

Unseen and Undaunted: Uzbek Women Educators Confront Gender Apartheid in Afghanistan

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Executive Summary

Today, many Uzbek women continue to teach in secret under extremely challenging conditions, particularly in remote provinces such as Faryab and Jawzjan. They face severe economic hardship, psychological stress, and social isolation, yet receive little to no support from NGOs or local authorities. Their unpaid educational work and quiet determination represent a powerful but largely overlooked form of resistance to gender apartheid.

"By 'gender apartheid,' I refer to the systematic segregation and exclusion of women and girls from public life, education, and decision-making — simply because of their gender."

About the RWI Afghanistan Programme



**".. Oh, God, do recognise my identity! With
tear-filled eyes and a heart heavy with dread,
Until I step foot in the halls of education,
My head rests on the pillow, my voice
whispers, burdened with sorrow.
What sin have I committed?
To be solely judged for being an Afghan girl?"**



Excerpt from a poem by an 18-year-old participant who, despite immense adversity, secretly teaches young girls and promotes resilience.

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MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS
OF DENMARK



Norwegian Ministry
of Foreign Affairs

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Urgent Action needed

Protect and support Uzbek women educators through direct funding, security guarantees, and formal recognition, induction and development programmes. Without this, their work - and the right to learn - will remain at risk.

Invisible Classrooms: Uzbek Women's Quiet Resistance

Recent interviews with Uzbek women in northern Afghanistan—particularly in Faryab, Jowzjan, and Mazar-e-Sharif—reveal that the struggle for education continues despite significant obstacles. Many women are still conducting informal, home-based classes in secret, often without any support from NGOs or government authorities

“We teach because we must - even if no one sees us and even if it is dangerous. We do this for the future of our daughters because we believe in the power of education.”

In Faryab, especially in Maimana, women report severe economic hardship, psychological strain, and a profound sense of abandonment. These feelings are especially acute in remote areas lacking basic infrastructure and visibility. While conditions in Jowzjan remain difficult, they are somewhat less dire than in Faryab. In Mazar-e-Sharif, limited access to women's markets enables some women to engage in small-scale economic activities—opportunities that are virtually absent in Faryab due to restrictive norms, insecurity, and underdeveloped infrastructure.

These findings emphasise the localised and intersectional aspects of Uzbek women's educational resistance. In many remote, Uzbek-majority regions, women experience double marginalisation, being excluded from formal education systems and disconnected from aid, development, and advocacy networks. Numerous women are widows or have husbands who have fled due to fears of Taliban reprisals against ethnic minorities. The Taliban's abrupt cessation of payments to informal educators has left those women who are the primary providers for their families without income, further exacerbating their already significant stress and pressure.



Illustration by Sofia Bartolini



“The government should ensure fair access to national resources. When our salaries were reduced, they did not consider how we, as sole breadwinners, could support our families and survive”



Illustration by Sofia Bartolini

Nevertheless, Uzbek women exhibit remarkable resilience.

They take pride in their handicrafts, creatively utilising their limited resources and time as a form of quiet resistance. Many express a strong desire to see their products reach international markets and actively seek support from international NGOs to help fulfil this aspiration.



Handicrafts made by underground educators - yet they get no support.



“There’s no local market for us. We sew and wait, hoping someone from the city buys our work. If INGOs helped export it, many lives could change”

Research Methodology

Based on interviews with more than 40 Uzbek women from Faryab, Jowzjan, and Mazar-e-Sharif, this research shows that Uzbek women have been actively promoting education for girls and women from the very beginning of formal schooling in Afghanistan. Field visits and outreach to families connected to pioneering educators, alongside the experiences of contemporary Uzbek women under Taliban rule, show how this long tradition of education and quiet resistance continues today.

Research Results

The determination of Uzbek women to establish clandestine schools highlights their ongoing struggle against a system of gender apartheid that seeks to erase their presence from public life. Their unpaid and often hidden educational efforts provide hope for countless girls who would otherwise be denied the opportunity to learn. Recognising and supporting these women is crucial to ensuring that their contributions are not overlooked and that policies effectively address the intersecting barriers of gender, ethnicity, and geographic isolation. Without concrete action, Afghanistan's gender apartheid will continue to silence the very women who are vital to preserving education.

Recommendation and Call to Action

This policy brief issues an urgent appeal to national and international actors to address the layered oppression faced by Afghan women,

particularly ethnic minorities such as Uzbeks in Faryab and Jawzjan. Drawing on contemporary evidence, this research demonstrates the need for immediate, intersectional, and coordinated action to prevent further erosion of women's rights under a system of gender apartheid.



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Key Recommendation:

- **Independent Monitoring:** Establish a mechanism to document violations against minority women and girls, with cases pursued through international legal channels.
- **Engagement with Detention Facilities:** Strengthen monitoring of underreported women's detention sites and protect other vulnerable groups.
- **Cultural and Religious Dialogue:** Collaborate with Islamic scholars and local leaders to help overcome cultural barriers and reinforce community-based resistance.



- **Diplomatic Action:** Apply sustained diplomatic pressure on the Taliban to reopen girls' schools ahead of the 2026 academic year.
- **Support for Educators:** Provide safe pathways, asylum options, and formal recognition for at-risk educators forced into exile.
- **Recognition of Gender Apartheid:** Advocate for the formal recognition of gender apartheid, with stronger backing from Muslim-majority states.
- **Targeted Investment:** Prioritise investment in education, healthcare, and social protection for marginalised ethnic groups, and ensure the reinstatement of female teachers with fair pay and robust safeguards.
- **Creating Women's Markets:** A women's market could be a good option for women who have lost their jobs and need an opportunity to sell their products in an accessible, women-friendly space —something that is currently lacking in Jawzjan and Faryab.

Without deliberate and inclusive action, the contributions of minority women educators will remain invisible, and generations of girls will continue to be denied their fundamental right to learn.



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