



Education as an empowerment tool for women in Afghanistan: the insider perspectives of educated Afghan women

MALIHA SHIR MOHAMMAD | SASNET PUBLICATIONS REPORT 2021:1
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The Centre for East and South-East Asian Studies, Lund University.

Author: Maliha Shir Mohammad

Information about Author:

Maliha recently completed her master's degree in Gender Studies at Lund University. Previously, she obtained degrees in Asian Studies and International Relations from Lund University and Malmö University. Her academic work focuses on women's rights in Afghanistan and various aspects of the lives of Afghan women in Sweden. She has written about domestic violence in the Afghan diaspora in Sweden and about hidden polygamy among Afghans in Malmö, as well as many other topics related to the performance of Afghan women in different political contexts in Afghanistan.

In her theses for her two master's degrees, she argues that a high level of education can improve the living situation of women in Afghanistan, is necessary for both practical and symbolic reasons, and that improved access to education for girls would mean an important change in social attitudes and beyond.

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Introduction

Gender issues have long been a source of tension in Afghanistan. This situation has been worsened by decades of war which has affected women's rights as one of the most vulnerable groups in the country. It has hindered their ability to take part in social life in a way that worsens their broader economic and social position. Archaic cultural practices grew out of Islamic fundamentalism and intensified existing misogynistic views about women, placing them in a subordinate position in society. Specifically, women's exploitation in the role of housewives has greatly affected their overall empowerment and social progress. ¹

In Afghan society, men's privileged status as the breadwinners of the family is an undeniable fact. The broader war-torn context further strains the social order and the pursuit of social justice in a way that particularly affects women. It makes promoting gender equality difficult because alongside security challenges, Afghanistan's culture continues to have a very pessimistic point of view against women's progress and their social position. Worse still, counter movements from a range of groups who do not tolerate women's public voices or empowerment have jeopardized the efforts of civil society activists to promote women's rights in the country.²

Globally, Afghanistan has one of the lowest literacy rates. This is because of barriers to female's education, like limited mobility for the girl and early marriage.¹ Overall, data shows a decrease in female enrolment in higher education. For instance, in 2008, only 26 percent girls graduated from grade 12, compared to 39 percent of boys.¹ Moreover, recent data shows that about 60 percent of the approximately 3.7 million out-of-school children in Afghanistan are girls.³

This study argues that the efforts made by the government, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and individuals in the promotion of girls' right to education in Afghanistan continue to be undermined by socio-cultural norms, while the complex security situation in Afghanistan further explains why so many girls remain out of education.

Therefore, as a way to further highlight the importance of education in Afghanistan and the need to promote girls' education in the country, this study looks at the understudied topic of the lived experiences of educated Afghan women. It also explores their perspectives on education as an empowerment tool for Afghan women, in addition to their challenges and motivations in contributing to the promotion of women's education in Afghanistan as they have also been shown to be involved in the struggle for women's rights.^{2,4}

The findings draw attention to the need for governments and NGOs to promote women's education in Afghanistan. More so, findings from this study contribute to the body of global literature on women's right to education by presenting findings on how women in Afghanistan have been empowered by education, and their challenges, concerns and motivations in contributing to women's education in the country. This study also covers new developments in women's education after the fall of the Taliban regime in 2001. More broadly, this study offers insights of relevance to issues of women's agency and empowerment in highly gender discriminatory contexts. The following section presents an overview of women's education in Afghanistan for a better understanding of the context of this study.

Women's education in Afghanistan: A situational context

To explore the current realities in women's education in Afghanistan, this study discusses how it has been promoted and hindered by the state in different periods in Afghanistan. It discusses how insecurity, political instability, and inimical cultural and religious values hinder women's education in the country: factors that have been responsible for some of the setbacks facing women's right to education in Afghanistan.

The effort of the state in the promotion of women's right to education in Afghanistan has drawn significant scholarly attention. Recent studies show that women's progress and their right to education has been both promoted and prohibited by the state in different ways.^{1,4,5,6} These studies discuss the events in women's education in Afghanistan under two consecutive eras: the Taliban era and the post-Taliban era. While the Taliban era – with little reliable data – has nevertheless been identified as a time when women's education in Afghanistan was at its worst, the post-Taliban era ushered in significant improvements. According to Gures,¹ the ousting of the Taliban regime in 2001 saw an improvement in Afghan women's position generally. Strategies include the initiation of the Afghan Ministry of Women's Affairs (MoWA) – itself is a crucial step toward the improvement of women's rights – the promotion of women's right to education, and women's new right to participate in the decision-making system and governance with their high educational abilities.

Furthermore, the post-Taliban era brought with it a new constitution, which contains clear requirements for education. All Afghan citizens are guaranteed the right to free education up to the level of a bachelor's degree. The constitution specifically mandates the state to develop and implement effective programs to generate balanced education for women.⁴ More so, the Afghan government has made efforts to improve women's access to education, with programs such as Education for All (EFA) and National Educational Strategic Plan (NESP).⁷ All these efforts have led to instances of a significant increase in the enrolment of girls in school. For example, in 2001, only 5,000 girls enrolled in school, but this number significantly increased to 2.4

million in 2010. In addition, women have begun to obtain important positions as members of parliament, civil society activists, defense attorneys, prosecutors, civil servants, and soldiers.⁴

However, according to Afzali,⁸ the existing complexity of the gender-based paradigm is being normalized by the state's efforts. The state upholds male domination, considering the fact that legislation is never fully objective, but initiated partly in a biased position to the advantage of men. This prevents it from surpassing strict cultural boundaries within male norm-based tenets, mostly representing men's interest.⁴ In this reality, there is some uncertainty as to how available actions can ensure equality between male and female.⁹

Furthermore, security challenges present a major setback in the promotion of women's education in Afghanistan. For scholars like Alvi-Aziz,¹⁰ although women's education began to flourish after the Taliban era, insecurity remains a serious hindrance. Another perspective on security further argues that structural violence that leads to harm, disease, hunger, poverty, and natural disasters, in addition to direct forms of violence such as war, terrorism and physical assault that hold back women's education in Afghanistan.⁶ For Royesh and Ashraf Nemat,¹¹ a secure atmosphere must be guaranteed if education is to serve as an important tool for the women's empowerment process.

The focus of other authors has been on the influence of rigid cultural and religious norms on women's education in Afghanistan. They note that unfavourable realities like child marriage, refusal to allow girls to be taught by male instructors, refusal to send girls to co-educational schools, negative gender stereotypes,

and patriarchal codes have all hindered women's access to education. More so, in Afghanistan, many families tend to give boys better prospects at the detriment of girls even though access to equal social, economic, and political rights through education would benefit both sexes.^{5,9} For authors like Nourya,¹² the worst form of resistance to girls' education in Afghanistan was experienced during the Taliban rule between 1996 and

2001. Under the Taliban rule in Afghanistan, girls and women were prohibited from going to school and the regime went as far as blocking girls' schools. Women's religious and domestic roles within households affected their social life negatively during the Taliban regime and education for women was limited to learning the Quran in the confines of their homes.^{5,13}

Education as an empowerment tool for women in Afghanistan: the insider perspectives of educated Afghan women

The previous section presented an overview of the situation of women's education in Afghanistan with a focus on the influences of the state's work, insecurity, and inimical cultural and religious norms. It showed that despite the efforts of the state following the ousting of the Taliban government in 2001, insecurity and deeply held cultural and religious norms are still major setbacks to the promotion of women's education in Afghanistan. Fortunately, however, some Afghan women have been empowered by education and subsequently joined the struggle for women's rights.^{2,4,10} Their lived experiences and perspectives on education can be an empowerment tool for other women. These women's roles, challenges and motivations for promoting women's education are worth some investigating.

Earlier research on the various hindrances to women's education has tended to focus on the oppressive socio-cultural sphere in Afghanistan, with an emphasis on religion. There are a lack of studies on the lived experiences of educated Afghan women: their roles, challenges and motivations in the promotion of women's right to education in Afghanistan, which this study seeks to remedy.

For this study, a qualitative research approach was adopted. Primary data was collected via interviews with ten highly educated metropolitan women who are active in the Afghan society. All the participants

are aged 25 and above, and have degrees in medicine, chemistry, mathematics and social science from universities in Afghanistan. Some of them have further degrees from Iran or Pakistan. They occupy high positions, socially and politically, and self-identify as highly educated, politically engaged, and feminist. They are working as lecturers in universities and as activists in NGOs connected to women's rights. All participants were chosen through a steered snowballing method. The following section presents findings from this study.

Findings

Findings from this study suggest that educated Afghan women are in the middle of the struggle to promote women's right to education in a conservative socio-cultural environment. In the site of this struggle, democratic and non-democratic forces play their part in affecting the lives of women, but significant results have been achieved since 2001 when the Taliban regime was ousted. Notably, despite security, cultural and religious challenges, change is happening with family support (especially from men), women's networks, and global connectivity as major facilitators. The participants can speak about how education has empowered them, in addition to their struggle and their role in the promotion of women's right to education. The women are resilient and can overcome anxieties. They counter family and gendered norms that hinder women's access to education. This section presents the findings from this study under different themes.

PARENTAL SUPPORT

Findings from this study show that parental support is vital in women's access to education in Afghanistan. In the words of Dr. Hanifa, one of the participants: *"I remember my father was saying; if you were a boy with this talent, you could achieve more success in your life... You still have the chance to progress. You are my pride..."* Eight other participants also stressed their father's role as a key relative with power in the family's decisions, encouraging them to embrace their own agency. Tahera, one of the participants who is a women rights activist even thinks that having a supportive father is God's gift and feels blessed to have such a father. According to her: *"[M]y mother is also supportive, but she cannot decide if there is a counterpoint from my dad; fortunately, my mother works outside the home as a high school teacher because my dad is an enlightened man..."*

Interestingly, the views of the participants suggest that challenging social norms was not an easy task for supportive men who were ridiculed by the society and tagged 'womanized male'. However, these supportive men shrug off the ridicule to support women's education.

HESITATION ON FATHERS' AUTHORITARIAN ROLE

Findings from this study also show that while most of the participants think that the father's action as a core member of the family could support his daughter's progress, some of them also condemn the authoritarian role of men which has been internalized and accepted by most women. According to one of the participants, Karishma, who is also an advocate and women's rights activist: *"[M]y mother never complains about things that my father decides, and she as a woman was compelled to leave her school at a very early age and could not continue her education. She accepted it as normal..."* Karishma, like many of the other participants, thinks that this acceptance is wrong.

WOMEN SUPPORT WOMEN

Findings from this study show that educated women tend to feel supportive toward other women. For instance, when one of the participants once discovered some girls who were having problems doing their homework because they had illiterate mothers at home and their fathers obviously did not want to help their daughters, she talked with her mother

(who was a teacher) and generated a class after their school time, so she could help these girls. According to Maria: *“[I]t seemed so wrong, as a little girl you are worrying about how to solve your problems with your little hands ... [I] was very upset ... [I] thought for many days about that, till I talked with my mother, then her help was a solution that calmed me down ...”*.

One other participant, Dr. Hanifa, narrated how she helped schoolgirls in her first career as a chemistry teacher when she saw there was a need for her assistance. She observed that many of the girls had the problem of understanding her subject and many were sitting upset in the classroom and could not express their problem. She decided to open a class after school hours and teach them. She even helped with some students' family problems by contacting their families.

All the participants state that their empathy and ability to help other women is due to the education they have acquired. Stated differently, they are able to help other women because they feel empowered by their own education. More so, according to them, education is one basic way to solve many social and cultural problems. They also argue that some of the problems in the society are due to a high level of illiteracy. This view is also shared by Gures,¹ who sees widespread illiteracy as one of the major consequences of the conflict and the civil war in Afghanistan.

SECURITY

The participants aired their views on how insecurity negatively affected women's access to education in Afghanistan. Security is a crucial prerequisite for women's education that has been stressed by scholars like Burrige, Payne and Rahmani.¹⁴ Findings from this study suggest that women's physical and psychological insecurity is worsened when they embark on a career as highly educated women, participating in the social and political arena.

The participants note that besides physical security, mental and psychological security is also essential. They argue that Islamic extremist beliefs in recent decades – especially after 1996 – constitute psychological propaganda. They emphasize the need to work on the elimination of psychological fear as a factor that prevents women's enrollment in higher education. The participants also note the reality of physical threats and suggest that both the state and religious

institutions have a role in tackling such threats, with the help of families too.

WOMEN'S RESILIENCE IN THEIR AGENCY

Findings from this study suggest that the participants are resilient in their agency, showing no signs of giving up despite the challenges they face. According to Mina:

“[I] think everyone here would at many times in her/his life be in a position of feeling like giving up when she/he feels lonely and desperate. Yes, sometimes when I was exhausted by different issues and felt lonely, I did feel like giving up, but I never did ...”

One other participant, Maria, had experienced a life-threatening experience when she was a master's student in the capital city of Kabul, but was determined not to give up:

“[O]ne day in the classroom I heard a loud thundering sound, then I was unconscious. When I woke up, there was fog and smoke everywhere, and blood surrounded me; my leg and hand were completely broken. There were so much glass all over me. People around me were just collecting the dead bodies. I did not have a voice, could not move, and was in a panic. I did not know what happened. Again, I fell unconscious. When I woke up again, I was in the hospital...”

Maria had survived an attack from a suicide bomber. She noted that her family already was against her higher education because of security issues and that the incident intensified their resistance. When she recovered and could continue her education, her relatives and family did not want her to continue. According to Maria: *“...I did not want to leave my study. I just struggled as a lonely person then. Too hard to overcome, but I succeeded, and I am proud of myself ...”*

However, the participants of this study think that it is not a matter of who gives up or not. For them, the focus should be on achieving the goal of forwarding women's agency through the support of the family and by adopting a sermon-like approach to educate the public on the need to promote women's rights. They also note that their resilience in forwarding their agency is the result of network support.

POSSIBLE CHANGE TOWARD GENDER EQUALITY

According to the participants of this study, the political system and social norms have changed since 2001. The participants personally think that beyond any recent conflicts, the situation is moving toward gender equality. They voiced their opinions on how these changes are happening, how they have been part of these changes, and the challenges they have faced.

Breaking boundaries

The participants of this study see themselves as highly educated women who can be part of the societal change in Afghanistan. Their discussion and expressions show how they try to overcome the barriers that limit their movement toward their agency. All the participants stated that they would stand against all forms of discrimination, including discriminatory remarks against women.

Family practices

The discussion of evolutionary changes within the society (in families in particular), after the Taliban regime in 2001 and as a result of international efforts against the Taliban, echoed throughout the participants' responses. The participants see these changes as slow and sometimes receding, hence, their decision to start the process of increasing their agency at the domestic and family level.

Most of the participants were satisfied with their own family practices and were therefore willing to extend their efforts to the whole society, and therefore other families. However, they were equally careful not to force their own choices on others, in order to avoid causing problems to girls and women instead of being helpful. They recognized that many conservative families are not ready to accept changes. According to all the participants, it is painful to see girls' rights violated and not be able to do anything. For them, the situation generates more anxiety.

Network-shared agencies

The participants of this study believe in networking because it allows women to break the silence on the discrimination and abuses they face. However, they reveal that the use of opportunities availed by networks varies based on the girls' age and level of education. They argue that the younger generation is more frustrated by such cruelty. Girls are more demanding when they are educated at a higher level because their access to information and knowledge has increased.

Democratic/undemocratic forces

Participants note that it is extremely hard to change an individual's ideas in the Afghan context. For them, even though the desire for change is increasing, there is a need to acknowledge the fact the efforts promoting women's rights to education are always countered by different extremist politicized religious groups. However, as the participants and some scholars argue,⁹ despite this resistance against gender equality, significant progress can still be made toward the promotion of women's rights. The participants look forward to achieving more results.

Pro-feminist men

The participants of this study acknowledge the contributions of pro-feminist men (fathers, brothers, and husbands) in the promotion of women's right to education. However, this study inquired if they feel it is 'okay' to continue to have manly figures over family decisions. Three categories of participants emerged based on their responses. The first group is those who did not have issues with some figures, like a father or husband (but not brothers or in-laws), having this power since such men are liberalized and helpful toward gender equality. The second group is those who think it can be considered as positive/negative depending on how the power is being practiced, and the third group categorically counters the practice (two of the participants think that even if these figures are educated, they may have some conservative patriarchal principle in their thoughts).

Regarding the question of whether women should live completely on their own, the participants hardly think it is possible in the near future. Their views suggest that freedom from a dependent life is not their desire for the time being because they still need family and manly figures' support. This partly corroborates the views of other scholars^{9,15,16} about women's relational and contractual relationship in the society, as accepted

norms which even now are seen as ethically okay. In and ‘exchange’ for men’s support, the participants of this study said they do the housework alongside their work outside the home, which sometimes gives rise to unequal relationships and can obscure exploitation. Moreover, the participants who work as women’s rights activists also note their political accommodations in the short-term, in hope for a better framework to support changes within the families.

Fake pro-feminist men

Interestingly, some participants like Dr. Hanifa, do not believe that there is any real pro-feminist man. According to her: “... I recognize such kind of men with specific behavior... They work as pro-feminist men and hide the real substance of their manner. They only boast to treat women with respect which is simply not true...” Marzia is also pessimistic about the activities of men who parade themselves as pro-feminists. She thinks these men just boast about assisting women’s equality. She is skeptical about why they would accept to change the conservative behavior of the society which is in fact in their favor. According to some of the participants even within pro-feminist men’s circles,

there is a kind of hidden behavior to resist women’s full emancipation from inequality.

However, when asked about younger men’s contribution to the promotion of women’s right to education, seven of my participants agreed that their interest is forming slowly and gradually. According to Tahmina:

“[T]hanks to God for world connectivity and acceleration of the internet. Boys are being connected to the entire world more than girls, based on their entire mobility which is based on our social norms. Boys can use social media and the internet freely based on their economics whereas girls are in a stricter position even if the parents’ income is high. That is why we can look forward to fast mobility to younger men’s attitude toward gender equality in the future”

For the participants, it is the older generations that still convey norms that negatively influence the promotion of women’s rights. According to Karishma “My brothers and brother-in-law are different from my parents and mother- and father-in-law. They are more supportive toward my job as an activist woman...”



Conclusion

This study has assessed the experiences of educated Afghan women regarding how they have been empowered by education and how they have lived as educated women. It has explored their perspectives on education as an empowerment tool for Afghan women, in addition to their challenges and motivations in contributing to the promotion of women's education in Afghanistan. Findings show that they feel empowered to work for social change because of their education, and that they have contributed significantly to women's education in Afghanistan despite challenges like insecurity and cultural and religious norms.

Findings from this study suggest that educated Afghan women are in the middle of a struggle to live as educated women and promote women's right to education in a conservative socio-cultural environment. In this struggle, democratic and non-democratic forces, in addition to the aforementioned challenges, play their own part in affecting the lives of women, but significant results have nevertheless been achieved since 2001 when the Taliban regime was ousted.

Notably, despite security, cultural and religious challenges, changes happening within families (especially among men), women's networks, and global connectivity are major facilitators of women's advancements. Interestingly, the women are able to speak about how education has empowered them and about their own struggle as educated women. They are also able to speak about their own role in the promotion of women's right to education. They are resilient and are able to overcome anxieties and work to counter family-based norms that hinder women's access to education.

Looking at the participants' positions, I can sense trustworthiness; I have no real reason to doubt their sincerity. The notion of responsibility toward gender equality as a socially prevalent ambition is part of their argument, and they expressed having a moral imperative for change. A desire for change or at least a hope for an opening up of new spaces is high, and thanks to their activities, changes are happening. Some women's capability and competence will foster the attainment of women's equality as a whole. It is obvious that the participants of this study, who are themselves beneficiaries of the positive developments in the promotion of women's rights after the ousting

of the hostile Taliban regime in 2001, recognize themselves as highly educated metropolitan women, who play active roles in promoting this right at least around their vicinity.

This study argues that despite the challenges faced, the activities of these women would in the long run result in sustainable changes with regard to women's access to quality education. Though the change the participants narrated in this study is happening slowly, there is a remarkable inclination toward change and social justice, increasingly among the young generation. Moreover, as the number of educated women increases, greater numbers of women will obtain higher social positions, from which they can propagate feminist ideals and drive social change like the participants of this study.

Based on the findings, policy changes and adjustments in the promotion of women's right to education in Afghanistan are recommended. The Afghan government should formulate more programs to meet the educational needs of girls in the most remote parts of the country, and target children whose parents are illiterate. There is a need for the government to create and enhance synergy with dedicated NGOs and educated Afghan women to drive these educational programs. In addition, the government, NGOs and individuals should focus more on cultural, religion-based, and family-focused strategies, which would encourage people to understand the impact of cultural and religious norms – such as girls' early marriage – on their education. These strategies should also involve religious leaders and men, due to their position as heads of families.

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