

Muslim World League International Conference on Girls' Education in Muslim Communities: Challenges & Opportunities

Malala's Remarks for the Main Lecture

Islamabad, Pakistan

1:30 pm, Sunday, January 12, 2025

Introduction

Assalamualaikum,

Thank you, Rabia Anum, for the introduction.

Your Excellencies, Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif, Dr. Al-Issa, and
Monsieur Brahim Taha –

Distinguished ministers, experts and educators –

And to everyone listening today –

Thank you for inviting me to address this conference on such a crucial
issue, one that is so dear to my heart. Girls' education.

أَفْرَأُ بِأَسْمِ رَبِّكَ الَّذِي خَلَقَ

...
الَّذِي عَلَّمَ بِالْقَلَمِ
عَلَّمَ الْإِنْسَانَ مَا لَمْ يَعْلَمْ

'Read in the name of your Lord who created... Who taught by the pen— ...
taught humanity what they knew not.'

The very first revelation to our Prophet, صلى الله عليه وآله وسلم, is a reminder
that learning is one of the foundations of Islam.

Our faith encourages the pursuit of knowledge for all people. It is a message for all men and women, girls and boys, to seek empowerment and growth through reading, writing and learning.

To this day, Islamic contributions in medicine, science, mathematics and philosophy continue moving our civilisations forward.

Muslim women have embodied righteousness and the pursuit of knowledge:

From Hazrat Aisha رضي الله عنها., a renowned teacher and scholar.

To Fatima al-Fihri, who founded the world's oldest continually operating university in Morocco in the 9th Century.

To Pakistan's own icons –

From Fatima Jinnah and Asma Jahanghir who led our fight for freedom and justice.

All the way to Anita Zaidi and Sania Nishtar, who have advanced public health, promoted gender equality and fought poverty.

While we celebrate our rich history, we must also turn our attention to the present and the urgent crisis of millions of girls who cannot go to school.

This is not just happening in some small, far-flung communities. It is not isolated to a few regions or cultural groups.

This is the lived reality of more than 120 million girls globally who are out of school today. And tens of millions of them live in the countries and communities represented in this room.

It is a reality that most governments routinely fail to acknowledge or address with the urgency required.

But today feels different.

I want to thank the Muslim World League and the Government of Pakistan:

Your Excellencies, you have brought us together to address the barriers holding girls back from their *right* to go to school and the *resources* they need to learn.

First, we should begin by recognising what we are up against:

A crisis that holds our economies back from hundreds of billions in lost growth.

A crisis harming the health, safety, and security of our people.

If we do not tackle this crisis, our societies will never thrive as they should.

If we do not tackle this crisis, we will fail to live up to Islam's fundamental values of seeking knowledge.

This conference – and your presence today – is an encouraging first step.

But, we can only have an honest or serious conversation about girls' education if we can call out the worst violations of it.

When we talk about the crises in Palestine, Afghanistan, Yemen, Sudan and many other Muslim countries, rarely do we focus on how the entire future of girls is stolen — their education is taken away.

In Gaza, Israel has decimated the entire education system.

They have bombed all universities,
Destroyed more than 90% of schools,
And indiscriminately attacked civilians sheltering in school buildings.

I will continue to call out Israel's violations of international law and human rights. Palestinian children have lost their lives and future. A Palestinian girl cannot have the future she deserves if her school is bombed and her family is killed.

Girls are living under dire situations in our ummah, in Yemen, Sudan and many other countries, facing poverty, violence, and forced marriages.

And in Afghanistan, an entire generation of girls is being robbed of their future.

Gender Apartheid

This conference will not be serving its purpose if we do not talk about the education of Afghan girls.

Because Afghanistan is the only country in the world where girls are completely banned from education beyond grade 6.

For the past three and a half years, the Taliban have ripped away the right to learn from millions of Afghan girls. And they have weaponised *our faith* to justify it.

The Taliban are explicit about their mission: they want to *eliminate* women and girls from every aspect of public life and *erase* them from society.

They have created a system of gender apartheid.

The Taliban have issued more than a hundred laws to strip away women's rights, including their right to education, employment, healthcare, and every basic freedom you can think of.

Their cruelty knows no bounds.

Under their system of gender apartheid, the Taliban are punishing girls and women who dare to break their obscure laws by beating them up, detaining them and harming them.

Simply put, the Taliban do not see women as human beings.

They cloak their crimes in cultural and religious justification.

Let us be absolutely clear:

There is *nothing* Islamic about this.

These policies *do not* reflect the teachings of Islam. In fact, they go against *everything* our faith stands for.

They are violations of human rights – and no cultural or religious excuse can justify them.

I have a message for everyone in this room:

To ministers and government representatives –

To intellectuals, scholars, and public figures –

As Muslim leaders, now is the time to raise your voices, use your power. You can show true leadership. You can show true Islam.

Afghan women and girls must be free to shape their own future. The very loudest champions of their cause must be fellow Muslims, *leaders such as yourselves*.

So here are a few things you can do, right now, to go beyond empty statements, and stand up for Afghan women and girls:

First, recognise the Taliban regime as a perpetrator of gender apartheid.

Do not legitimise them.

Do not make compromises on our faith.

Second, support the Crimes Against Humanity Treaty, a historic global effort to codify gender apartheid in international law, and hold the Taliban accountable.

Push your governments to engage in this process. It is time we have real tools to prevent any extremist regime from systematically oppressing women and girls, like the Taliban are doing.

The path forward for Afghanistan lies in political solutions instead of military force, and in using the power of international law and human rights to bring justice.

The path forward also requires a united voice from Muslim scholars to openly challenge and denounce the Taliban's oppressive laws.

The Afghan people must not pay the price for the Taliban's brutality.

When it comes to Afghan refugees, we are all witnessing what is unfolding here in Pakistan, in Iran and other Muslim nations. Innocent people, including girls, who have fled their homeland are being abused, beaten and displaced.

I cannot imagine an Afghan girl or an Afghan woman being forced back into the system that denies her future.

As we gather to reflect on our faith's timeless values, let us affirm that all people, especially all girls, must be treated with compassion, hospitality and respect.

And every effort must be made to uphold their rights.

These are the principles at the very heart of Islam.

Conclusion

We must be the narrators of our faith.

We must speak for what Islam stands for.

That means looking at the situation of girls' education in all Muslim countries, from Sudan to Yemen, Palestine to Pakistan, and certainly Afghanistan.

As I stand here, I am imagining this conference as the beginning of a new journey.

Where we commit to a future for every girl to have access to complete quality education.

And make this vision a reality in our lifetime.

The next time we all gather, I hope to see more women and girls – like the brilliant students who have joined us today – speaking on stage and setting the agenda.

Give them a round of applause, everyone!

Seeing you pursue your education gives me hope for our country.

Pakistan is where I began my journey and where my heart will always be.

12.5 million Pakistani girls are still out of school, one of the highest numbers in the world.

I am glad that this conference is taking place here. Because there is still a tremendous amount of work ahead so every Pakistani girl can access her education.

Distinguished guests,

Championing girls' education is the mission of my life.

I am here to tell you that girls around the world need us to act for their education *today* – not next year, not next decade.

So I ask you all, in this room, and your leaders:

Protect girls' right to go to school for a complete 12 years.

Invest the resources to make education a reality for all girls.

Let us be *champions* of our faith by being *champions* for girls and their right to learn.

Thank you. Bhot Shukria.