Protecting education should be at the center of peace negotiations in Afghanistan

By: Lauryn Oates & Homa Hoodfar

The Taliban appeared to be walking away from peace talks with the Afghan government — until, at the end of May, they suddenly agreed to a proposed meeting in Istanbul.

But they stipulated major constraints, with a senior leader relaying, according to Voice of America, that the agenda shouldn't include making decisions on critical issues, the conference must be short, and the Taliban delegation should be "low level." These conditions effectively render the meeting meaningless, and it's likely that one of the critical issues the Taliban wish to avoid discussing is education. The Taliban have dismissed progress in education in Afghanistan as yet another manifestation of foreign occupation, and has used this as justification to attack schools, students and teachers.

It is clearly counter to Taliban interests to acknowledge the intense demand Afghan children and their families have for education, and their courageous efforts to realize that demand under the improved schooling conditions that have mercifully come about since 2001.

But now it's not only the Taliban that have an interest in dismissing and downplaying these achievements. The United States government is absolving itself of Afghanistan through a plan to withdraw by Sept. 11, peddling a narrative that it isn't responsible for the country's future. It's also turning its back on Afghanistan's educational gains.

Justifying attacking schools

The Taliban have not claimed responsibility for the deplorable attack recently carried out May 8 against the Sayed Al-Shuhada School in Dasht-e-Barchi, a neighborhood in West Kabul where members of the Hazara ethnic minority live. The attacks took the lives of at least 85 people, mostly schoolgirls. But suspicion of Taliban involvement is justified given their history of violence against educational institutions and the view — shared with some other Sunni Islamist extremist groups — of the Shia Hazaras as heretical.

Yet, despite the Taliban's casual downplaying of the very significant social change that has swept Afghanistan since the end of its rule, the last two decades have stood out in stark contrast to not only the time when the Taliban ruled the country, but also as an exceptional period in the overall history of the country's efforts to establish and expand public education.

Expansion of Afghan education

In 1950, six per cent of Afghan children — fewer than 100,000 — attended school, almost all of them boys. By 1960, this figure had close to doubled and girls accounted for just over 10 per cent of elementary students. By 1978, more than a million students were in primary and secondary schools, but still only about 15 per cent were girls.

Even under the Soviet-backed regime that introduced compulsory education aimed at paving the way for changing the socio-political structure of the country, 90 per cent of the population remained illiterate. By 1991, 33 per cent of children attending elementary school were girls, but the student population had dropped to only 628,000 kids with 182,000 enrolled in secondary schools.

Then, the Mujahideen forces seized power, initiating the decimation of the modest progress made over the past century. In 1995, when the Taliban started closing down girls' schools, there had been 103,256 girls in public schools in Kabul and 7,793 female teachers. By May 1996, there were none at all. A small minority of girls managed to access clandestine schools, at great risk, but the public school system for girls effectively no longer existed.

The right to human development

Indeed, research in in 2007 and 2010 showed that a considerable portion of Afghan refugees in Iran and Pakistan, had fled Taliban-controlled Afghanistan primarily so that their children could go to school.

These families had seen up close what a society stripped of educational opportunity looked like. They knew that education would be the most enduring capital they could give their children. And they are right: education is essential for human development.

Countries' literacy rates predict their GDPs, as well as health outcomes, including child and infant mortality rates. If the Taliban insist on denying access to a good quality education to all children, girls and boys, they effectively guarantee Afghans a future of poverty and chronic underdevelopment.

In 2009, journalist Sharmeen Obaid-Chinoy interviewed Qari Abdullah, a Taliban commander in charge of recruiting children as suicide bombers. He told Obaid-Chinoy: "If you're fighting, then God provides you with means [to win] … kids themselves are tools to achieve God's will."

Afghans don't want this, and they are asking the U.S. to hold the Taliban accountable, to help protect a meaningful future for children and families.

Honest reckoning needed

But many have argued that the U.S. troop withdrawal announcement has meant there is now no incentive for the Taliban to compromise.

Worse, U.S. President Joe Biden has expressed little concern for the very grave consequences this will have for Afghans, especially women and girls.

An honest reckoning with what's at stake in paving the way for the Taliban to once again dismantle progress made in education would require facing the full tragedy of the cataclysm in store for millions of Afghan children who dream of going to a real school.

That truth is a hard one to face. As a consequence, we're witnessing a strange convergence of views between Biden's government and the Taliban — one where Afghan children are being asked to quietly absorb the blow of the end of their education.

The Biden administration should course correct and immediately recalibrate its strategy vis-à-vis the Taliban, if it wants to avoid leaving in place this dismal legacy.

Zero responsibility?

While on the campaign trail, Biden claimed he would feel "zero responsibility" for the future of Afghan women and girls if they were negatively affected after a U.S. withdrawal.

But the truth is that after 20 years of military engagement in Afghanistan, besides an earlier proxy war and many promises made, the U.S. does hold responsibility for Afghans' fate, including their human right to access education.

Safeguards to this right must be put in place now; waiting until the conclusion of talks will be too late.

Firm and detailed guarantees from those involved in the talks about the future of education in Afghanistan should be a condition of the negotiations, rather than a hoped-for outcome. And the U.S. should lead in brokering these guarantees.

Relying on the good will of the Taliban — the same people who have burned down schools, murdered teachers and used children as suicide bombers — is not a responsible strategy; it is, rather, enabling more suffering and more injustice.

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New CARE research reveals COVID-19 is compounding barriers to health care for displaced women & girls

"Magnifying Inequalities and Compounding Risks: The Impact of COVID-19 on the Health and Protection of Women and Girls on the Move," a new report by CARE revealed growing evidence that COVID-19 is increasing short-term humanitarian needs and negatively affecting longer-term outcomes for marginalized populations and people in vulnerable situations.

The report showed that among those worst affected are the nearly 40 million forcibly displaced

women and girls worldwide who already faced additional barriers to accessing critical basic services before COVID-19 due to the intersection of their gender and displacement status. Since the onset of the pandemic, women and girls on the move are facing further decreased access to healthcare — including sexual and reproductive health — and protection services, increased risks of gender-based violence, and deeper poverty and food insecurity.

Placing gender at the center of its humanitarian and development responses, CARE undertook the new research, including more than 1,000 surveys with women on the move and from host communities – in Afghanistan, Ecuador, and Turkey between April and May 2021 — to better understand how COVID-19 is impacting the health and protection of women and girls on the move.

The three countries represent different types of forced displacement across multiple regions: internally displaced persons (IDPs) and refugee returnees in Afghanistan; more recent migrants and refugees due to the Venezuelan crisis in Ecuador; and longer-term Syrian refugees living under temporary international protection in Turkey.

Key findings included:

Half of all women on the move in Afghanistan, Ecuador, and Turkey have had less or no access to regular health check-ups and other basic health services since the start of the pandemic. Across all three countries, many told CARE they were not utilizing any available health services because they feared stigmatization and/or contracting the virus.

Almost half (46%) of women on the move in Afghanistan, Ecuador, and Turkey had less or no access to safe maternity care since the start of the pandemic.

67% of women on the move in Afghanistan and 70% in Turkey reported that their household income decreased during COVID-19, which is constraining expenditure on medication, hygiene items and food, and increasing reliance on negative coping strategies.

Across all three countries, between 16% and 39% of women on the move reported that the risk of violence and abuse of women and girls in their communities had increased.

More than a quarter of women on the move across the three countries (26% on average) reported increased challenges accessing registration and legal and civil documentation, which are vital to secure legal stay and often to access essential services, such as health care.

With the findings confirming that women and girls on the move continue to face grave challenges to their health and overall protection, CARE called on national governments and the international community to act urgently to ensure that COVID-19 and other humanitarian response and recovery efforts are gender-responsive, women-led, and focused on preventing women and girls on the move from losing further ground in the fight for gender equality.

Salah Hamwi, CARE Turkey's Assistant Country Director: "The socio-economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has been significant in Turkey, with reduced access to livelihood opportunities, increased basic needs, and challenges in access to education and health services. Refugee women and girls are disproportionately affected by the COVID-19

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US forces preparing to return to Afghanistan if threats posed

Based on reports, US forces are preparing for possible return to Afghanistan in future as concerns are raising over increasing presence of al-Qaeda in the region particularly Afghanistan.

In a Congress committee hearing, Ronald Moultrie, the under-secretary of defense for intelligence and security, confirmed that intelligence lessons are being learned in case there is a need to return. His answer came in reply to a question by Mike Waltz, a member of the US House of Representatives and a former Special Forces soldier in Afghanistan.

'There is a strong likelihood that we may have to go back,' said Waltz. 'Al-Qaeda will resurge in the wake of Taliban gains and does intend to attack the United States again if given the opportunity.'

"It is what we're exactly thinking of – we're people trying to make sure what intelligence networks are focusing on," Moultrie stressed.

In April, US President Joe Biden despite US army suggestions decided on full troops withdrawal from Afghanistan by September 11 this year.

More than half of US troop withdrawal process has been completed so far. Experts are afraid of returning Taliban to get the power once again in absence of foreign troops in the country.

A number of Afghan experts say US knows that terrorist groups are threatening Afghanistan and early troop withdrawal from Afghanistan will cause worse scenarios in the country.

They are stressing that US should make further steps towards maintaining peace in Afghanistan, violence and Taliban attacks will increase in the country where other terrorist groups including al-Qaeda and Daesh will also pose serious threats to Afghanistan and the region.

Afghanistan National Security Council in its recent statement in connection with relations between the Taliban and al-Qaeda has said it would be difficult for the Taliban group to cut ties with al Qaeda as both have common interests and deep ideologic relations.

"The formula of Taliban's power in Afghanistan has been described mistakenly. For time being, Afghan are standing to defend the system and its values; therefore, neither Taliban nor any other groups can forcefully impose its system on the people," said Rahmatullah Andar, a spokesperson to the country's national security council.

This comes after United Nations Security Council in its recent report has said that presence of al Qaeda has been reported in at least 15 provinces particularly in the country's eastern, southern and south-eastern provinces.

Meanwhile, Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC) has also expressed concern over increasing violence and civilian casualties in the country, saying that most civilian casualties have been caused by IED explosions used by Taliban.

On the other hand, officials for the ministry of defense say the country's air forces have conducted lots of air strikes against Taliban and al-Qaeda fighters in outskirts of Helmand's Nawa district, inflecting heavy casualties to the groups in the province in recent weeks.

This comes amid of increasing violence and Taliban attacks in 26 provinces of the country. Although Afghan National Defense and Security Forces have launched military operations in several provinces, Taliban fighters are still posing threats to the government and people in different parts of the country.

It is worth mentioning that US and NATO troops withdrawal process was started on May 1st and it is determined that the process will be completed by early September.

Suraya Raiszada

In Afghanistan, COVAX COVID-19 vaccine deliveries make schools safer

On March 8, Afghanistan became the first country in Central Asia to receive COVID-19 vaccine doses through the COVAX Facility, with UNICEF coordinating procurement and supply. The first shipment of 468,000 doses was prioritized for teachers and university professors, an indication of just how vital the nation's educators are to the embattled nation's future.

Teachers were among the first to be vaccinated when Afghanistan received its first shipment of COVID-19 vaccine doses through COVAX.

"This is great news for us, because we feel safe against the virus," said Gul Chaman Sadat Mousavi, a teacher at Dasht Girls' High School in Daikundi Province, after she received her vaccination. "Schools are about to start and the children can come to classes safely and study. Today, I feel happy, comfortable and at peace."

This student was injured after three terrorist bombs exploded near the Sayed Ul-Shuhada High School in west Kabul on May 8, 2021.

This student was injured after three terrorist bombs exploded near the Sayed Ul-Shuhada High School in west Kabul on May 8, 2021. © UNICEF/UN0464835/UNICEF Afghanistan

"My back, neck, and shoulder, as well as my left knee, are all injured," the student pictured above said 10 days after the bombing (her name has been omitted to protect her privacy). " One of my ears has gone deaf since the explosion. I cannot sleep and I stay awake until midnight before I fall asleep. And even though my mother reads the holy Quran for me every night, I keep having nightmares. When I close my eyes, I see dead bodies and I feel as if I'm falling from a great height."

UNICEF is working to ensure that children in Afghanistan receive a quality education and the opportunity to reach their full potential

To ensure that Afghanistan's children — including girls — receive a quality education despite the threats to their health and safety, UNICEF works with partners to protect students and support the nation's fragile school system.

UNICEF remains at the forefront of the humanitarian response in Afghanistan, and will continue to reach vulnerable children and families affected by multiple shocks with urgent, lifesaving services. In 2021, those plans include connecting 600,000 children with formal and nonformal educational services, implementing safety protocols to prevent and control the spread of infection in 1,250 schools and providing training for 60,000 adults and adolescent boys and girls on gender roles, nondiscriminatory practices and positive social norms. To achieve 2021 program goals in Afghanistan, UNICEF requires US $143.6 million.

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