

AGDA Reflection

Erased But Unbroken: A Regional Call to Action for Women's Rights in Afghanistan

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Four years since the Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan, the removal of women from public life has been systematic and deliberate – making it the most repressive regime for women and girls. Over 130 edicts have been issued restricting every aspect of women's lives and freedom – including education, employment, mobility, healthcare, public visibility, and freedom of expression. Female professionals have been dismissed en masse countrywide. Girls above the age of 12 are barred from school. Women protesting peacefully face detention, torture, public lashings, and even sexual violence. Afghanistan has become, by all indicators, the most repressive country for women in the world leading many international lawyers to call it a system of 'gender-apartheid'.

This kind of gender repression is not rooted in Afghan culture, nor is it allowed in Islamic tradition as it has not been seen across the Muslim world. Despite the misuse of religious rhetoric, Afghan women have not disappeared. They continue to teach, resist, organise, and lead – often in silence and danger and underground,

but with unwavering courage. Their resilience calls not for sympathy, but for principled regional and international action.

In this context, the convening of the Women's Forum for Afghanistan (WFA) with the Anwar Gargash Diplomatic Academy (AGDA) in Abu Dhabi in June 2025 marks a powerful step forward for regional support. This regional engagement reflected a clear understanding that Afghanistan is not an isolated humanitarian tragedy – it is a test of the Muslim world's commitment to women's rights, justice and the true spirit of Islam. The Forum brought diverse Afghan women into conversation with Emiratis, women ministers, and regional leaders in foreign policy and the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda. Together, they discussed what a meaningful, values-based regional response could look like – and how Gulf countries can lead that response.

As Muslim-majority states, the Gulf has a unique moral and political responsibility to challenge the Taliban's misappropriation of Islamic values. Across the region, constitutions and foreign policy frameworks already codify commitments to gender equality, justice and human rights. Islamic tradition has long upheld women's access to education, participation in public life and protection from harm. What is unfolding in Afghanistan is not a debate on interpretation – it is a clear violation of core Islamic teachings and principles.

It is therefore imperative that regional actors speak with one voice: that gender apartheid has no basis in Islam and no place in our region. The United Arab Emirates (UAE) and its allies can action their expressions of concern and challenge the Taliban regime's claim to Islamic legitimacy, especially when it is being used to deny women the most basic rights.

Afghan girls today are denied the very foundation of their future. With over 1.4 million girls barred from secondary school and tens of thousands blocked from universities, the need for urgent educational access is clear.

That is why we call on regional and international partners to expand scholarships and establish tailored education corridors for Afghan girls – especially those living in exile or in refugee communities in Pakistan, Iran and Central Asia. Gulf universities can lead by allocating placements, providing residency support, and fast-tracking leadership, medical, and vocational training programmes for Afghan women. Additionally, short-term leadership and language programmes hosted by Gulf states, such as those championed by Emirati institutions – can serve as platforms for cultivating the next generation of Afghan women leaders.

The health crisis facing Afghan women is worsening. Every two hours, one Afghan woman dies from childbirth and related complications. Many are denied care without a male guardian. Female doctors are banned or threatened. Suicide and maternal mortality rates are rising. Here too, the region can play a significant role. The UAE has already demonstrated leadership in humanitarian aid and development. That leadership can now extend to targeted, gender-responsive health programmes for Afghan women.

Regional funding should support trauma-informed mental health services, mobile clinics, and networks of Afghan female health professionals. Humanitarian aid must be conditional on gender access and delivered in partnership with trusted women-led local organisations. The region and others can push for safeguards that ensure aid does not entrench repression but supports resilience and recovery.

At the heart of any durable solution must be Afghan women themselves. They hold the knowledge, experience, and legitimacy to lead change. Their exclusion from regional and international forums is both unjust and counterproductive. The WFA's engagement with AGDA is a model for how this can be reversed: through intentional consultation, long-term partnerships, and representation of diverse women leaders – urban and rural, from all ethnic backgrounds.

We urge states to institutionalise Afghan women's participation in all dialogues and diplomatic processes on Afghanistan. Regional organisations such as the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation and the Gulf Cooperation Council must commit to including Afghan women in shaping policies, humanitarian priorities and negotiations with the de facto authorities.

The region has framed the Taliban's policies as "suspended" – not final. This creates a vital window for action. Gulf countries can offer not only sanctuary and scholarships but also leadership in restoring the dignity of Afghan women. Through values aligned with Islam

and international human rights, regional actors can position themselves as both protectors of justice and shapers of global norms.

Reversing the removal of Afghan women requires more than statements of solidarity. It demands tangible, values-based solutions from those closest – geographically, culturally and spiritually. Regional partners in the Gulf and wider Middle East region can lead with clarity and courage: to invest in education, health, mobility, and voice for Afghan women, to anchor this leadership in Islamic principles, and to ensure that women are not seen as victims of crisis, but as architects of recovery.

Afghan women have not given up. They are still here: teaching, resisting, building. The question now is whether the region and the world will rise to meet them. The time for action is not tomorrow. It is now. And the path forward begins with listening to Afghan women and walking beside them.