Nazifa Faqeryar:** Dr. Faqeryar called for international and human rights organizations to pressure the Taliban regime to reopen schools. She suggested that Islamic scholars advocate for women's education and that men, including male teachers, defend women's rights to education and work. National discussions and scientific programs should be established to support girls' education.

**Dr. Mursal Dawodi:** Dr. Dawodi proposed supporting girls through motivational videos and creating free psychological counseling institutions to help them cope with mental and physical challenges. Educational institutions should develop programs to support girls and help them find ways to continue their education despite the challenges.

**Hassan Rahnaward:** Rahnaward highlighted the need for legal efforts to include women in social and economic processes. He emphasized that overcoming these challenges requires addressing security and economic issues and ensuring women's inclusion in all aspects of society.

**Marzia Hakimi:** Emphasizing general points discussed on this topic.



### 3. Preparing Female Students and Researchers Without Institutional Support

**Dr. Nazifa Faqeryar:** Dr. Faqeryar suggested that women engage in scientific work, write articles, and participate in scholarly activities to stay academically active.

**Marzia Hakimi:** Mrs. Hakimi recommended forming educational and scientific groups and creating educational libraries as effective ways to continue academic activities.

**Dr. Mursal Dawodi:** Dr. Dawodi stressed the importance of utilizing online resources and technology. She suggested that women learn English, improve computer skills, and take online courses to stay connected to the academic world.

**Hassan Rahnaward:** Mr. Rahnaward emphasized the importance of building a strong network among students and scholars. He suggested creating a network to publish articles and disseminate information in national and international languages.

### 4. Expectations from Domestic Academic Institutions

**Dr. Nazifa Faqeryar:** Dr. Faqeryar expressed no expectations from domestic institutions, citing the lack of support from male colleagues when women were excluded from universities.

**Hassan Rahnaward:** Mr. Rahnaward acknowledged the difficult conditions faced by domestic institutions but suggested that collaborative efforts to write articles and hold conferences could have a positive impact.

**Dr. Mursal Dawodi:** Dr. Dawodi noted that domestic institutions are under significant pressure and fear repercussions from the government, limiting their ability to support women's education. She suggested looking to international organizations for support.

**Marzia Hakimi:** Mrs. Hakimi highlighted the lack of serious protests or objections from domestic institutions when schools and universities were closed to women. She suggested focusing on international efforts to support women's education.

### 5. Expectations from International Organizations

**Marzia Hakimi:** Mrs. Hakimi suggested that larger sessions and increased opportunities for women and girls could be effective. She stressed the need for international conferences to discuss and support women's education in Afghanistan.

**Hassan Rahnaward:** Mr. Rahnaward called for increased diplomatic pressure, financial support for girls' education, and expanded educational opportunities and scholarships for Afghan girls. He emphasized the need for global conferences to raise awareness about the challenges faced by Afghan women.

The other two speakers (**Dr. Faqeryar and Dr. Dawodi**) agreed with Mrs. Hakimi and Mr. Rahnaward, emphasizing the need for larger sessions and international conferences to support women's education, as well as increased diplomatic and financial support for Afghan girls. They highlighted the importance of raising global awareness about these challenges.



## 6. Have International Organizations Fulfilled Their Responsibilities?

**Marzia Hakimi:** Mrs. Hakimi acknowledged that international organizations have made efforts but stressed the need for continued support and action. She emphasized that the situation has not improved significantly and that greater efforts are needed.

**Dr. Mursal Dawodi:** Dr. Dawodi called for more substantial support from international organizations, including educational opportunities and scholarships, to ensure positive outcomes for Afghan girls and women.

**Hassan Rahnaward:** Mr. Rahnaward stressed the need for ongoing dialogue and increased understanding of the situation in Afghanistan. He called for greater international attention and action.

**Dr. Nazifa Faqeryar:** Dr. Faqeryar agreed with her colleagues, emphasizing that international organizations have not fully met their responsibilities and that more support is needed.

## 7. Have You Lost Hope in Domestic Academic Institutions?

**Dr. Faqeryar:** Expressed hope for positive news and changes but acknowledged the unpredictability of the situation.

**Hassan Rahnaward:** Mr. Rahnaward emphasized the importance of continuing dialogue to raise global awareness about the situation in Afghanistan.

**Marzia Hakimi:** Mrs. Hakimi stressed that despair is not a solution and expressed hope for even the smallest positive efforts.

**Dr. Mursal Dawodi:** Dr. Dawodi expressed a mixed outlook, acknowledging the difficult conditions but also the potential for international efforts to bring about positive change.

## 8. Weaknesses of International Organizations

**Marzia Hakimi:** Mrs. Hakimi highlighted the geopolitical changes and the lack of preparedness of international organizations to address the Taliban's return to power. She stressed the need for short-term and long-term plans to support Afghan women.

**Dr. Mursal Dawodi:** Dr. Dawodi noted the cultural differences within Afghanistan and the need for unity among Afghan people to achieve positive results with international support.

**Hassan Rahnaward:** Mr. Rahnaward pointed out that international organizations operate based on the prevailing political conditions and their own interests, limiting their effectiveness in supporting Afghan women.

**Dr. Faqeryar:** Emphasizing general points discussed on this topic.

## 9. Recognition of Afghan Scholars by Global Academic Institutions

**Dr. Nazifa Faqeryar:** Dr. Faqeryar discussed the challenges faced by Afghan scholars in gaining admission to international universities. She highlighted the lack of recognition of Afghan qualifications and the difficulties faced by Afghan researchers in obtaining opportunities.



**Dr. Mursal Dawodi:** Dr. Dawodi agreed that Afghan scholars often face discrimination and are not given equal opportunities in global academic institutions.

**Marzia Hakimi:** Mrs. Hakimi shared personal experiences of Afghan scholars being overlooked and emphasized the need for greater recognition and support for Afghan academics.

**Hassan Rahnaward:** Mr. Rahnaward noted instances of discrimination against Afghan women scholars and called for increased efforts to ensure equal opportunities for Afghan academics.

## 10. Solutions

**Dr. Nazifa Faqeryar:** Dr. Faqeryar called for a national dialogue and international pressure on the Taliban regime to reopen educational institutions. She suggested writing open letters to international authorities to raise awareness about the situation in Afghanistan.

**Marzia Hakimi:** Mrs. Hakimi emphasized the need for collective efforts and international support to bring about positive change. She suggested holding more conferences and meetings with international organizations to highlight the challenges faced by Afghan women.

**Dr. Mursal Dawodi:** Dr. Dawodi stressed the importance of unity and collective action among Afghan scholars to amplify their voices and achieve positive results. She suggested forming alliances with international organizations to support Afghan women's education.

**Hassan Rahnaward:** emphasizing general points discussed on this topic.

## 11. Role of Domestic Scholars in Seeking Solutions

**Dr. Nazifa Faqeryar:** Dr. Faqeryar emphasized the need for a national dialogue and advocated for international pressure on the ruling government to facilitate such discussions. She suggested drafting an open letter to international authorities to ensure that the plight of Afghan scholars and their work is recognized globally. This could help in establishing programs that highlight Afghanistan's top researchers and their contributions. She also suggested that local lecturers and researchers can conduct research and studies analyzing the negative consequences of girls being deprived of education on society, and then publish the results of these studies in international journals.

**Marzia Hakimi:** Mrs. Hakimi noted that creating forums where scholars discuss their challenges could be beneficial. She stressed the importance of having representatives from international organizations such as the UN and UNESCO present at these discussions to ensure that the voices of Afghan scholars are heard.

**Dr. Mursal Dawodi:** Dr. Dawodi highlighted the power of unity among Afghan scholars. She proposed that multiple domestic organizations could come together to form a discourse that could reach a global audience. Inviting international and external organizations to these forums or sharing reports with them could also help in drawing attention to the issues.





**Hassan Rahnaward:** Mr. Rahnaward suggested focusing on practical solutions tailored to Afghanistan's specific conditions. He also recommended that researchers and scholars outside the country actively contribute to positive change.

## 12. Role of Foreign Scholars, Researchers, and Specialists Worldwide

**Dr. Nazifa Faqeryar:** Dr. Faqeryar believed that foreign scholars should raise awareness about the dire conditions faced by Afghan women. This could involve forming alliances and creating platforms where international and Afghan scholars can collaborate. Such initiatives could help in highlighting Afghan researchers and their contributions. Dr. Faqeryar shared her experiences of securing scholarships for Afghan students in Japan and expressed frustration over her unsuccessful efforts in France. She stressed the need for continued support and collaboration for Afghan scholars.

**Dr. Mursal Dawodi:** Dr. Dawodi proposed that foreign scholars could support Afghan scholars by providing them with opportunities such as scholarships or internships. If foreign professors could invite and support Afghan female students, it would greatly benefit Afghan scholars. She stressed the importance of international collaboration in overcoming the barriers Afghan scholars face.

**Marzia Hakimi:** Mrs. Hakimi suggested that mentorship programs could improve the quality of education. She also highlighted the potential impact of external scholarships for Afghan scholars. Collaborative research and the establishment of cultural diplomacy could enhance bilateral cooperation.

**Hassan Rahnaward:** Mr. Rahnaward pointed out the diminished motivation among Afghan scholars due to the bleak situation. He proposed creating platforms that foster intellectual alignment among scholars, regardless of their background, to work together effectively. He also suggested that organizations like "Scholars in STEM" could be instrumental in providing opportunities for Afghan scholars.

## Summary of Views:

### Current Challenges Faced by Afghan Women and Girls in Higher Education:

- **Dr. Nazifa Faqeryar:** The challenges include the negative impacts of past regimes and current restrictions on education, leading to increased child marriages, maternal mortality, and suicides.
- **Marzia Hakimi:** Challenges are deeply rooted in social, cultural, and economic factors, with current restrictions on education being the most significant barrier.
- **Hassan Rahnaward:** The challenges are historical and systemic, with educational restrictions reflecting broader socio-cultural and economic issues.
- **Dr. Mursal Dawodi:** The closure of educational institutions affects multiple generations, with the limited scope of available programs being insufficient.

### Needs to Reduce These Challenges for Women:

- **Dr. Nazifa Faqeryar:** International pressure on the regime and advocacy from Islamic scholars and male educators are crucial. National discussions and scientific programs are needed.



- **Dr. Mursal Dawodi:** Psychological support and motivational programs are necessary, alongside educational institutions providing support for girls.
- **Hassan Rahnaward:** Legal efforts and societal inclusion are needed to overcome the challenges, with a focus on security and economic issues.

### **Preparing Female Students and Researchers Without Institutional Support:**

- **Dr. Nazifa Faqeryar:** Engage in scientific work, write articles, and participate in academic activities.
- **Dr. Mursal Dawodi:** Utilize online resources, improve language skills, and take online courses.
- **Hassan Rahnaward:** Build networks among students and scholars, publish articles, and disseminate information.

### **Expectations from Domestic Academic Institutions:**

- **Dr. Nazifa Faqeryar:** No significant expectations, given the lack of support from male colleagues when women were excluded.
- **Hassan Rahnaward:** Collaborative efforts in writing and conferences could have a positive impact.
- **Dr. Mursal Dawodi:** Institutions face pressure and limitations, reducing their ability to support women's education.

### **Expectations from International Organizations:**

- **Marzia Hakimi:** Larger sessions and increased opportunities could be effective, with international conferences discussing women's education.
- **Hassan Rahnaward:** Diplomatic pressure, financial support, and expanded educational opportunities are needed.

### **Fulfillment of Responsibilities by International Organizations:**

- **Marzia Hakimi:** International organizations have made efforts but need to continue and increase their support.
- **Dr. Mursal Dawodi:** Calls for more substantial support, including scholarships and educational opportunities.
- **Hassan Rahnaward:** Ongoing dialogue and increased understanding are necessary.

### **Despair in Domestic Academic Institutions:**

- **Marzia Hakimi:** Hope for positive change remains, despite unpredictability.
- **Hassan Rahnaward:** The importance of global awareness and dialogue is emphasized.
- **Dr. Mursal Dawodi:** Mixed outlook, with potential for international efforts to bring positive change.



### **Weaknesses of International Organizations:**

- **Marzia Hakimi:** Geopolitical changes and lack of preparedness in addressing the Taliban's return.
- **Dr. Mursal Dawodi:** Cultural differences and internal unity issues in Afghanistan.
- **Hassan Rahnaward:** Dependency on political systems and limited effectiveness.

### **Recognition of Afghan Scholars by Global Academic Institutions:**

- **Dr. Nazifa Faqeryar:** Many Afghan students are not given opportunities by foreign universities.
- **Dr. Mursal Dawodi:** Afghan scholars are often overlooked in global academic environments.
- **Marzia Hakimi:** Negative attitudes and visa restrictions hinder Afghan scholars.
- **Hassan Rahnaward:** Discrimination against Afghan women scholars and researchers.

### **Role of Domestic Scholars in Seeking Solutions:**

- **Dr. Nazifa Faqeryar:** National dialogue; International pressure.
- **Marzia Hakimi:** Effective forums; International organization involvement.
- **Dr. Mursal Dawodi:** Unity among organizations; Global outreach; Reporting challenges.
- **Hassan Rahnaward:** Practical solutions; Collaboration; External support.

### **Role of Foreign Scholars, Researchers, and Specialists Worldwide:**

- **Dr. Nazifa Faqeryar:** Raise awareness; Form alliances; International collaborations.
- **Dr. Mursal Dawodi:** Support with scholarships; Invite Afghan scholars; Mentorship.
- **Marzia Hakimi:** Mentorship programs; External scholarships; Cultural diplomacy.
- **Hassan Rahnaward:** Intellectual platforms; Non-discriminatory collaborations.

### **Solutions Considering Current Conditions**

- **Hassan Rahnaward:** Intellectual alignment; Expanded opportunities.
- **Dr. Nazifa Faqeryar:** Continued international support; Overcoming barriers in education.
- **Dr. Mursal Dawodi:** Future invitations; Support for admissions; Addressing limitations.

### **Expectations from Domestic Academic Institutions:**

- **Dr. Nazifa Faqeryar:** supportive work environment for female staff; support from male colleagues.
- **Hassan Rahnaward:** Positive impacts of conferences; Collaborative writing.
- **Dr. Mursal Dawodi:** Pressure and limitations; Institutional challenges.



## Expectations from International Organizations

- **Marzia Hakimi:** Larger sessions; Increased opportunities.
- **Hassan Rahnaward:** Diplomatic pressure; Financial support; Expanded opportunities.
- Other speakers also emphasized these points.

**Moderator (Dr. Akbari) and Speakers:** The moderator, Dr. Akbari, and the speakers also discussed and acknowledged the support of many organizations, including the Institute of International Education's Scholar Rescue Fund (IIE-SRF), Scholars at Risk programs, PAUSE, Canadian Women for Women in Afghanistan (CW4WAfghan) and numerous other organizations that have supported Afghan scholars since 2021 and beyond. They emphasized the importance of such programs in providing a safe environment for scholars at risk globally, particularly Afghan scholars. However, they also noted that the currently active organizations are few and that this is not sufficient to support many Afghan scholars who remain at risk. They stressed that more such initiatives are needed to provide adequate support.

## Conclusion

The challenges faced by Afghan women and girls in higher education are multi-faceted and deeply ingrained in historical, cultural, and socio-economic factors. Addressing these issues requires a concerted effort from both domestic and international communities. This includes pressure on the current regime, support from international organizations, and collaboration among global scholars. The collective efforts of both domestic and foreign scholars, researchers, and institutions are essential to improve the educational opportunities and conditions for Afghan women and girls. The aim is to transform the current dire situation into one where Afghan women and girls can thrive academically and professionally, ultimately contributing to a brighter future for the country.

## Acknowledgment

This report was noted and prepared by **NoorAfshan Hashimi Kabulian**, during the event. The Scholars in STEM team is thankful for her time and patience in preparing this report.

## Editor:

This report is edited by **Dr. Sweeta Akbari**

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