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‘Education is as important for me as water is to sustaining life’: perspectives on the higher education of women in Afghanistan

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Progress in education in Afghanistan since the fall of the Taliban has been described as ‘fragile, limited in reach, depth and uncertainty of sustainability’ [UNICEF, 2013. *Basic Education and Gender Equality: Afghanistan*. United Nations International Children’s Emergency Fund. http://www.unicef.org/afghanistan/education_2206.htm]. This is particularly true for Afghan women participating in higher education, within a culture that remains resistant to women’s education. This article documents the views and attitudes of Afghan women who have sought to gain a higher education, within a context where only 5% of the Afghan population attends university, and less than 20% of university students are female [The World Bank, 2013. *World Development Indicators: Poverty Headcount Ratio at National Poverty Lines. The World Bank Group*. <http://data.worldbank.org/country/afghanistan>]. It is an attempt to listen to the voices of Afghan women to ascertain what they see as the best ways to improve their educational outcomes. Findings illustrate that while progress has been made in enabling a small percentage of women to pursue higher education, there are still significant and enduring obstacles for Afghan women seeking such a path.

Keywords: women; gender; higher education; Afghanistan; tertiary access

Introduction

Progress in education in Afghanistan since the fall of the Taliban, whilst significant, has been described as ‘fragile, limited in reach, depth and uncertainty of sustainability’ (UNICEF, 2013). This is particularly true for Afghan women participating in higher education, within a culture that remains resistant to women’s education, and where women face many significant barriers to their participation.

This article focuses on the experiences of Afghan women who are currently participating in higher education. This research is based on interviews undertaken with Afghan women students, as well as some male students, investigating their views about women’s educational needs and aspirations, the barriers Afghan women face in achieving their educational goals and their perceptions of the possibilities for change. It represents an attempt to listen to the voices of young Afghan women themselves to ascertain what they see as the best ways to improve their educational outcomes.

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While the gathering and reliability of statistics in Afghanistan is often difficult, reports show that the number of children attending schools has risen from around one million in 2001 to 8.7 million in 2011 (UNICEF 2011, 1) – with 39% of these children being girls (ActionAid 2011, 4).¹ Participation rates vary greatly from province to province; while the overall literacy rate for Afghan women is only 12% (UNFPA 2012), women's literacy level has been estimated to be three times lower in rural areas (Oates 2013). The UN's Human Development Report for Afghanistan indicates that in 2012, 5.8% of adult females have reached secondary or higher education, compared to 34% of males; female participation in the labour market is 15.7% compared to 80.3% for men (UNDP 2013, 4). Teacher education training is poor with only 30% of the 186,000 teachers meeting the minimum requirements; only 32% of teachers are female (UNICEF 2013, 12). Only 6% of Afghan women aged 25 or older have received any formal education (Joint Briefing Paper 2011, 7), and despite the establishment of literacy centres targeting women aged 15–24 years (UNICEF 2011, 2), there are only limited opportunities for older women who missed the opportunity to attend school during the Taliban era to receive adult education or literacy training. Poverty, early marriage, insecurity, lack of family support, lack of female teachers, lack of proximity to schools, the poor quality of education, lack of girls only schools, and community attitudes are major obstacles to the education of girls (Joint Briefing Paper 2011, 4).

Although there are major challenges at all levels of the education system in Afghanistan, higher education is undoubtedly of critical importance. The vital role of higher education in promoting a unified national identity, cross-cultural understanding, social cohesion and democracy in Afghanistan has been highlighted; however, the higher education participation rate in Afghanistan is one of the lowest in the world, with a gross enrolment ratio of around 5% (The World Bank 2013, 2). According to a recent study of higher education in Afghanistan, women made up only 19% of students enrolled in public universities and higher education institutions in 2012 (The World Bank 2013, 2).

Methodology

The initial research project upon which this article is based applied qualitative research methods using a grounded theory approach, which utilises participatory observation techniques to gain authentic insights into the views and attitudes of young women living in Kabul seeking to gain an education in the political and social context of the 'fragile state' that is Afghanistan.

Using a grounded theory approach enables a much greater focus on allowing the voices of the young women in particular, to be heard. Through their voices, we seek to gain an understanding of social, cultural and political contexts surrounding their existence and the impacts these may have on their educational futures.

Twenty-nine women students participated in this research project; 12 male students were also interviewed. All interviewees have been allocated a pseudonym to ensure that no individual can be identified. Interviewees attended a range of universities in Afghanistan, both public and private, and the initial round of interviews were undertaken in 2013. Afghanistan comprises 34 provinces, and an attempt was made to ensure representation of interviewees from a range of different geographic areas; ultimately, 19 separate provinces were represented among the interviewees, with three interviewees preferring not to identify their home province. Some interviews were recorded, transcribed and translated into English by researchers based at the Gawharshad Institute; other responses are based on questionnaires completed by women students and

translated into English by partner researchers in Afghanistan. A second round of 30 women students were surveyed in February 2015, specifically to follow up on the concerns raised by women students in the initial interviews about security issues, to see if perceptions had changed subsequent to the withdrawal of foreign troops in 2014. These interviewees were asked a separate set of questions relating specifically to their perceptions of any change in the security situation or their personal safety, and whether they had personally been involved in any security incidents.

Key issues and themes emerging from the interviews

'To somehow serve my country': women's goals in pursuing a higher education

Many women interviewees indicated that they were highly motivated to pursue higher education by the goal of being of service to their country and community, rather than only seeking individual/personal benefits from their participation.

My main goal from getting education is to enhance level of my knowledge [to] play an effective role in my society. (Tahmina, Ghazni Province)

Through education I can guarantee my future and serve the people of my country. And my main goal is serving my country. (Laila, Herat Province)

Inappropriate cultural, economical and educational condition of my country motivates me to get an education to somehow serve my country. (Yasameen, no province specified)

When I see the deteriorating situation of the people of my country, I get upset and always think that I should help them to bring improvement in to their lives and serve my family and my country. (Kamela, Balkh Province)

Education is very, very important to me. It is important to the extent that I attend evening classes despite of security problems. It means that I work during the day and attend my classes during the evening. I want to be a useful individual serving my people and through this be part of [the] solution to the problems that my country is facing. (Heela, Parwan Province)

It is unclear from the information available in the interviews whether women primarily cited such service-oriented motivations because they constitute a more socially acceptable rationale within the Afghanistan context for women's participation in higher education, rather than the interviewee's simple desire for (and right to) an education.

Whilst primarily articulating their motivations in terms of service to others, interviewees clearly recognised the importance of education in providing access to employment opportunities and lifelong benefits:

Education is not only important for me but it is also important for all human beings and it can rescue people from all difficulties of life. (Tahmina, Ghazni Province)

My final objective of education is to have a better life. (Dina, Parwan Province)

My motivation for education is to save myself from cultural and financial poverty ... I want to save my family from the current economical problems. (Pakeeza, province not identified)

It is important to me, because education and learning is the foundation of everything. (Rahima, Ghazni Province)

Financial problems were the main concern and motivation for me to continue my education in order to change my life for a (sic) better. (Rabia, Orozgan Province)

Education is as important for me as water is for sustaining life. Education brings changes that brighten your world ... Education causes positive changes to emerge in everyone's life. (Janan, Daikundi Province)

Other goals that the interviewees believed higher education would assist them to achieve included

- The desire for independence

My final objective is to be independent. I don't want to be dependent to others, so that they think women require help of men. (Rasheeda, Bamian Province)

The reason that motivates me to pursue my higher education is my desire to stand on my own feet and to build a bright future for myself. I hate being dependent on others. (Farahnaz, Paktia Province)

My longer term goal is to serve my family financially as well as to become a responsible member of society. I don't want to be a burden on the shoulders of my family and society. (Madiha, Maidan Wardak Province)

My family had a very hard time and we were suffering from economic difficulties, I have been humiliated for not being an earner, so my motivation to continue education is [e]scape from this situation. (Mahira, Baghlan Province)

- The importance of completing their qualifications despite difficult circumstances as some recompense for the sacrifices that their families had made for them to obtain an education

I want to be an independent and self-reliant person and repay my family for whatever they have done for me. (Sabrina, Maidan Wardak Province)

... most importantly, I want to prove that my father's efforts didn't go [in] vain. (Rasheeda, Bamian Province)

- To prove that women are capable of being successful in education and professionally

I don't want to extend my hands to other for help and so that they think women are burden on others shoulder. I want people to know that woman is also able to study and work ... (Rasheeda, Bamian Province)

My aim is to get an education to be a different person from my mother. I don't want to be locked at home like my mother. I want to be an active member of society and to help my people. (Sabrina, Maidan Wardak Province)

- To learn about women's rights and to improve outcomes for women in Afghanistan

I want to make [all] possible efforts to do something for women of my country ... The reason behind continuing my education is all the misery and suffering that women and girls of my age are faced with. These misery and suffering pushes me to get education and do whatever I can for them. (Tahmina, Ghazni Province)

Education is very important for me, as I can gain more information and knowledge through it and know more about the rights of other women as well. My aim from getting education is to acquire my rights and defend the rights of other women. I don't want women to suffer and will do anything possible in my power. (Janaara, Bamyan Province)

- To improve their employment prospects

I will try my level best to acquire the highest level of education I can and to find a good job and become a useful and productive individual. I hate being inefficient and unproductive. (Madiha, Maidan Wardak Province)

My aim from education is to find a good job and earn a good salary and not being dependent on others. (Mahira, Baghlan Province)

One interviewee commented that improving her education would enable her to be a more effective parent:

Getting higher education enables mothers to train their children in a better manner and help them with their studies. Literate mothers can generally manage their families better compared to other illiterate mothers and they can offer influential children to society ... They can take best care of their homes and manage it in a better way. So, education is the only way that can help me to bring up a healthy and sound son. (Habiba, Bamyan Province)

Literacy of family members

The following table (Table 1) has been compiled from the responses provided to a question about the literacy status of the female interviewees' family members. Where the interviewee only mentioned the literacy status of one parent, their response has been entered in the 'at least one parent is literate' category.

Table 1. Literacy status of interviewees' families.

All family members are literate	At least one parent is literate	Parents are illiterate; siblings are literate	All family members other than the interviewee are illiterate	Parents' literacy status not identified
10 (34.5%)	6 (21%)	2 (7%)	1 (3%)	10 (34.5%)

Of the interviewees who identified the level of education their parents had attained, five interviewees indicated that their parents had participated in only primary education (36%), three indicated that at least one of their parents had attended some secondary schooling (21%), and six indicated that at least one of their parents had undertaken higher education (43%). Three interviewees (10% of all interviewees) indicated that their parents were illiterate, and the remainder (12 interviewees) did not specifically identify their parents' level of education. Although it is difficult to draw firm conclusions due to the high non-response rate to this question, these figures suggest that, not surprisingly, the majority of women participating in higher education in Afghanistan come from families that have attained a much higher education level than the average Afghan family.

'The best gift for a child': family support for women's participation in higher education

Not surprisingly, as our interviews were conducted with women already enrolled in higher education, most respondents indicated a high level of family support for their higher education. Typical responses include:

My family has always guided and supported me in every step of my life. The encouragement of my parents was very effective in my education. (Rasheeda, Bamyan Province)

I am proud of my parents, especially my mother who has encouraged me in all conditions. All of my success goes to my parents. It is because of them that I am at this position. (Heela, Parwan Province)

... I think family support is the best gift for a child in a family. With their support I can continue to study in a safe and sound environment and achieve my objectives. (Madina, Kunduz Province)

A number of interviewees highlighted the crucial support of a particular family member – most often their mother or father, sometimes their husband, brother, sister or another relative – and the impact this had on their success:

My family has also supported me, but my mother supported me the most. She was my main supporter. (Tahmina, Ghazni Province)

My father's wish is that I become a famous person in the country. My father's encouragement and persuasion as well as my own deep desire to continue my education have caused me to take a step further than school. (Madina, Kunduz)

From a very young age I was interested to get education. After I got married, my husband's family encouraged me to complete my education ... My husband has always helped me afford [the expenses of education]. (Zeenat, Kabul Province)

Though my parents were not happy with my education, my persistence and a helping hand from my Uncle made my father allow me to continue my education. (Nawida, Logar Province)

My family in general but my brothers in particular are supporting me with all their might. They are my main backer and encourager. (Geeti, Wardak Province)

However, several interviewees' indicated that they had to negotiate their participation in higher education in the face of family opposition:

Table 2. Cost of education as a barrier to participation.

Finding it difficult to afford the costs of higher education	Cost of education not seen as a barrier	No response
14 (48%)	11 (38%)	4 (14%)

The biggest challenge was [the] disagreement of my [extended] family to continue my education, which is resolved. (Tahmina, Ghazni Province)

While most interviewees indicated receiving at least emotional or ‘spiritual’ if not financial support and encouragement from their immediate families, a small number of interviewees indicated that they were pursuing their studies without any family support, which they accepted in preference to active opposition to their participation:

I don’t have any kind of support from my family. (Mahira, Baghlan Province)

I ask my family to support me to get my education. If they are not supporting me, at least they don’t have to get in my way. (Nawida, Logar Province)

I only ask my parents not to get in my way in pursuing my education. (Benafsha, Kabul Province)

From the information provided in the interviews, there was no obvious correlation between parents’ literacy levels and the likelihood or otherwise of their support for their daughters’ education. According to interviewees, illiterate parents were just as likely to support their daughters’ educational aspirations as those who were literate, though there is evidence from the admittedly small sample size of interviewees that women whose parents were illiterate were more likely to indicate that the cost of education was a barrier to them (see Table 2).

Barriers to women’s continuing participation in higher education in Afghanistan

‘An education without any fear’: the impact of women’s concerns about national security

Issues of national security, concerns about the future of Afghanistan, and fears about the detrimental consequences for women should the Taliban return, were consistent themes raised by most female interviewees:

I am afraid for the future, because I think the Taliban will return ... If they return, no women will dare to go out for studying or working. (Rasheeda, Bamiyan Province)

Security problems and cultural concerns are the challenges for all Afghan girls including me who want to study and serve their society. These problems will have destructive results in our life unless we overcome them. (Heela, Parwan Province)

My only concern is insecurity. Because if the security situation worsen, I will have to go back to [her home in the provinces] and this will end my ambition to study Law ... My first proposal is to improve security; it will enable women to get an education without any fear. (Elina, Badakhshan Province)

As for all the Afghan girls, security is my main concern, especially if unrest returns to Afghanistan. (Benafsha, Kabul Province)

My main concern is the security situation in Afghanistan. If the security worsens, and the situation gets difficult for girls to get to school or university, they will be forced to abandon their education. Now, overall opinion in Afghanistan is that if the Bilateral Security Agreement (BSA) is not signed and all foreign troops withdraw from Afghanistan, the Taliban will take over, and this situation for sure is not in favour of girls. The relative freedom that women have now will be lost. (Madina, Kunduz Province)

My only concern is insecurity; I have stuck between two words, peace and conflict and think where we are heading to. There is nothing predictable in this situation for future of my country. Deteriorating security situation may halt my access to continue my education. (Janaara, Bamiyan Province)

My concern is fighting and insecurity and the presence of fundamentalists and religious radicals. The Taliban era and oppression of women during their regime is known to all and their return to power mostly ends my hope to continue my education. (Tamana, Balkh Province)

When I hear [the] sound of explosions and suicide attacks and news of people caught in these suicide attacks, these may undermine me to achieve my objectives. (Laila, Herat Province)

A joint briefing paper noted that 'growing insecurity is rapidly eroding access to schooling for many girls' (Joint Briefing Paper 2011), and our research finds that security concerns are also a major consideration for women involved in tertiary education. One interviewee indicated that security concerns had directly impacted upon the choice of her field of study:

I wanted to study Law, but my family thinks that studying law will create problems for me security wise ... If I become a lawyer or defence attorney, after handling some cases, I might lose my safety if other people involved did not like my decisions. In addition, society does not approve of this field for girls. You know that everyone thinks that it is better for women to become teachers or doctors to treat female patients. (Nawida, Logar Province)

Research partners at the Gawharshad Institute undertook a follow-up survey with 30 female students of the Institute in February 2015, to specifically address whether women's perceptions of the security situation had changed subsequent to the withdrawal of foreign troops from Afghanistan in 2014. Eighty per cent of respondents indicated that they felt that the security situation had worsened since the new government had taken power in 2014. Thirty per cent of respondents reported that they had personally faced a security issue since the change of government, and 90% of respondents stated that they did not feel safe. These figures strongly suggest that the aspirations of Afghan women to have a higher education without fear remain a hope rather than a reality.

A number of interviewees also expressed concern about the economic future of Afghanistan, and the impact this might have on their employment prospects.

I don't have any concerns about the future right now, but my only concern is after 2014. Along with withdrawal of foreign troops, it is possible that the economic situation of the people may get worse and this situation will be an obstacle to my education. (Sabrina, Maidan Wardak Province)

My biggest concern is that Afghanistan has not been able to stand on its own and meet its economic need, therefore, there is concern regarding its future that what would happen, as it is dependent on aid from donors. (Kamela, Balkh Province)

'My only concern in the future is my financial status': financial barriers to women's participation

The difficulties of meeting the costs associated with higher study were cited by nearly half of female interviewees as a factor that impacted on their continuing participation.

More than half of interviewees (15 participants) did not specify the source of financial support that enabled them to fund their participation in higher education. Of those who did, nine (60%) specified receiving support from their family; four (27%) indicated that they were self-funding their participation through employment, and two (13%) indicated that they were in receipt of a scholarship to pay for their higher education.

As interviews were conducted only with women already enrolled at university, clearly our sample is biased towards those who have already overcome or are at least managing to meet the financial challenges of higher education. Nevertheless, 48% of the interviewees expressed concerns about the costs involved in higher education as a barrier to their continuing participation. A number also indicated that they felt additional financial pressure on them to obtain good employment at the end of their studies.

Access to public universities in Kabul is free but the number of spaces available is very limited; a number of interviewees noted that the fees charged by private universities were a significant barrier, particularly for women. Of the Afghan population, 35.8% live below the national poverty line (The World Bank 2011), and family size tends to be large with the average household size seven to eight individuals (IRIN Humanitarian News and Analysis 2010), which makes it challenging for families to educate their children.

We have faced cases where girls couldn't continue their higher education due to financial problems. In case girls can't pass the exam for government universities, they need to have enough budgets to attend private universities. This is very difficult for most Afghan families to afford expenses of private education. (Heela, Parwan Province)

Recently I was afraid that my family will not allow me to continue my education. But, now I'm afraid of my family's economic status. If a day comes that my family couldn't pay my tuition fees, they may ask me to discontinue my education. (Nawida, Logar Province)

Overall expenses of education are very high in Afghanistan. Since I study in a private university, it is very difficult for my family to afford the expenses. This condition is worrying me. (Kamela, Balkh Province)

Even where interviewees were attending a free programme at a public university, the incidental costs of textbooks, internet access (which can be costly and unreliable), and other associated costs could pose a barrier:

... having enough money is very crucial to utilize all facilities such as internet, books and lecture notes. (Dina, Parwan Province)

A number of interviewees commented that the cost of education was not a barrier to them as they were employed and were self-funding their studies.

Since I work in a private organization, I don't have a particular problem in this regard. (Rahima, Ghazni Province)

Without having a source of income, it would be very difficult to afford expenses of education. (Mahira, Baghlan Province)

I don't see any encouragement from my family, neither financially or emotionally. I support my education by sewing and embroidery work, as stated before; I don't want to be a burden and dependent on others. (Farahnaz, Paktia Provin)

I don't have any special problem [paying tuition costs]. Since I work and pay my expenses and I'm independent. (Heela, Parwan Province)

'...being a mother is quite a big problem while studying'; the impact of carer responsibilities

One interviewee identified that her role as a primary carer for children had made it difficult to continue her education:

From a very young age I was interested to go to school, but my marriage has postponed it. Now, I have restarted my education and the motivation behind my education is to increase my level of knowledge and capacity and raise my son in a sound manner ... being a mother is quite a big problem while studying. (Habiba, Bamyan Province)

Employment opportunities

A number of interviewees raised concerns about lack of job opportunities in the future, and the importance of finding a job.

My main concern is to find a job and don't remain jobless for long ... I'm very much concerned with the state of joblessness. If I couldn't find a job, I don't know what would happen to me. (Zakia, Bamyan Province)

... shortage of job opportunities i[s] biggest concern. When I see people have queued in lines to get a very basic job, I get concerned. (Laila, Herat Province)

The unemployment rate in Afghanistan has been estimated at over 40% (IRIN Humanitarian News and Analysis 2010), meaning that this is a very real concern for young women in addition to the many cultural and family barriers they may face in seeking employment.

Postgraduate programmes and facilities

Some interviewees commented on the need for improved facilities and opportunities in Afghanistan for women to continue their studies at the postgraduate level.

Security, financial support and provision of education facilities at Master and PhD levels might be helpful ... My only concern in the future is my financial status and the lack of opportunity of pursuing my masters and further on doctoral degree. (Dina, Parwan Province)

'If family doesn't want, their daughters [can't] have an education': the impact of community and family attitudes towards women's education

Although our responses are limited to those already participating in higher education, some interviewees did indicate that attitudes towards women's education, from either family members or society more generally, were a barrier to women's education:

... families differentiate between boys and girls ... people think only their boys and sons have the rights (sic) to get education. They think that girls are getting married and they don't need to get education. (Karima, Parwan Province)

... if family doesn't want, their daughters [can't] have an education. (Rahima, Ghazni Province)

The biggest obstacle on my way to get education was my relatives. They are always accusing me that I have brought shame to them and they hate me. They always treat me as a cursed person ... They disgrace me (sic) because I am here in Kabul away from my family to continue my education. (Janaara, Bamyan Province)

The biggest challenge was the society and aggressive men who opposes women participation in society. (Tamana, Balkh Province)

Several interviewees mentioned family pressure on daughters to marry as a factor that had impacted on them. One indicated that she had had to resist pressure from her father for an arranged marriage at a very young age in order to pursue her goal of attaining an education. For other interviewees, the family and social expectation of early marriage as the best option for young women remains an ongoing concern.

For me, marriage could have been the biggest obstacle in getting education. If I had accepted my father's advice, I would already have been married for several years. But my dissatisfaction and my brothers' resistance ensured that I did not get married at a very young age. If I had been married, I would not have achieved as much as I now have. (Elina, Badakhshan Province)

... the other problem that could hinder my education is tradition. By this I mean if someone asks for my hand in marriage, I have to accept him because the presence in a family of an unmarried adult female is considered by relatives to be a defect. (Lailuma, Serat Province)

Another obstacle for girls to get an education is early marriage, even in families willing to support their girls' education. Even these families will insist on the early marriages of their daughters, accepting this tradition. Therefore, this will be one obstacle in front of my education. (Madina, Kunduz Province)

From a very young age I was interested to go to school, but my marriage has postponed it. Now, I have restarted my education and the motivation behind my education is to increase my level of knowledge and capacity and raise my son in a sound manner. (Habiba, Bamyan Province)

Another interviewee described the choices many young Afghan women have to face between marriage and education:

The situation in Afghanistan is that when a girl reaches the age of marriage, she must take one decision from among the two very important paths in her life: either she has to decide to get marry (sic) and forget about continuing her education, or if she wants to continue her education, then she has to forget getting married. Once she is married, she has to deal with all the daily family matters so that she will not be able to continue getting higher education. (Farahnaz, Paktia Province)

... Research partners based at the Gawharshad Institute commented that Afghan women who attend higher education or who work are no longer perceived to be of unblemished morality by many in Afghan society, because study and work necessitates

interaction with male lecturers, students or co-workers. This attitude is reflected in a comment by a male interviewee –

Yes, women should be educated but it should be according to Islamic rules and regulations. I know many women who studied at universities, and that is why no one wants to marry them. (Haidir, province not specified)

Living away from home

As there are only a small number of universities located in regional areas in Afghanistan, many students have to leave their families and relocate in Kabul to attend university.

A small number of female interviewees mentioned that they were living away from their families to study at university, and that this was a major challenge for them, particularly in a culture that does not readily condone single young women living alone; ‘Women either at home or in the grave’ has been described as ‘one of the commonly believed and practised norms’ of Afghan society (Nijat 2014, 1).

The biggest challenge is living in a strange city. I live alone in Kabul. (Rohina, Kandahar Province)

Obviously, relocation and living away from home add significantly to the costs of participation in higher education. One interviewee suggested that online and distance education may provide an effective alternative to enable some women to access higher education:

... what the government could do is to offer online and long distance courses for those women who can’t afford to attend classes physically. So, this way they could have access to study from home. (Habiba, Bamyān Province)

A research partner at Gawharshad Institute observed that increasing the number of universities and other higher education institutions in more locations across Afghanistan would also be an effective strategy to enable more women to participate.

‘Street harassment’: travel to university

Several interviewees mentioned harassment when travelling to university as a concern:

The street harassment, for me the biggest challenge is that some jobless people hanging around on the streets disturb me on the way when I go to university. I can’t tolerate that. (Rahima, Ghazni Province)

The biggest problem that I have faced so far is the street harassment by vulgar boys. I was so frustrated by their bad behaviour that I even wanted to quit university. (Janan, Daikundi Province)

Corruption

Commentators have identified that there is a great deal of corruption at all levels in Afghanistan, with political and ethnic rivalries interwoven with poor short-term planning and lack of accountability in the delivery of programmes (International

Crisis Group 2011; Wimpelmann 2012). A number of interviewees identified government corruption as a concerning factor for them, and expressed the need for opportunities in education and employment to be based on personal merit rather than nepotism:

Unfortunately, due to the corruption in the government ... incompetent people with money and power rise to higher levels. For instance, scholarships which are intended for talented and distinguished students are often distributed among those who already have money, influence and power. Therefore, I ask the government to eradicate corruption in order that I could get what I deserve. (Lailuma, Serat Province)

Corruption is my main concern ... I'm not sure I could find a job due to the existence of corruption. As I fear that whoever is in a position of power, they prefer nepotism over professionalism and appoint their relatives in good positions. (Karima, Parwan Province)

The government has to eradicate and eliminate corruption from its institutions. This is the only way that I am hopeful for the future; otherwise, neither do I have the money nor do I know a powerful person to get me a job to meet my objectives ... If corruption is eliminated and nepotism were replaced with merit I'm sure that I would find the place where I deserve to be. (Janan, Daikundi Province)

Effective support for women's continuing participation in higher education

Women students participating in this research clearly articulated a range of initiatives that they believed would improve their educational outcomes; there are concrete solutions to many of the issues these women face, if there is financial support and the political will to implement them. Interviewees were asked what kind of support they needed to achieve their educational goals. The most common response was that the interviewees needed security about the future, so that they could study and work in safety and without uncertainty about the future status of women.

The first and foremost thing in this regard is providing security. In a secure environment everything goes well. I ask our government to provide a secure and peaceful environment in our country so that all ethnics will cooperate [with] each other to create a good cultural setting. (Rasheeda, Bamian Province)

In my opinion peace and security are the most important ones. If we have security, we can do everything, but if we don't have peace and security, every effort for achieving our goal will remain meaningless. (Pakeeza, province not identified)

A number of interviewees suggested the need for the government to support women's involvement in higher education, primarily through scholarships and other forms of financial assistance.² Some interviewees also expressed their desire for the government to proactively support education and employment for women through affirmative action programmes:

I think the number of scholarships should be increased; Afghan families invest more in their sons, and girls don't have any other option. (Madina, Kunduz Province)

My interpretation of positive discrimination is that there are discounts for the tuition fees for women and girls studying in private universities. This positive advantage will help those girls with economic difficulties to get enrolled at the universities and continue their education. (Madiha, Maidan Wardak Province)

In my opinion, positive discrimination is [the] best solution ... For instance, the government should increase enrolment of women to the universities and exempt them of paying tuition fees and make the education free for girls. (Tamana, Balkh Province)

... availability of student's loans for continuation of my studies would be helpful. This would enable me to pursue my master's degree and if possible further on. (Dina, Parwan Province)

The government should provide financial and emotional support to families and lower the tuition fees for women. (Zakia, Bamyan Province)

... there should be financial incentives for women and girls in order to encourage them to go to school as well as to lower the scoring marks necessary to get admitted in to the universities as a positive discrimination. (Janaara, Bamyan Province)

Interviewees suggested the need for programmes to continue to raise awareness in Afghanistan about women's rights, particularly in the provinces. Incentives or penalties to encourage parents to ensure their daughters receive an education may also be an effective strategy.

The awareness program about women's rights should be increased in all provinces ... we should pay special attention to women's education. (Tahmina, Ghazni Province)

Increasing awareness of men about women's rights especially the right of getting education ... (Dina, Parwan Province) [the government] should give full awareness to families so that they let and encourage their daughters to get education. (Rabia, Orozgan Province)

The government should not allow and [should] control the people who threaten women's education. (Janaara, Bamyan Province)

Awareness raising programs should be carried out in all Afghanistan and it should be done constantly. If we want to have sound and healthy society and free of violence, we should [put an] emphasis on girl's and women's education. (Janaara, Bamyan Province)

The media were seen as a significant stakeholder that could do much to improve attitudes towards women in Afghanistan:

Today the media has a very important role in people's lives, so we could publicize the importance of educational programs through this channel. We can publish public awareness programs in this regard and improve the status of women. It is the state's duty to develop and design programs to improve the status of women's rights. (Benafsha, Kabul Province)

As the coeducational nature of higher education is seen as a barrier to women's participation, one interviewee stressed the importance of female academic staff in supporting the participation of more women in higher education:

... recruitment of female lecturers and teachers is another option that could boost support of women's education. This will also provide a reason for conservative families to let their daughters go to school and universities. (Madina, Kunduz Province)

Another interviewee spoke of the constraints the coeducational environment imposed on women students:

... at the university, due to the presence of boys, the liberty of girls is limited and they have to be careful of their behaviour, for example, by wearing the Hijab. (Benafsha, Kabul Province)

For some, establishing women-only universities and vocational training centres would be a preferred strategy:

... in this case more women and girls will come to get education. Because the prejudice in the society will block the women to go to the co-ed classes. (Zeenat, Kabul Province)

Deep, foundational changes'? Interviewees' views on the status of women in Afghanistan

Participants were asked whether they thought that the status of women had changed in Afghanistan over the past decade. Whilst there were mixed responses to this question, the majority of women believed that the situation for women had improved, though many noted that these improvements were largely limited to urban areas.

Women had good improvements in the last decade. Most women got awareness about their rights and their view of not allowing their girls to school has changed. Nowadays women try their best to educate their children. (Tahmina, Ghazni Province)

I think there haven't been many changes. The changes were not foundational and they did not cover women all around Afghanistan ... Only a few women are holding senior governmental positions as a symbol. But women in rural and remote areas are living in a state of poverty. (Laila, Herat Province)

... before 2001 women did not have right of doing anything. It is natural to say that we have seen changes. I think these changes were temporary. The main problem is that up to now no organization or individual was able to bring deep foundational changes. (Heela, Parwan Province)

In my opinion, the situation of women has improved a great deal. The people are now more open-minded; therefore, the situation of women has changed both at home as well as outside of home. Violence against women has decreased, and women's presence is more evident in society. This change is very visible in Kabul as the capital but things have not changed so much for women in the provinces. (Nawida, Logar Province)

When we can get an education, be part of important decisions, raise our voice, it shows that there are changes in the situation of women. (Farahnaz, Paktia Province)

There are overall positive changes, but this is not enough. Although it is true that girls can go to school and attend up to the 12th grade, after that they face pressures imposed either by their family or by society not to continue higher education. (Lailuma, Serat Province)

Twelve years ago, women weren't able to even get out of their homes without wearing a veil and being accompanied by a close male relative (Mahram³), let alone complete their education. But in the last decade with the help of the international community, the situation has got better and women's situation has also improved. For instance, the doors of schools and universities are open for them, and job opportunities are available to some extent for them. But unfortunately, this improvement is not countrywide; these changes are visible only in Kabul. (Janan, Daikundy Province)

A number of interviewees noted the difference in women's access to education, and the status of women generally, between their own experiences in Kabul and the situation for women in the provinces:

In rural areas women don't have facilities to continue their education. They don't have good condition. Most of them are illiterate and don't have opportunity of learning. (Janaara, Bamyān Province)

In [the] provinces still some customs and wrong traditions prevents women's improvements in various sectors. (Tamana, Balkh Province)

The government should provide an identical level of education all over Afghanistan so that students don't travel to other provinces for getting education. (Rohina, Kandahar Province)

... In my opinion, the situation of women has improved in the important cities, but not in all of Afghanistan. Yes, I witness improvement, but I have to mention that this improvement is limited only to the Capital and some cities and does not extend through Afghanistan. In Kabul, women have been able to exercise their rights, like the right to have a job and the right to accept or refuse a marriage proposal. But in the remote provinces, no significant improvement has happened. (Elina, Badakhshan Province)

In the last decade the status of women has improved compared to the past. But these improvements have not been the same all over Afghanistan. The provinces need more focus and concentration than Kabul in this regard. (Rabia, Orozgan Province)

The views of male students on women's access to and participation in higher education in Afghanistan

Most male students interviewed for this study indicated that they believed the education of women to be very important to Afghanistan, bringing positive changes to society as well as individual benefits to the women and their families:

Women's involvement in education is very important to our society. (Dilawar, Ghazni Province)

... women's education ensures their better future. (Omid, Kapisa Province)

A majority of the male interviewees indicated that their daughters were now studying at the higher education level, providing some evidence – from an admittedly small sample group – of generational change in attitudes towards women's education in Afghanistan. Another interviewee proudly stated that he had supported all of his daughters-in-law to receive a higher education, most of them to Masters level. Some male interviewees had sisters studying at university. One interviewee expressed his support for women's education although his own female family members were not studying:

I have positive views about women's involvement in higher education, but none of my female family members are getting an education. (Sabir, Orozgan Province)

However, even amongst this group of educated males, there was opposition to women's participation in higher education due to its co-educational nature –

I believe that women's education at the university level is not permissible because co-education is improper and incorrect according to Islam. There should be separate schools, classes and female teachers for women. (Haidir, province not specified)

Only one male interviewee expressed women's participation in education as a human right that women should enjoy on an equal basis to men:

Women should have the right to study as men have, without any discrimination. (Tariq, Ghazni Province)

Male views on the main barriers to women's participation in higher education

It is interesting to note that only three male interviewees identified security issues, which were overwhelmingly identified as a concern by female students, as an obstacle to women's participation in higher education in Afghanistan. The male interviewees cite 'lack of security' as a general concern; there is no specific reference made by any male interviewee of the possibility of the Taliban returning to power, and restrictions once again being placed on women's access to education, although this specific concern is widely identified amongst the female interviewees.

I think the main barriers to women's participation in higher education are the marginalization of girls, the customs of a traditional society and a poor economy. (Ameer, Laghman Province)

The differential citing of concerns about security issues between female and male interviewees suggests that perceptions of violence and fears for personal safety are highly gendered in Afghanistan. Awareness-raising initiatives targeting male students, highlighting issues such as women's concerns about their personal safety and security and their experiences of street harassment or other forms of gender-based violence, may be an effective first step in addressing the culture of fear in which many women students live their daily lives.

Other issues identified by male interviewees as barriers were:

- Financial issues.
- Family opposition to women's education.
- The co-educational nature of higher education.
- Traditional customs.
- Lack of literacy and low levels of education in families generally.
- Specific issues within the province the family lived in which were preventing women obtaining an education.
- Corruption in Afghanistan.

Strategies to support women's participation in higher education; the views of male interviewees

In terms of what could be done to assist women to gain an education in Afghanistan, a number of male interviewees noted the importance of the media in changing 'people's conceptualization about women's rights in such a traditional society like Afghanistan'. Given that a number of male interviewees identified the significance of family and social opposition to women's education, only two commented on the importance of

family support as a significant factor that would assist women to gain an education in Afghanistan. Financial support was also identified as something that would assist more women to access higher education, as was government support.

Although no male interviewees raised affirmative action measures when asked what strategies might support women's access to higher education, nearly all male interviewees expressed their support for affirmative action measures to support women's participation in higher education in Afghanistan when prompted about this issue by the interviewer, with only one interviewee opposed to it, on the grounds that quotas would bring more women into universities and workplaces which would be at odds with his interpretation of Islamic beliefs. This interviewee believed that women's participation in higher education was actually worsening their status as it was bringing women into conflict with traditional Islamic beliefs –

Women's status is worsening because they don't wear the hijab, and they study alongside men. That is why I am not optimistic about their status improving. They won't have a good future. (Haidir, province not specified)

Views of male relatives in extended family towards women's education

Only one interviewee who supported their female relatives' education had experienced criticism from other male family members –

... there is a lot of criticism from my uncles and cousins who live in Laghman province. They feel that women's education brings shame to a family. (Ameer, Laghman Province)

Conclusion

A recent World Bank report identified a number of factors contributing to women's underrepresentation in higher education in Afghanistan, including the lower participation of girls in secondary education reducing the eligible pool of applicants; the lack of appropriate transport, 'sanitation' and residential facilities for women students; and inadequate child care provision (The World Bank 2013, 2). Whilst many of these issues were reflected in our study, research participants have also provided a wealth of information about other issues affecting their participation in higher education, including the impact of family and community attitudes towards women's education; financial barriers; and, overwhelmingly, security and personal safety concerns which are very real to Afghan women students.

The strong concerns expressed by research participants about security and the uncertainty of their future prospects suggest that this is a very significant issue for women considering higher education; there is a lot at stake for women students struggling to obtain a higher education, against the wishes of relatives and facing wider social disapprobation, when it is unclear for these women if they will be able to get a return on their education investment. Such concerns can only be addressed by national-level policy, including clear statements of support by the government for women's right to an education, policies and programmes to support women's access and participation, and strong action demonstrating that violence against women in any form will not be tolerated.

A challenge for policy-makers will be whether they accept the current realities that inhibit access and participation in higher education for Afghan women, and work

within these constraints, or attempt to challenge the social and cultural norms that underpin opposition towards the education of women and girls in Afghanistan. For example, accepting the constraints of the current environment may lead to increased provision of single-sex education options, the provision of distance and online education options to enable some Afghan women to study from home, and the training of more female teachers to work at schools and universities. A more ambitious strategy that recognises Afghan women's right to education on equal terms with that of men might prioritise human rights education, addressing the aspects of male culture that contribute to insecurity and violence against women, and the implementation of affirmative action strategies designed to increase women's access to and participation in a broad range of tertiary courses including at the postgraduate level. Ultimately, the best chance for success in improving Afghan women's access to higher education may lie in a combination of these two approaches. Critical to the success of any strategy will be engagement with the views and feedback of young Afghan women, which may not always align neatly with Western progressive agendas but which are based on their lived experience of negotiating the challenges of participation in higher education in Afghanistan on a daily basis.

The insights provided in this research, from the perspective of young Afghan women currently participating in higher education, and from their male relatives, are valuable in building understanding of the issues and challenges these women face in achieving their educational goals. Particularly noteworthy are the suggestions made by women students about the types of support that would be most effective for them, including the need for quotas to increase women's enrolment; the pressing need for financial support, particularly for women who do not have support from their families for their studies; the need for human rights education to promote women's right to an education in Afghanistan; and the women students' desire for reassurance that their security concerns and concerns for the future would be addressed. Regional inequities within Afghanistan were also keenly observed by many research participants, who expressed concern that opportunities for women in the provinces remain very limited, particularly at the higher education level.

It is to be hoped that consideration of the perspectives of Afghan women university students will improve our understanding of the barriers and constraints on women's access to higher education in Afghanistan, and will assist policy-makers to develop strategies to more effectively support women's access to and successful participation in higher education in Afghanistan, and in other communities where the intersection of history, culture and conflict has impeded progress in the education of women and girls. Ultimately, a major benefit for Afghan women and girls in accessing education will be to empower them to make their own choices about their future in their own country.

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Notes

1. It is not possible to determine girls' participation rate in schools in 2001 as the Taliban implemented a nation-wide ban on public education for women and girls in 1997; in 1998, private education was limited to girls under eight and was restricted to the teachings of the Koran (PBS 2007).
2. For example, the Gawharshad Institute offers a 30% discount on fees for female students to encourage their participation.
3. A Mahram is any man with whom a woman has a relationship (of blood or fosterage) that precludes marriage or sexual intercourse.

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