

Analysis of discourses in the Islamic World about the ban upon women's education by the Taliban in Afghanistan

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The women's education ban in Afghanistan is a vital issue for people in the country and also a challenging issue for the Islamic world. The researcher used critical discourse analysis to analyse the mediated discourses in the Islamic world regarding the women's education ban in Afghanistan. An online search was applied by using key terms and headings such as "girls deprived from education in Afghanistan"; "women education ban in Afghanistan"; "women education bans by the Taliban in Afghanistan"; and "the ongoing discourses in the Islamic world regarding the women education ban in Afghanistan". A total of 62 articles were recorded, and after the exclusion of duplicated and irrelevant articles, 20 news articles were selected, reviewed, coded, and analysed. The Foucauldian viewpoint was adopted to consider the relationship between discourse and power, and the three-dimensional model of Fairclough (1993) was applied to guide the critical discourse analysis. Based on the results from the analysis, almost all countries, organisations, and key leaders in the Islamic world called education a fundamental right for all human beings, including women. They condemned the women's education ban by the Taliban in Afghanistan. However, the Taliban ignored the reactions of the Islamic world and focused on their destructive decision to deprive women of education in Afghanistan. The results indicate that just condemning the Taliban's decision on women's education is not enough, and the Islamic world needs to take practical actions to secure equal rights to education and work for women in Afghanistan.

Introduction

Education, as one of the fundamental rights of human beings, has no other alternatives in human life. The primary religious sources of Islam, especially the Holy *Qur'an*, focus on the importance of education in human life regardless of gender discrimination. For example, Allah (SWT) says in Sura Al-Alaq, "Read in the name of your Lord who created; created man from a clinging substance" (*The Qur'an*, 96:1-2). Also, says in Sura Az-Zumar, "Say: 'Are they equal, those who know and those who do not know?' Only those with minds remember" (*The Qur'an*, 39:9). Moreover, it was narrated from Anas bin Malik that Prophet Mohammad (PBUH) said, "Seeking knowledge is a duty upon every Muslim" (Sunan Ibn Majah, n.d.). According to Freire (1973), education that enables human beings (male and female) to learn how to partake in the world's development process has no other alternative. Sedere (2005) stated that education is the primary means of change in societies.

However, contrary to the above-mentioned religious orders, after returning to power in August 2021, the Taliban began limiting women's education in Afghanistan. Finally, under the pretext of fulfilling religious orders, they banned women's education in December 2022. Mr Noorullah Munir, former Taliban's acting education minister, during his trip to Uruzgan province, claimed that people disagree on their young girls attending schools. However, people in this province and some other provinces rejected his claim and asked

the Taliban to open girls' schools immediately (*Associated Press*, 2022). According to some news articles, women's education is banned by the Taliban in Afghanistan. The Taliban's acting higher education minister ordered all public and private educational institutions in Afghanistan to suspend female education (*Al-Jazeera*, 2022; *BBC News*, 2022).

Based on their vague agenda, the Taliban banned girls from attending high schools and universities in Afghanistan. Mr Nida Mohammad Nadim, the Taliban government's acting minister of higher education, said they do not allow girls to continue their education at universities. The Taliban's higher education minister backed their decision on the women's education ban and said that it was necessary to ban female students from going to universities to prevent mixed education in the country (*RFERL*, 2022; *Al-Jazeera*, 2022; *Euronews*, 2022; *Reuters*, 2022; *The Guardian*, 2022). The Taliban's women's education ban sparked despair in Afghanistan, followed by international condemnations (*BBC News*, 2022).

The return of the Taliban to power in 2021 and their rule in Afghanistan can be considered highly severe for women in the country, and the Taliban, which is a militant group, is known for their harsh policies in their first period from 1996 to 2001 (Salih, 2023). During their first period from 1996 to 2001 in Afghanistan, the Taliban was infamous for their violence against women, and under their rule, women were not allowed to learn and work, and they imposed the same rule after their return to power in Afghanistan in 2021 (McQuinn et al., 2022). One of the causes the Taliban mentioned to justify their decision on the women's education ban is the issue of the Hijab (the Islamic dress code). The hijab (Islamic dressing) is a crucial identification symbol of Muslim women. But, in different Muslim societies, the hijab has different levels of importance based on social, cultural, and political issues (Mizel, 2023). However, Muslim girls have not been deprived of education and going to schools and universities on the pretext of not observing the hijab and other excuses in Islamic countries, and this has happened only in Afghanistan under the Taliban rule.

Modern women's education in Afghanistan was started in 1920 and continued until the end of control of the Islamic government of Afghanistan under the leadership of former president Professor Burhanuddin Rabbani, who was a well-educated Muslim scholar, in Kabul in 1996. However, when the Taliban took control of most parts of Afghanistan, including the capital city (Kabul) in 1996, it banned women's education in most parts of the country, except the areas that remained under the control of the Islamic government. After the ousting of the Taliban from power in 2001, the doors of schools and universities reopened for all girls in the country. Again, the Taliban limited and finally banned women's education after their return to power for the second period in August 2021. Before the return of the Taliban, about 1,444,000 school girls and about 112,000 female university students were going to schools and universities in Afghanistan. In 2018, of 3.8 million school students, 38% (1,444,000) were girls (Zirack, 2021). In 2020, the number of university students was about 400,000 and 28% (112,000) were female (*Hasbt-e Subh*, 2020).

Moreover, in different countries where women can learn and be active, they have made remarkable contributions to scholarly works. Based on some scholarly works, women make relatively more contributions in some regions and countries (Atkinson et al., 2019). According to the results from some studies (e.g., Sarwari et al., 2016; Qahar Sarwari & Abdul Wahab, 2017; Sarwari et al., 2023), in some Muslim-dominated countries, such as Malaysia, where women are allowed to receive education, work and partake in social, cultural and political activities, the number of female students is higher than male students in higher education institutions and female students are relatively more active, and conduct more interactions with their peers from different cultures and societies. In Afghanistan, female students are eager to participate in educational activities and overcome their educational-related challenges, even though they may experience some harassment. Although some female students experienced harassment in some institutions (Orfan et al., 2022), both male and female students reported higher levels of self-regulation (Tareen et al., 2023). However, the Taliban's decision to ban women's education has prevented Afghan girls from achieving their educational aspirations.

After the female education ban by the Taliban in Afghanistan, there were some reactions from some leaders, authorities and organisations in the Islamic world. but they did not change the Taliban's decision. The women's education ban by the Taliban in Afghanistan under the pretext of fulfilling religious orders and analyses of the dominant mediated discourses in the Islamic world regarding this issue could be a helpful and interesting study.

Some key research questions have emerged from the Taliban's decision to ban women's education in Afghanistan and the reactions of the Islamic world. What are the Islamic sources that could be a basis for the Taliban banning women's education using the pretext of fulfilling Islamic orders in Afghanistan? How has the Islamic world responded to the decision of the Taliban regarding the women's education ban in Afghanistan? What is the dominant discourse in the Islamic world regarding the women's education ban?

Critical discourse analysis could be a helpful method to answer such questions. According to van Dijk (1998), critical discourse analysis focuses on studying all kinds of spoken and written discourses that focus on different issues, such as domination, discrimination and inequality in a society. Moreover, discourse is a powerful aspect of communication and discourse analysis has an interdisciplinary tendency. Based on Foucault (1972), discourse cannot be subjectively generalised into words and language but instead comprises the fundamental constituents of statements, and discourse analysis has an interdisciplinary trend (Yang & Sun, 2010). Critical discourse analysis, as a broader concept, focuses on the relation and use of language in societies and its effects on ongoing discourses (Blommaert, 2005; Jorgensen & Phillips, 2002; van Dijk, 1998).

Analysis of the ongoing discourses in the Islamic world regarding the mentioned decision of the Taliban in Afghanistan may add some helpful information to the related literature.

Method

This work focused on critical discourse analysis of ongoing discourses in the Islamic world regarding the women's education ban by the Taliban in Afghanistan. An online search was applied by using key terms and headings, such as "girls deprived from education in Afghanistan"; "women education ban in Afghanistan"; "women education bans by the Taliban in Afghanistan"; and "the ongoing discourses in the Islamic world regarding the women education in Afghanistan". A total of 62 articles were recorded, and after the exclusion of duplicated and irrelevant articles, 20 news articles were selected, reviewed, coded, and analysed.

Critical discourse analysis, as a discourse analysis framework, was applied to conduct this study. The three-dimensional model of Fairclough (1993), which includes text, discursive practices and social practices and focuses on three levels of analyses (word, text and social norms levels), was used as a critical discourse analysis framework for our study. The three-dimensional framework of Fairclough (1993) and his approach to critical discourse analysis focus on the relationships between language and power, language and social changes, and discourse and sociocultural issues and practices. Critical discourse analysis supported by Foucault's poststructuralist theories that look to discourse as more than merely speaking and as a source of power, a system of thinking, and a way of constructing our realities (Chambon, 1999; Foucault, 1972; Foucault, 1979; Gutting, 1994; Parker, 1992). Critical discourse analysis is one of the analytical discourse analyses that focuses mainly on assessing dominance, inequality, and power abuse performed, duplicated and resisted in the political and social context by spoken and written text (van Dijk, 2001). Based on some scholars (e.g., Carroll, 2004; Wodak, 2001), the term 'critical' in critical discourse analysis focuses on investigating and comprehending different aims and perspectives of language use and linguistic messages related to social, economic, political and other issues.

About half of a century after the publication of the first academic work under the title of 'Discourse analysis' in 1952 and based on its association with several fields, the area of discourse analysis experienced a fast growth (Yang & Sun, 2010). In accord with that trend, our article collects Internet and media-mediated discourses by key leaders and authorities in Islamic countries and organisations, and applies critical discourse analysis regarding the women's education ban by the Taliban.

Results

Two themes emerged from the analyses of the selected texts: women's education from the Islamic perspective and the dominant discourse in the Islamic world regarding the women's education ban by the Taliban. Based on the analyses, the researchers will explore these themes.

Women's education from Islamic perspectives

As the first theme of the analysis, women's education from the Islamic perspective has a place in the main Islamic sources. All statements from leaders, countries and organisations in the Islamic world about the women's education ban by the Taliban in Afghanistan support women's education. The Holy *Qur'an*, as the main religious source of Islam, repeatedly and regardless of gender discrimination, emphasises the importance of learning, thinking and knowing in human life. For instance, Allah (SWT) says in the first verse of Sura Al-Alaq, "Read in the name of your Lord who created" (*The Qur'an*, 96:1), and also says in Sura An-Nahl, "So ask those who possess knowledge if you do not know" (*The Qur'an*, 16:43).

Even though the main sources of Islam, including the Holy Quran, emphasize the education of human beings (men and women) without any gender discrimination, the Taliban, with their incomplete religious understanding, banned women's education under the pretext of fulfilling religious orders. They have ignored all religious orders regarding the importance of education for both males and females, depriving girls of education. Furthermore, the different verses of the Holy *Qur'an*, Islam's main religious source, ask all human beings (men and women) to read, ask, think, and know. Notwithstanding, the Taliban deny educational rights to women.

During a visit to Uruzgan province of Afghanistan, the Taliban's then-acting education minister said that people of Afghanistan, especially people in Uruzgan province, are against sending their 16 years old and older daughters to schools (*Al-Jazeera*, 2022). However, the claim was rejected by people in Uruzgan and other provinces (Saayin, 2022). Because the Taliban decided on a women's education ban, people, including many women, protested in the capital city of Afghanistan (*Reuters*, 2022).

Education is an essential requirement in human life. All human beings (men and women), without discrimination, have equal rights to learn and to know how to live effectively. People in different areas and provinces asked the Taliban to open school doors to their girls (Pacha, 2022). However, the Taliban's acting minister for higher education defended their decision on the women's education ban and backed the Taliban decision (*Euronews*, 2022).

The women's education ban by the Taliban in Afghanistan was followed by some serious reactions from the Islamic world, and most Islamic countries and organisations condemned the mentioned decision. Based on a news article titled "OIC calls for global Islamic campaign against Taliban for university education ban on women", at a meeting on 29 December 2022, the OIC Secretary General, Hissein Taha, called the women's education ban by the Taliban a decision against Islam and asked all Islamic countries for a joint campaign against depriving women of education by the Taliban (Khalid, 2022). At the same time, the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar, Ahmed Al-Tayeb, denounced the women's education ban by the Taliban and said that Islam is against such decisions that deprive women of education (Binesh, 2022). As cited in a news article entitled "Al-Azhar Imam:

Ban on women's education contradicts Sharia", Dr Al-Tayeb, the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar, warned:

Muslims and non-Muslims against believing or accepting the allegation that banning women's education is approved in Islam. ... Indeed, Islam firmly denounces such banning since it contradicts the legal rights Islam equally guarantees for women and men (Binesh, 2022).

To look at the world level of the text, based on the first dimension of Fairclough's (1993) three-dimensional model, the phrase 'firmly denounces' (Binesh, 2022) is used to reject the relationship between Islam and the Taliban's decision on banning women's education. The phrase 'equally guarantees' emphasises that Islam supports women's education. Based on the second dimension of the model, the discourse (text) produced is based on Islamic sources. The social practice level shows the importance of women's education among Muslims, where people know Islam's real aspects and teachings.

Based on a news article entitled "Erdogan calls Taliban ban on women's education 'un-Islamic'", Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan condemned the women's education ban by the Taliban, called it a non-Islamic and inhumane decision, and also said that such a thing does not exist in Islam (Soylu, 2023). According to the article, President Erdogan said:

There is no such thing in our religion. No one should define any ban like that based on Islam. Islam does not accept such a thing. On the contrary, we are members of a religion that says, 'seek knowledge from the cradle to the grave' (Soylu, 2023).

Based on the words and discursive analysis of the text, President Erdogan rejected the relationship between Islam and the Taliban's decision on the women's education ban. Also, it is clear that the discourse is based on the main Islamic resources and focuses on the encouragement of seeking knowledge through Islam.

The dominant discourse in the Islamic world regarding women's education ban

Based on different news articles (e.g., *Al-Jazeera*, 2022; *Associated Press*, 2022; *Bernama*, 2022; *Khalid*, 2022; *Soylu*, 2023; *Euronews*, 2022; *Reuters*, 2022; *Aqil*, 2022; *Binesh*, 2022), the dominant discourse in the Islamic world is supportive of women's education, and almost all Islamic countries and organisations condemned the ban by the Taliban in Afghanistan. To illustrate further, Islamic countries such as Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar, opposed the women's education ban by the Taliban (*Associated Press*, 2022; *Euronews*, 2022). According to a news article titled "Saudi Arabia and Turkey condemn Taliban university ban for women", the Saudi foreign ministry expressed "astonishment and regret" at Afghan women being denied university education (*NBC News*, 2022). As cited in the same news article, the Turkish foreign minister Mevlut Cavusoglu called on the Taliban to reverse their decision:

What harm is there in women's education? What harm does it do Afghanistan? ... Is there an Islamic explanation? On the contrary, our religion, Islam, is not against education, on the contrary, it encourages education and science. (*NBC News*, 2022).

As stated in a news article entitled "Indonesia 'deeply concerned' over the Taliban suspending university education for women", the foreign minister of Indonesia expressed concern and dissatisfaction regarding the women's education by the Taliban in Afghanistan and called education a prime right of all human beings (men and women) (Aqil, 2022). Moreover, based on a news article titled "Malaysia hopes Afghanistan will reconsider the ban on women from attending universities", through sending a letter to the Taliban's acting higher education minister, Nida Mohammad Nadim, Malaysia's higher education minister Datuk Seri Mohamed Khaled Nordin asked for a rethinking of the decision. He called the women's education ban a harmful decision for educational growth among Muslims (Bernama, 2022). According to the article, the Malaysian higher education minister said:

I believe that education for Afghan women will make them a valuable asset to the nation and help build resilience, stability and strong social cohesion towards nation-building (Bernama, 2022).

The quotation from the Malaysian higher education minister focuses on the importance of education in human development and turning women into valuable assets as necessary steps needed for social integrity, nation-building, and stability in the country.

Furthermore, based on some news articles from the analysis, the Foreign ministers of Iran, the United Arab Emirates and Qatar condemned the women's education ban by the Taliban and called the decision against Islamic teachings and against fundamental human rights ("UAE condemns", 2022; *NBC News*, 2022; *TOLONews*, 2023). Based on a news article entitled "Abdollahian says ban on women's education against Islamic principles," the Iranian foreign minister, Amir Abdollahian, during a meeting with his counterpart from Qatar, said that the women's education ban in Afghanistan is a wrong decision and not in favour of Islam (*TOLONews*, 2023).

However, the Taliban believe their decision on the women's education ban is based on women's honour and national interests (*Al-Jazeera*, 2022). The Taliban's acting minister for higher education rejected all international condemnations regarding the Taliban's decision on the education ban and defended the mentioned decision. The former acting education minister of the Taliban claimed that the people of Afghanistan do not agree to send their girls to school (*Euronews*, 2022; Pacha, 2022). Conversely, people in different parts of Afghanistan opposed the Taliban's decision on the women's education ban, rejected the mentioned claim of the Taliban's former acting education minister, and asked the Taliban's caretaker administration to allow girls and women in Afghanistan to have access to school and university education (*Reuters*, 2022; Pacha, 2022).

Based on the analysis, the selected texts under both themes support women's education and renounce the Taliban's decision on the women's education ban in Afghanistan. The discussion section below will address the mentioned issues in more detail.

Discussion

Our work assessed mediated discourses in the Islamic world regarding the women's education ban by the Taliban in Afghanistan. An online search was applied by using key terms and headings, such as "girls deprived from education in Afghanistan"; "women education ban in Afghanistan"; "women education bans by the Taliban in Afghanistan", and "the ongoing discourses in the Islamic world regarding the women education in Afghanistan". A total of 62 articles were recorded, and after the exclusion of duplicated and irrelevant articles, 20 news articles were selected, reviewed, coded, and analysed.

Besides the selected news articles for the analysis, women's education was also assessed according to the main religious sources for Islam. Both the Holy *Qur'an* and *Prophetic Hadith* (Prophet's words), as the main sources did not support the Taliban's decision on the women's education ban. As Islam's main sources, different verses of the Holy *Qur'an* and *Prophetic Hadith* introduce education as an essential part of human (men and women) life. *The Qur'an* asks all human beings to read, think, ask and seek knowledge, and Prophet Mohammad (PBUH) introduced seeking knowledge as a duty for all Muslims (*The Qur'an*, 96:1-2; *The Qur'an*, 16:43; *The Qur'an*, 39:9; *Sunan Ibn Majah*, n.d.).

Based on the analysis of the dominant discourses in the Islamic world regarding the women's education ban by the Taliban, most of the predominant leaders, scholars, and organisations (e.g., the Director General of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar, the Turkish president, the foreign ministers of Saudi Arabia, Indonesia, Iran, Malaysia and so on) opposed the Taliban's decision on banning women's education, called it a non-Islamic act, and emphasised respect for the educational rights of women (Aqil, 2022; *Associated Press*, 2022; Bernama, 2022; Binesh, 2022; *Euronews*, 2022; Khalid, 2022; Soylu, 2023).

Mr Hissein Taha, Secretary General OIC, head of the second largest organisation in the world after the UN and the largest organisation in the Islamic world, denounced the Taliban's decision on banning women's education in Afghanistan and called it an act against Islam. As an important religious figure in the Islamic world, Dr Ahmed Al-Tayeb, the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar (Al-Azhar University in Egypt), condemned the women's education ban by the Taliban and spoke about Islam being against depriving women of education. Turkey's President Erdogan, called the Taliban's decision on women's education a non-Islamic and inhumane action and said that we could not find the banning of women's education in Islam) (Khalid, 2022; Soylu, 2023; Binesh, 2022).

When such key leaders and figures in the Islamic world denounce the women's education ban by the Taliban in Afghanistan' and describe the decision as being against Islamic values and inhumane, it is very clear that the Taliban's decision is against all Islamic values and teachings. Islam encourages human beings, regardless of gender-based discrimination, to read, learn, think, and seek knowledge.

Based on the main religious sources of Islam, and also based on the analysis of ongoing discourses in the Islamic world regarding the women's education ban by the Taliban, Islam and the Islamic world support women's education, regard education as a

fundamental right for both men and women and reject any decision that deprives human beings (men and women) from education (*Associated Press*, 2022; *Bernamea*, 2022; "Binesh, 2022; Soylu, 2023; *Euronews*, 2022; Aqil, 2022; "Binesh, 2022). Thus, the dominant discourse in the Islamic world regarding the women's education ban by the Taliban is against the Taliban's decision on women's education and is supportive of access for all men and women to education.

However, against all religious orders, against the requests of people in Afghanistan, and also against the demands of key leaders, scholars and figures in the Islamic world, the Taliban have sought to defend their decision on the women's education ban (*Reuters*, 2022; *The Guardian*, 2022). The Taliban assume they respect women by preventing them from attending schools and universities (*Al-Jazeera*, 2022). The Taliban depicted their decision as based on the demands and interests of the people of Afghanistan (Pacha, 2022), and rejected all international criticisms (*Euronews*, 2022). However, based on the evidence, except for a minority of uneducated tribal people in some parts of the country, people in most parts of Afghanistan want to send their daughters to schools and universities and support women's education. Before the collapse of the previous government of Afghanistan in August 2021 based on an unclear deal between the US and the Taliban, there were about 1,444,000 female school students and about 112,000 female university students in Afghanistan (*Hasht-e Subh*, 2020; Zirack, 2021). After the women's education ban, people from different provinces asked the Taliban to stop depriving women of education and to open the doors of schools and universities to women and girls.

Conclusion

Our work focused on critical discourse analysis of ongoing discourses in the Islamic world regarding the women's education ban by the Taliban in Afghanistan. An online search was applied by using four key terms and headings. A total of 62 articles were recorded, and after the exclusion of duplicated and irrelevant articles, 20 news articles were selected, reviewed, coded, and analysed. The Foucauldian viewpoint was adopted to consider the relationship between discourse and power, and the three-dimensional model of Fairclough (1993) was applied to guide the critical discourse analysis. Based on the analysis, almost all countries, organisations, and key leaders in the Islamic world called education a fundamental right for all human beings, including women. They condemned the women's education ban in Afghanistan, but, so far, the Taliban have rejected all international criticisms and condemnations regarding their ban on women's education.

The results indicate that, except for a minority of uneducated tribal people in some parts of the country, people in most parts of Afghanistan want to send their daughters to schools and universities and support women's education. After the women's education ban, people from different provinces asked the Taliban to stop depriving women of education and to open the doors of schools and universities to women and girls. But the Taliban has ignored the reactions of the Islamic world and people in the country regarding their destructive decision to deprive women of education in Afghanistan. The results indicate that by itself condemnation of the Taliban's decision on women's education and

participation in some press conferences regarding the issue are not enough, and the Islamic world needs to take some severe practical actions to provide women with equal rights to education and work in Afghanistan.

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The corresponding author, Dr Abdul Qahar Sarwari, designed and conducted the study and wrote the manuscript, and Co-author, Professor Dr Hamed Mohd Adnan, made contributions in language editing and technical issues.

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