

AFGHANISTAN

ANALYSIS OF DATA

In this report I discuss about the changes that has happened in Afghanistan as a result of increased in women's education and employment. Particularly the workforce participation has given women self-confidence, recognition, sense of self-worth, participation in decision making and some voice over the disparity and inequality against them. However, the in-depth interviews show the continuity of varied impediments such as gender preference in educating boys over girls, conventional norms, violence against women, and gender inequality which constrain the women's education and workforce participation. It is imperative to explore and understand the roots of the inequalities to find solutions for the injustices against Muslim women. This study has implications for social reform and policy as well as practical initiatives in order to sustain Muslim women's freedom and empowerment.

Positive changes of having education

First I analyse data on the positive changes that increased educational experiences have brought into women's lives in the present time. Many respondents pointed out that even little education is much better than having no education at all because education helps women to make intelligent decisions particularly regarding the children. It is apparent that educated parents want their children to get education. As they explained:

Educated parents have 100% influence on their children, even if they are poor they will try to eat less food and spend less money on food and clothes, and instead spend that money for their children to go to school (Nargis_H4S1)

If I was uneducated and had not studies till fourth grade, now I may not have allowed my girl to go to school, because my education was not enough I let my daughter to go to school and I support her. Some wanted and tried to interfere; I did not allow and let her study and I will support her till the end, but if I was completely uneducated I would not allow her to do so (Nargis_H1P)

Educated parent is the first and most important factor; if parents are uneducated they won't know the value of education and will raise their children according to their traditional views. Some says financial status is also important, but I have seen people who are so rich but still do not send their children to school.

Therefore, it is not about money it is about illiteracy (Nargis_H4S2)

These statements show the respondents' perception about the education and the value of education. The majority of respondents believed that it is important to provide education to children including girls. Although a majority of women in this study have not received higher education they were well aware about the benefits that education and employment could bring into one's life. The narratives of the female respondents show the regrets that they have on not being able to get education and proper employment:

What do you think about the education you have had?

I am not satisfied because if I had continued my studies now I would have been a teacher and I could help my family, it also would make me much open minded (Nargis_H1P)

I appreciate educated and employed women. I always want to become like them. I always blame my parents for being avoided from education and opportunities. I see that women have jobs but I have to stay at home because I am uneducated. If we have job we at least can economically support our children and not ask their father. (Zahra_H9S1)

Another woman who couldn't get education stressed that her own deprivation is her main drive to support the education for her daughters:

I encountered so much difficulty but I don't want my children to experience the same difficulties and that is why I put lots of effort so that they have a bright future (Nazifa_H1S1)

As it is apparent from these narratives there are strong feelings of remorse and resentment associated with women's lack of education. However, these statements also reflect some hope

for the future; future of their children's education and employment. While being resented on not having a proper education and employment, many parents were determined to provide a better education for their children. Witnessing the benefits that proper education and employment bring to one's life has made many women aware of the importance of providing a better education for their children.

Empowerment

The narrative of working women in this study shows that there is a direct link between employment and empowerment of women. As the following experts show the workforce participation has helped in building women's self-confidence and power in decision making. The married women who were employed at the time of the interview shared greater degree of shared decision making with their husbands than the unemployed female respondents. At the same time, single women who were employed said that they get a voice in decisions about themselves as well as in family matters:

I consider myself as one of the strong pillars of the family because I am a student and am counted as an educated girl. My advices/ suggestions are valuable, my words are worthy, and more often, the things I say are accepted. (Nazifa_H1P)

As much a person gets education, as much his/her self-confidence increases. When I was a high school student, I was not confident enough to do everything by myself. However, now I feel much more confident. I can make decisions by my own because I am independent now, I work and have job. I have improved since the past. (Zahra_H6S2)

Gaining self-confidence in making decisions, building social networks and increasing self-worth and acceptance were discussed as main benefits of education and employment of women. A female respondent who has completed a bachelor's degree in fine arts and working as a photographer said:

What types of changes do you feel you have experienced because of your educational experience?

A lot of changes, now I am kind of independent, my family pays attention to my thoughts and suggestions and they respect me more than the past, I feel comfortable in my social relationship with others and I think I have enough information about so many things. I have self-confidence and I am a like a someone that other girls in my family would look up to (Nargis_H1S2)

Some women described that with education and workforce participation their opinions got increased recognition and they got more decision making power in the family. It is evident that employment, particularly working outside from the home brings independence and the ability to be involved in problem solving in the home.

Those who work outside of the home have a higher level of self-confidence and don't have any problem in terms of their social interaction. And those who work from home have a lower level of self-confidence. (Nargis_H2S2)

A female respondent who works in a saloon said:

I feel more confident, maybe it is because of the job that I have, each day I interact with lots of customers and as result of that now I feel more confident in my social interaction (Nargis_H4P)

A woman who works as a head of a kindergarten said:

I experience so many changes, like personal agency, confident, having the ability to help others and many other changes, when I compare myself with other women around me I can say that I have agency and I am more confident, I have my own personal income and I can help others, I mean I can help my friends if they need something like money. Also I am good at my social interactions, I can communicate with all and there are no restrictions (Nargis_H7P)

A female participant who works as a teacher said:

My social communication improved a lot. I have learned how to speak confidently in public. You get to know more people around you.

Gaining confidence in social networking and building up one's own personality through widened social relationships, improved social communication were discussed as main benefits of employment outside the home boundaries. Women who were employed showed greater sense of agency and satisfaction in their narratives. One female participant (Nazifa_H1P) said that women who are working outside "have higher morale and spirit than those who work from home" and feel more empowered. Many women respondents in this study perceived that self-identity, self-confidence and ability to contribute to problem solving in the family define women's empowerment in the Afghan society.

Economic independence is another main benefit of workforce participation which directly paves way to gain respect and recognition. As one female respondent said "both men and women should have a job so that they won't beg from others" (Nargis_H8P). Not having to 'beg for money' certainly enhances women's self-confidence and independence. Further, when women earn they gain some financial autonomy and through helping family in their day today needs brings them respect and some self-value among the family members.

When a woman has no job and is always at home, she is always dependent to her husband. If she wants a small stuff to buy, he might scream that she spends too much money buying useless things. But if she works, besides being able to buy everything she wants, her family also respect her because she supports family too (Zainab_H6S1)

Women pointed out that engaging in income generation has brought positive changes to their lives. Becoming economically independent and being able to contribute to family income and education of the children were discussed as one of the main benefits of doing a job:

I have achieved all of these through my literacy; I have independence which means I am not dependent on a man to earn for me and my children, I am the only one. It has also affected my self-esteem, yes, I have been able to achieve self-confidence and whatever task that I want, I can start and complete it. (Zainab_H3P)

The female respondents who engaged in employment at the time of the interview showed a strong personality and positive perception of themselves when compared with women who did not work. They were able to articulate their opinions well and also were confident about the constructive changes that education and employment have brought into their lives. As one female journalist described:

What changes have you seen in your life as a result of your education?

When I was a kid everyone used to call me whaida gak – small wahida. However, [now] everyone calls me Ms. Wahida. The consequence of my education has been building strong personality for myself. As a result of my education I could get employed, as a result of my job, I got famous and finally I am respected by everyone. These all depend on my education. If I was not educated, I would not be respected by all. Education helped me know my society, people and their problems. When was small, I did not know anything about these all. Even in our family everyone respects me. (Zainab_H6S1)

The respondents discussed how working outside home enriches one's life experiences and enhances socialisation. They discussed that socialisation with a wider community is beneficial for women and family as enhanced experiences help women to make rational and informed decisions in their daily life. As one participant described:

It is good for her to have a job outside of family because she can economically support her family. Also when she works outside family, she gets to know more people, society. She learns more from her work place. (Zahra_H8P)

With the increase in women's workforce participation, there could be seen some shared decision making in some households. However, as there could be seen a considerable age gap (about 10 years) between most of the husbands and wives in Afghanistan, some women tend to believe that their husbands are better able in making rational decisions because they are elderly: "the main and important decision because my husband is elder, he decides" (Zainab_H5P).

Being the primary income earner of the family has also given men a considerable authority in making decisions in the household. However, with economic contribution to the family it is apparent that wives have also gained some voice and power in decision making process.

Choosing the right employment- exercising agency

The narratives show that many women in Afghanistan have somehow made use their minimal facilities and limited freedom to engage in income generation activities. On the one hand, in households where women are not allowed to work outside the house, women have made avenues to earn income by engaging in income generating activities from home such as tailoring, sewing blankets, carpet weaving, flower knitting and so on. This shows that women have somewhat overcome the challenges of restrictions and gained some economic independence. Society generally has a positive perception about these women who have been able to generate some income irrespective of the various personal constraints.

On the other hand, when women had to bear the responsibility of household chores they have used their free time to engage in some income generation from home. As one respondent stated that the choice of employment should depend on individual's life circumstances. Mainly as women have to balance the household chores while working, many women showed some preference to work from home as it would allow them to balance both:

What kinds of employment do you think are appropriate for women? Why?

It depends, for me I like to work from home as it is easy for me to take care of my children and housework too. But some who are educated want to work outside of the home. (Nargis_HIP)

Similarly, the professions like teaching and tutoring were chosen by many female respondents as it would allow them to balance the occupation with disparate household responsibilities. As one woman stated:

...for a woman, the best job is teaching because teaching half the day at school, she can also reach out to her house for the rest of the day, and to serve her family, school, and society. (Zainab_H4P)

These narratives show great examples of how women have conquered the cultural and social barriers to some extent in order to gain some economic independence and empowerment. A minority of respondents expressed that women should have the freedom to choose her field of employment.

As a whole, this study shows that both males and females in the Afghan society generally have a positive attitude towards women's engagement in income generation activities. However, this attitudinal change does not reflect in actual measures and practices as still there could be seen unequal division of labour within the household and restrictions on women's mobility.

Awareness and negotiations at the individual level

Many respondents showed great awareness of the benefits that education and employment bring into women's lives. As one uneducated female respondent described women have to "be active to get their rights because no one is going to give them their rights" (Nargis_H8P). This shows that some women are empowered to understand about their rights and ways of achieving their rights. The narratives show varied individual level attempts to overcome the constraints in the daily life such as using negotiation within the household particularly regarding children's education (when husbands want to stop daughter's education), using women's income from tailoring etc. to pay for daughters' education, negotiations about getting permission to work, and so on. One female respondent described how she managed get her husband's consent to buy a house and how she contributed from the money she earned from weaving carpets. As she explained:

During the Taliban regime, we were in Pakistan. I started making carpet there. After the fall of Taliban we came back to Afghanistan. As a result of making carpet, I bought land and constructed my house. First, I told him to buy a house

but he denied because he did not have money. Then, I told him that I will make carpets and buy a house. I borrowed money from the person I used to take the materials to make the carpet. Then I bought money from the money I borrowed. Then I took some pupils and started making carpets, within a small period of time I could return the money I borrowed from the person. My husband used to convince me to sell my land in my hometown hazarajat but I resisted. Now you can see the chances in my life as a result of my employment or making carpet. Now I own a house and feel like I have the best life. After years making carpets, I left it and started working in bakery. I strongly believed in myself to chance my life and showed my ability, so I got what I wanted (Zahra_H2P)

These narratives reveal some women's capability of persuading or resisting their husbands in day to day confrontations and decisions relating to themselves, their children and household matters. Financial independence as well as knowledge and awareness helped many women in their day to day negotiations.

Both men and women believed that educating women is beneficial for the wellbeing of the family as well as the society. They accepted that education broadens one's awareness and promotes intelligent decision making. Resilience to face the life challenges was discussed as another positive impact of education. Some women have found courage and ability to continue employment despite numerous constraints. As one respondent described:

Well there will be always problem for women in the society that we are living now, but it is up to women that how they can cope with the challenges and solve their problems. There are some women who go for work and after few weeks they cannot bear the pressures from society they quit their works. However, there are some women who are strong and they think this is their own society and it is up to them to solve the problems and take their rights and they go ahead. They don't care how society reacts and I think this also depends on the society that a woman grows up in. (Razia_H8P).

Being a “strong woman” is discussed with a positive standpoint. Many said it is vital to be strong to face the challenges, restrictions and barriers in the society and gain some independence and success.

Again my mother, she is a strong independent woman and I always admire her personality patience and determination, I have learned from her that no matter how life treats you, you have to be strong and never give up (Nargis_H3S2)

My elder sister got education in such a dire economic situation and tolerated lots of problems. She worked to get education but never lost confidence and has been strong in front of problems of the time. So she is a good role model for me. (Nazifa_H1P)

I really admire those women who work or do sport. It is because they are strong in a society that women are always looked down. In many families when a baby is born the first thing they ask is if it's a boy or girl, since having a boy is like an advantage. You can imagine that working in such a male dominated society is not easy, but we have women who are working who do sport and cope with all pressures and hardworking. (Razia_H7P)

The above excerpts highlight the individual attempts to face the challenges of male dominated society. However, it is important to note that a structural change in the society is vital in order for women to gain sustainable benefits of their education and employment. If not it is a constant struggle within the household, as some female participant described:

We are living in a traditional society and people have negative thoughts about women work outside of home, or come home late at night. However, if girls have a strong support from their family, then they can go beyond the traditional norms of our society. It is because society can have a strong impact on women. (Nargis_H8S2)

...However, if the girl is not enthusiastic enough to pursue her education and goals then it is not possible to handle the barriers she might face from her society. In our society girls face with a lot of problems both in society and family,

the social norms that girls should follow and etc. So both definitely affect her persuasion and her life. There are some families who unfortunately get affected from society and its norms and what challenges a girl might face while being integrated with society. For instance, some families might not let their daughters to study because they have seen other families not doing so. If they are well aware and educated, they would definitely encourage their daughters to continue education but they would rather say, others are not sending their draughts to school, then why should I send you to school my daughter!!!??? At the same time, something might happen the other way around. For instance, if other families send out their daughters to school, even if a family is conservative enough in terms of social freedoms from their daughters, they would send their daughters to school because they have a strong attachment with society and get affected from it.

These excerpts show the individual battles that women have to undergo in their daily life to achieve their basic rights; right for education, right for employment and right for freedom.

Resistance and Revolutionary Ideas

It is important to note that a significant number of Afghan narratives express revolutionary ideas and opinions against harmful and disparate norms and conventions against women (this was not apparent in Bangladesh interviews). Both men and women expressed some dissatisfaction about the existing system in Afghanistan and aspire for some change. As male participants described:

Afghan people look at women as their property if they like they will send them to school and if they don't want they will control her and keep her as they want...Afghan people are uneducated and those who are educated also do not know anything beyond their course books, I mean they never go on to analyse what they have read, instead all that they do is memorising the book and never ever using them again in their lives (Nargis_H4S1).

It [male escort] is the impact of Taliban, still some men don't allow their women to go out alone, I feel bad for them because they need to trust each other and remember that we are living in 21 century. Women are allowed and free to do wherever they want. The only thing that can help Afghanistan is education and educated people (Nargis_H3S1)

A female participant said:

I think this [male escort] is really meaningless view (she says it very strongly). Why not a woman is not allowed to go alone? A woman has her own personality and independence and she know where to go and where not to go. If she wants to do anything she can do that even with her guardian in any kind of situation. I personally think that these kinds of thoughts makes women suppress. If they don't segregate them in this way there won't be any major issues in society. (Razia_H8P)

The ability of openly talk and criticise the existing system and the capability of identifying the root cause of the societal issues shed some positive light on the future of women in Afghanistan. Both women and men said that system in Afghanistan is discriminatory against women. Questioning the existing system and believes were apparent in some interviews:

Afghan people say that women's brains are incomplete. But I want to say that even if a man spends his whole day and night in the kitchen washing the dishes and doing the housework, his brain will also remain "incomplete". We need to [expose to] the surroundings and learn how to live and explore new ideas (Nargis_H4S1).

The only issue with girls going to workplaces – studying/getting education – in my opinion is the invalid/wrong perception of Islamic beliefs and values. These result in – if the perception is wrong, they don't allow the girls to study, to work, and to go and do activities. In areas in Afghanistan if there are better perceptions of the Islamic values, they do allow, because it is in Islam that education is obligatory for both girls and boys to go and perform it. But unfortunately, in many areas there are people who – there is illiteracy – literacy is very low. There

is a Mullah. That Mullah – whatever he says is right even if his sayings are against Quran, against Sharia, against religious and Islamic values – his sayings are correct and no one disobeys him. If such kinds of people are identified by people or government, and are discharged, then a barrier is taken away from girls' way and they can come – because everyone has their own interests – I mean every girl that I know is interested to go and study but poor they are not allowed to go and study. (ZainabMursal_H5S1)

The above statements openly challenge the existing social system of Afghanistan which has assigned a lower status to women. One male respondent (Nargis_H4S1) said that he wanted to marry an educated girl as then she could work outside the household. However, at the time of the interview his wife did not engage in workforce but being a fulltime mum to their new born baby. One female respondent (Nargis_H8P) said that Afghani culture is “weak with its old customs and traditions”. She pointed out the importance of raising awareness in relation to illiteracy, wrong believes, traditions, customs, physical and emotional violence against women and pessimism. These individual efforts to analyse the detrimental social norms and attempts to change them shed some positive light.

Another male respondent talked against restrictions placed on women and importance of education in order to prevent violence against women. As he explained:

I think men and women both are human beings. So if we prefer certain things for men but not for women this itself is violence. When you think of someone higher than the other, this is violence. For example, when women go somewhere they are told not to do this or that, why? Because they are women, this is violence. In Afghanistan we don't have even one female driver. Suppose tomorrow someone gets sick and they have to take him to hospital, they have car at home but the husband is not home and the women does not know how to ride, this is violence. Beating is also when no one is willing to give up and they both continue, and it is obvious that the men will beat his wife. This fighting and beating is also due to illiteracy. Educated people can understand each other and there will be no misunderstanding or fights. (Nargis_H6S2)

Impediments for education and employment

In this section I discuss various impediments for getting education for girls and employment for women. It is vital to understand the constraints in order to find ways to address them in the future.

Many narratives of this study show the stresses that people have gone through as a result of the war, political unrest and threats to lives. Several respondents have changed their place of birth due to these uncertainties and this had made them to abandon their education. Taliban Regime taking over of the country has made some respondents to quit from education and take the responsibility of their families. And also strict rules such as women having to have a male escort, restrictions on dress and harsh punishments and killing during that era have made negative impact on women's education in Afghanistan. As some respondent described:

I am uneducated, have not study at all, it was during Taliban regime and we did not go to school, at home we were weaving carpets, then we did not study, we had family problems (Nargis_H6S1).

In the past, we had problems with Taliban. That is why our families would not let us study. I mean because of Taliban we could not get education. It was unsecure (Zahra_H9S1)

I am not satisfied with my education because I wanted to have higher education but I was not allowed to. I passed bad and horrible situations, the war was going on, and there was all destruction and insecurity going, lots of violence from every side (Zahra_H6P)

Some respondents even doubted the possibility of achieving equal rights of education and employment for women because “the country is still in a war with terrorist groups like Taliban. Taliban never accepted and will never accept women's education and employment” (H8S2). However, some pointed out that there could be seen some observable positive changes in the society after the fall of Taliban regime:

During the Taliban's rule women couldn't earn income by themselves because they were restricted but now they can work and be an arm and a pillar to their husband at home (Nazifa_H2S1)

It has changed positively. During the Taliban regime, there was no school at all. However, now we see a large number of girls attending universities, getting bachelors, masters. They have got good education opportunities. (Zahra_H7S1)

This study raises a number of policy implications as well as practical initiatives. The respondents discussed various factors such as restrictions on mobility, conventional norms and traditions, economic constraints, violence against women and lack of family support as impediments to women's education in Afghanistan. I discuss all these impediments in detail in this section analysing the narratives.

Gender preference in educating children

Although the majority of respondents believed that equitable access to education for both girls and boy are important for the development of the country, there could still be seen gender bias in educating children. As some respondent described:

Afghan's usually prefer sending their boys to school and spending money for them but not for us. (Nargis_H4P)

They say boys should study, girls shouldn't, which is why such acts are still present in the Afghan society. Distinction between girls and boys, parents' discrimination between their children has led to girls'- otherwise, girls are smarter than boys; they have more skills and services to offer the society, but unfortunately, all these discrimination between children that boys should study and girls can't or should study less or don't need to study more, I think are the factors. (Zainab_H3P)

Policy intervention is imperative for an attitudinal change to increase at least the basic education of girls in Afghanistan. This study highlights the gender bias in educating children,

giving preference to educate boys than girls in Afghanistan. At the same time, the interview material shows that girls have far less self-confidence and courage than boys in Afghanistan. It is evident that deep rooted cultural norms, ways of raising girls and excessive restrictions on women and girls have made a profound negative impact on girls' self-image on themselves. Several participants said that girls and women are reluctant to take part in education and employment along with men because of the lack of self-confidence. Men are always seen as superior and powerful and women find it difficult to work along with men due to this perception. Many said that it is important for girls to have self-confidence and courage in order to succeed in life making the lack of it the generalisable attribute of the women in the afghan society. As a female teacher explains:

I think there is no limitation and they [women] can do anything. They can be engineers since both men and women have the same brain and mentality. The only think women should have is self-confidence and courage. If they don't have these two they even cannot be a simple teacher. (Razia_H6S1)

Incorporating child rearing practises which enhance girls' self-confidence and independence are vital in the Afghan society. In the next section I discuss varied restrictions on girls and women that directly make an impact on women's education and employability.

Conventional norms and restrictions on mobility

The deep engrained traditional views which see women's mobility with pessimism constrained girls' access to education. The patriarchal society of Afghanistan sees women as dependents whom should not be given freedom of movement because women are viewed feeble and are prone to misbehaviour in the absence of a male counterpart. These ideas were further reinforced during the Taliban period and along with the restricted rules and their harsh practises have made people to perceive these as general norms of the society. Some respondents (Zainab_H5P) in this study said that husbands have right to either beat or divorce his wife if a woman goes out of the house without an accompanier. Although many participants voiced against the restrictions on women's mobility there were few men and women who justified these extreme norms.

As some respondents described:

In your opinion what are/ is the biggest factor that prevent afghan girls getting education?

There are two factors: first one is the financial stability of the family. The second one is family's beliefs. It means that in some families' people believe that when girls grow up they have to get married. And some others have a pessimist view towards girl so they won't allow them to go out. (Nargis_H2S2).

Wrong beliefs and tradition, some says "what girls have to do with education?" they have money, school and good and secure situation, but girls can't go to school because of the wrong traditional beliefs and traditions. This way of beliefs are not everywhere, mostly it is in provinces. In Kabul, Herat , Ghazni the situation is better and girls are going to school, but in Helmand, Farah and ...people are so conservative and girls can't go to school (Nargis_H3P)

Due to wrong beliefs and traditional views of women as housewives, in Afghanistan people think men are created to work outside and women are created to work at home

The first reason is lack of knowledge and education among Afghans. This is all about people's perceptions about women. People always hear about mullahs saying women are not allowed to work outside home and should stay at home. Men hearing these, those with patriarchal behaviour follow the speeches by mullahs. This is not a recent problem, it has a very in depth root of the past.(Zainab_H6S1)

These statements reflect the importance of attitude change in the society, particularly through policy and intervention in order to sustain equitable access to education for women. Although the opportunities for women to get education has increased in modern times when compared to the past, women's workforce participation is constraint due to restrictions on female mobility. To the question whether education help someone to find employment, female respondents said:

It depends, if the family allows. Those who are educated but their husbands or family does not allow them to work is also a problem. For example, one of my relative is educated, she got married and her husband does not let her to go to work. She has no other option. There are only some families that allow their women to work outside of the home. Lack of security, war and bomb blasts are also the reasons (Nargis_H1P).

I know many girls who are educated and they have no job. And the other thing is that people here are so conservative and they don't want their women to be seen in society and the government does not provide any facilities for them either. The other thing is that because of insecurity women cannot really go out and confidently work in other provinces than Kabul. These are the reasons why girls cannot really get job even if they have education and be well qualified. (Razia_H7P)

The data shows that females do not exercise much freedom of decision making. They always have to get “permission” either from husband or family even to get education, go outside the home and engage in employment. The respondents discussed ‘getting permission’ in an ordinary manner which reflects its commonplace in the Afghanistan society.

For instance, when we tell them [men] we want to go out and become tailor, they say “can you do the same job at home”, once I wanted to send my daughter in one of the nearby parlours to learn something, and then I saw my husband's resistance. So I did not send her. (Zahra_H9S1)

When I was in 12 grades I wanted to pursue my higher education abroad. I did exam and I received a scholarship, but my family did not allow me to go. For them, it was important that what other people may think if a girl goes abroad in a non-Muslim country alone. They avoided me for going there and I could not reach my goal. (Razia_H8P)

This excerpts show women's incapability of taking decisions relating to themselves as well as their children. One respondent (Natgis_H4P) said that although her sister is educated and aspired to become a teacher she could not achieve her dream because her husband did not

allow her to go to work. Some respondents expressed extreme patriarchal views such as “god created women weaker because it [workforce participation] would be lots of pressure for her” (Nargis_H6S2). It is evident that positive attitude change is vital in Afghan society in order for women to reap the benefits of their higher education.

Lack of security and violence against women

It is evident that although the level of women’s education has increased in Afghanistan, women’s engagement in employment has not gained much growth. The war and security related issues have made women housebound irrespective of their level of education.

Int: In your idea, does learning/having education lead to employment?

Interviewee: yes, in my idea it does. But, in my idea, because of situation of Afghanistan, the education that we have is not effective for us. Because they graduate from universities and have PhD degrees, Master degrees, bachelor degrees and now they are jobless/unemployed...The reason is that in Afghanistan there is war, insecurity, moral corruption. (Zainab_H5P)

Lack of security is the other problem that usually makes families worried about the safety of their daughter. Afghan people are so conservative and when women go outside they will face lots of harassments and other problems, (Nargis_H4S1)

The current political situation, war and violence against women were pointed out as significant factors that impede women’s access to education.

Why do you think girls and women are staying at home?

It is because of insecurity, whenever the situation is not good I usually prevent my children to go to office and ask them to stay at home...You see Afghanistan is all about bomb blasts, fight and insecurity, what else is there? Nothing

Political security of society; if society is secure then families let daughters to study because they know nothing will happen to them. They also can trust that no one will harass their daughter if she goes to a good work place or school. Families never send their daughters to work and study at a very risky place. (Zahra_H6S2)

As it is evident, less security in the society and violence against women impede girls' education in Afghanistan. Many suggested that schools in near vicinity as a solution for this problem as it would make their families to send their girls to schools with less fear and that would increase school participation.

In our society lack of security has a strong impact on women's isolation from society. But again in Kabul it is better. In other provinces like Helmand and Kandahar perpetrators and other people throw acid on schoolgirls as they walk to school. As a result, parents who see this kind of attacks or hear about it will not allow their girls to go to school anymore. (Nargis_H8S2)

...the crime level has increased. When a woman/girl goes to school, she is attacked by acid – when a girl goes to school, she is beaten, threatened, and the rest do not dare to go and study. (ZainabMursal_H5S1)

Many respondents talked about acid attacks as a main barrier to women's education. This phenomenon was not discussed in the interviews of the other two (Bangladesh and Pakistan) countries. This could be something prevalent in the Afghan society. Some said that in some areas girls attend schools despite the security problems and acid attacks. Some respondents mentioned child marriage as a violence against women that impede their education and employment. Early marriage seems to be a main course for school dropped out of girls at a very young age. Many families still sees girls as a burden to the family and marring them off is seen as a great relief to the family.

In Afghanistan when girls finish twelfth grade, families marry them off. After marriage or even during engagement period there are a very less number of families letting girls to continue their studies. I believe everything depends on women themselves. (Zainab_H6S1)

Recurring patriarchal ideals are apparent in the narratives of this study. Even women sometimes justified violence against women stating that it is women who make them victims through their dress code, behaviour and not covering her hair. It is very important to provide education for women about their rights and increase their awareness about the world around them in order to break their vicious cycle of victimisation because patriarchal social identities are enforced not only by men but women as well (for example by mothers and mothers-in-law). One young female respondent who was a university student at the time of the interview stated:

Well I try my best to have my proper Hijab and I think that a bad woman who does not have proper Hijab does not have honour. She is not only corrupt herself, also make other men to do bad thing to her as well. I have seen in television that these girls pushed men to do bad thing. Those women who does not have money to marry these girls they do bad things to their own relatives and they attack to their own mother and sister. (Razia_H9P)

Some female participants said:

...husband never beats his wife without a reason, if the wife is bad then the husband has to beat her. The family should solve the problem, when it is not solved at home what do you think NGOs can do? (Nargis_H6P)

Husband comes home angry and tired and if the woman says even a word, he will get angry and fight will start. Men are men, once they get angry, they take whatever is around and will beat you with that, a woman should not make the situation like this (Nargis_H6S1)

Further, a male participant who had very liberal ideas throughout the interview said:

Beating is violence; you are not allowed to beat women. But if you think by beating you can bring them back to the right path then it is ok, but still you need to make sure that by beating you won't hurt her a lot. My father sometimes beats my sisters when they put make ups on and go outside (Nargis_H3S1)

These narratives show the prominence of traditional, patriarchal norms which indicate that women are vulnerable and must be protected by men. Although a significant proportion of men and women renounce violence against women during the interview, the narratives show profoundly embedded existence of varied types of violence in the society. Domestic violence played a drastic role in the Afghan society in controlling in women's freedom and independence.

Well domestic violence....men should not have this thought that they are men, it's alright that they say we are men and head of the family and everyone should listen to them, but they should not beat up women whenever they interact with others. They should not do that. Women have rights in Islam too. It is fine that men say women should have Hijab since he is either her father or husband, but in Afghanistan it is not like that. Even if you go out or talk with others they beat you up. If they see some problem at home they take their knife and want to attack their women and nobody consider this violence. (Razia_H9S1)

...from the day that I got married I did not had a good life. Others were interfering in my life and I was always beaten up... sometimes four or five of them together were beating me, so at that time should I also thought of committing suicide or self-immolation. (Nargis_H3P).

Besides domestic violence, the respondents talked about other extreme forms of violence such as honour killing, acid attacks, rape and abuse of women and girls. It is imperative to implement policies to stop violence against women as well as establish support services for those who experience violence. It is vital to amend the law regarding women's age of marriage, domestic violence against women and women's mobility to end discrimination. I argue that this culture of violence against women needs to be addressed in order for women to gain real freedom through their education and employment.

Unequal gender role division

Gender role stereotyping which is strongly prevalent in the Afghan society is another main impediment to both education and employment of women. Men are naturally seen as born to work outside whereas women's role is mainly confined within the boundaries of the home. Many said that most of the works at home including preparing tea for males, cooking meals, bringing them water, washing and ironing their clothes are considered as women's work in the Afghan society:

In my family (sarcastic) men do not take part in household activities. For example, they even don't make tea for themselves. I should say that most of the works at home is considered as women's work. (Razia_H8P)

Some narratives in this study show that these socially constructed gender role segregations are cultivated within the people to the extent that they see them as the normal practise. As one female (30 years old) participant described:

*Int: Do you believe men should work out and women inside?
Originally women should work at home-do household work. But if she wants to work outside she can do.*

*Int: can men do household work too?
Of course not! He should work outside of home. When a man has a wife he does not need to do household work.*

*Z: How much your husband takes part in household work?
Hahahahh, nothing, I even put his sleepers in front of his feet when he gets out of home. (Zahra_H9S1)*

The dialogue shows the deeply rooted gender role division in the society which greatly hinders the workforce participation of women in Afghanistan. As one respondent clearly explains:

Why do you think girls/women are staying at home?

Due to wrong beliefs and traditional views of women as housewife, in Afghanistan people think men are created to work outside and women are created to work at home.

These conventional gender stereotypes have negative impact on women's education as they have internalised the idea that no matter they are educated or not once getting married and having children their main responsibility is to take care of them. These stereotypes both limited girls' access to education as well as their motivation for higher education. Some pointed out lack of self-interest for education is a main constraint for education. As one respondent described:

No here no one is willing to go for education, they started a course here and they went door to door and asked people to come and study but no one went there. Finally they closed down the course. Next time there was another course in Pol-e-Surkh and they also come here door to door and informed people that we will pay for your daily car rent, you just come and study. But no one went. When the course was just here in our area no one went so of course no one will go that far. All women are jobless here (Nargis_H6P)

This shows the importance of raising awareness in people of the importance of education as deeply embedded conventions have prevented and made people less interested in gaining education.

Furthermore, many respondents said that there is unequal division of labour in the Afghan society which delimits women's workforce participation. Running the household chores is mainly on women and many women found it difficult to balance it while doing a job. This is a very important concern that needs significant awareness-raising. Because on the one hand women accept that it is natural that women have to be the primary carer of the family. This acceptance and norms were passed down from generations and the new generation of females who are much educated than the previous generation face similar adversities after getting married as they are expected to balance household chore with the job if they aspire to work. These extremely entrenched conventions unless changed both at family level and societal level could hinder the women's workforce participation although they are highly educated

and skilled. The following excerpt illustrates the housebound situation of women and also unequal division of labour in the society:

Some of them [women] do not have the time to come out of the house; it is because of too much of housework. Some are not allowed by their families and if they come out without permission then problems may happen within the family, most of women in Afghanistan are not employed and they have nothing to do outside of the home so they mostly stay at home and occasionally come out (Nargis_H3S2)

Teaching, because they partly go to school and partly can do household work. Also, for conservative families who do not allow their women work with men, they can find female schools to teach (Zahra_H4S)

It is critical to address these issues pertaining to conventional norms and practises in order to realise women's rights as human beings and as equal citizens.

Conclusion

This paper examined the positive benefits that increased education and employment have brought into women's lives. It also analysed various types of impediments for girls and women's education and employment in the Afghan society.

The narratives indicate that the workforce participation has increased women's social recognition and value as well as given women some sense of self-worth, confidence, and participation in decision making. The participants in this study showed a greater awareness about the disparities against women and some expressed their dissatisfaction and revolutionary ideas against the conventional norms and existing harmful practises against women and girls. However, the in-depth interviews also show persistence of varied barriers for women's education and employment such as gender preference in educating boys over girls, violence against women, restrictions on mobility and gender inequality in Afghanistan. Unless these issues are addressed at policy and structural level, it would be extremely

challenging for women to reap the benefits of their increased education and employability. This study has implications for social reform, policy and practical initiatives in order to end discrimination and sustain Muslim women's freedom and empowerment in Afghanistan.