

**Exploring Afghan Girls' Access and Adaptation to Online  
Higher Education**

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**A thesis submitted to the BRAC Institute of Educational Development in  
partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Education in  
Educational Leadership & School Improvement**

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BRAC University  
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## **Declaration**

It is hereby stated that,

1. The thesis presented is my original work undertaken while pursuing a degree at Brac University.
2. The thesis does not include material that has been published or written by anyone else, except where it is properly referenced with full and precise citations.
3. The thesis does not feature material that has been accepted or submitted for any other degree or diploma at any university or educational institution.
4. I have credited all significant sources of assistance.

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## Approval

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## **Ethical statement**

I hereby acknowledge that this is my original work. The manuscript, Exploring Afghan Girls' Access and Adaptation to Online Higher Education, is authentic and free from any form of distortion or manipulation.

This research was conducted with honesty and integrity, ensuring that personal biases were consciously set aside to maintain objectivity. Each participant's perspectives were respected, and their identities were kept confidential to protect their privacy. The study included a total of 12 participants, comprising two teachers and six students from diverse backgrounds and different regions across Afghanistan.

All ethical considerations were carefully addressed, including obtaining informed consent from participants and adhering to principles of confidentiality and respect. The research findings are presented truthfully, and all sources used are properly cited. Furthermore, digital and physical records of the data are securely stored and will only be shared through appropriate and formal procedures.

I affirm that this paper complies with all ethical guidelines and institutional standards, maintaining the highest level of academic integrity and ethical conduct.

## **Abstract**

Access to education remains one of the most critical challenges in Afghanistan. After the Taliban took over Afghanistan, schools and universities were closed to Afghan girls until further notice, which deprived them of their fundamental right which is education. In response, many girls sought online scholarships and educational programs as an alternative to continuing their higher education online. This study aims to investigate Afghan girls' perceptions of access and adaptation to online higher education and strategies to address the challenges they face in the synchronous online education of two universities.

The study used qualitative research methods, employing focus group discussions (FGDs) and in-depth interviews to explore Afghan girls' experiences with online learning. The primary findings highlight several key barriers, including unreliable internet connectivity, technical issues, and financial constraints, all of which hinder their ability to attend online classes. Additionally, a lack of family support and limited awareness of online educational opportunities, especially in remote areas, significantly affect girls' access to online higher education.

Overall, the study reveals how Afghan girls have found strategies and solutions to overcome these obstacles. Fully funded online scholarships and educational courses provided by two universities and organizations have played a crucial role in enabling them to pursue their higher education online. Addressing these challenges and increasing awareness of online learning opportunities can further support Afghan girls in obtaining quality education despite existing limitations.

**Keywords:** Afghan girls, synchronous online higher education, difficulties, Afghan Girls perception, Adaptation and access

## **Dedication**

I dedicated this thesis to my mother and father, who believed in the power of education as a guiding light. Their unwavering faith in learning and their support gave me the freedom and independence to pursue my dreams and turn them into reality. Their encouragement has shaped my journey, allowing me to embrace knowledge and strive for a brighter future. I also extend this dedication to my brave sister and all Afghan girls who, despite being deprived of education and facing barriers, continue to seek learning opportunities online. Your resilience and determination serve as an inspiration to all.

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## **List of Acronyms**

FGD: Focus group discussion

AUAF: American University of Afghanistan

Kankor: A university entry exam in Afghanistan

UNESCO: United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization

UNICEF: United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund

NGO: Non- Non-governmental Organization

IIS: Institute of Ismaili London

Brac: Bangladesh Rural and Advancement Committee

SDGs: Sustainable Development Goals

TOEFL – Test of English as a Foreign Language

IELTS – International English Language Testing System

PC – Personal Computer

CV – Curriculum Vitae

PhD – Doctor of Philosophy

UK – United Kingdom

AKF – Aga Khan Foundation

## **Chapter 1**

### **Introduction and Background**

#### **1.1 Introduction**

Education plays a vital role in the development of every individual. The education of Afghan girls has been a longstanding issue of deep concern and widespread international attention. Generally, the situation is much worse for Afghan girl students who are facing huge problems in continuing their education owing to socio-political instability, cultural values, and financial obstacles. This is relevant to challenges that have arisen recently, which have deteriorated after the resurgence of the Taliban in 2021, leading to the shutdown of educational institutions for girls, thereby restricting their access to learning opportunities. (Amnesty, 2023).

According to Al-Shammari (n.d.), “This rule was put in place by the Taliban in December 2022 and has not been changed, despite many international attempts to challenge it. It is one of the biggest obstacles to international investment and support for rebuilding Afghanistan. A Taliban official stated in a discussion that there is an extensive lack of infrastructure and budget, with several challenges to providing education for girls at all stages”.

To fill the education gap in Afghanistan, international organizations and Afghan Academics who live outside create online courses, schools, and universities to provide asynchronous and synchronous online education for girls. There is no exact data to show how many Afghan girls are using online education. Still, some higher education platforms report that tens of thousands of girls are registering and continuing their education.

Despite advancements, online higher education has emerged as a vital alternative to addressing the educational gap for Afghan girls. It provides a unique opportunity to navigate sociocultural barriers by delivering educational content through digital platforms and online resources (UNESCO, 2024). However, the effectiveness and challenges surrounding their access and adaptation to online learning remain insufficiently explored. This study examines the perceptions and experiences of Afghan girls regarding their engagement with online higher education, highlighting the strategies they employ to overcome these obstacles.

## **1.2 Research Topic**

Education plays a vital role in national development, and it is essential for individuals to acknowledge its significance and impact. As a developing nation, Afghanistan has endured more than thirty years of continuous conflict, disproportionately affecting Afghan girls. For the past 600 days, they have been deprived of their fundamental rights (Hamidi, 2024).

Currently, institutions such as AUAF University and Online Women's University (Zan University) offer online higher education as an alternative pathway for Afghan girls. Those who meet the eligibility criteria are pursuing their bachelor's degrees through these programs. However, they continue to face significant obstacles, including internet connectivity issues, electricity shortages, and other challenges. Through FGDs and interviews, I have gained deeper insights into these difficulties.

My research focuses on Afghan girls' access to online higher education, aiming to understand their current situation and how they navigate restrictions. My perspective is shaped by personal experience, having lived in a rural area and encountered similar challenges during my own online studies. This firsthand understanding of their struggles and resilience fuels my commitment to

exploring their views on online education and advocating for policies and programs that enhance accessibility.

### **1.3 Statement of the Research Problem**

Afghan girls currently face a complete lack of access to formal education in Afghanistan. Since 2021, schools and universities have remained closed to them, forcing some to seek online higher education as an alternative. However, the majority struggle with significant barriers, including poor internet connectivity, poverty, unreliable electricity, limited access to computers and devices, and a lack of familiarity with online learning platforms (Ahmadzai, 2023).

According to Audrey Azoulay (2024), Assistant Director-General for Education at UNESCO, Afghanistan is the only country in the world that prohibits girls over the age of 12 and women from accessing education (UNESCO, 2024). The latest data reveals that 1.4 million Afghan girls have been deliberately denied the opportunity to attend school, college, or university (UNESCO, 2024). Additionally, Afghanistan has one of the lowest internet access rates globally, further restricting the technological resources necessary for online education

As a girl who had the same experience after the collapse of the previous regime, I lived in one of the rural areas of Badakhshan province, where I faced many challenges that evoked me to do research and explore the hands-on insight of other girls in the current situation regarding their accessibility and adaptation with online learning.

The issue of Afghan girls' adaptation and access to online higher education remains a critical concern. This study seeks to uncover the underlying causes of these challenges, particularly as the new government in Afghanistan continues to impose escalating restrictions on girls, further

limiting their educational opportunities. The research aims to explore Afghan girls' perceptions and experiences regarding their access to online higher education amid the current circumstances.

#### **1.4 Research question**

This paper formulated the primary research questions below to delve deeper into the chosen topic.

Q1. What is Afghan girls' perception of the current circumstances, adaptability, and access to online higher education?

Q2. What key challenges do Afghan girls encounter in accessing online higher education?

Q3. How do Afghan girls navigate these challenges, and what strategies do they adopt to cope with or overcome them?

#### **1.5 Purpose of the Study**

This study explores the current state of Afghan girls' access to online higher education, highlighting the obstacles that hinder their participation. Through interviews and focus group discussions, it seeks to identify the key challenges they face and the strategies they employ to overcome them. By centering on their experiences and perspectives, the research provides fresh insights into how Afghan girls navigate academic opportunities under the Taliban's new restrictions, shedding light on their resilience and adaptive approaches.

## **1.6 Significance of Research**

This study offers valuable insights into how online higher education on the retention and academic success of Afghan girls, addressing a pressing issue within Afghanistan's current socio-political landscape. Given the Taliban's restrictions, Afghan girls face significant barriers to education, making it crucial to explore alternative learning pathways such as online education. This research explores the feasibility of online learning as a viable solution, aiming to understand their experiences, perceptions, and challenges. By doing so, it seeks to inform targeted interventions and support mechanisms that can enhance educational access. Additionally, this study contributes fresh perspectives on the lived realities of Afghan girls ' experiences often overlooked in academic discourse.

Ultimately, it fills a critical knowledge gap by providing a comprehensive view of both the obstacles they face and the strategies they employ to overcome them, paving the way for the development of more effective educational resources and services

## **Chapter Two**

### **Literature Review and Conceptual Framework**

#### **2.1 Literature Review**

This research has explored themes from my research question linked to online higher education and Afghan girls, and their insight into the difficulties or challenges and how they overcome to access online higher education. Hence, a thorough review of various books, research papers, policy documents, academic websites, articles, and journals related to the study topic has been conducted. In a larger sense, there is limited broad research on online higher education for Afghan girls; particularly, insufficient research exists within the context of Afghanistan. Utilizing the reviewed literature and published academic papers, according to my research questions, I have categorized the literature into four themes.

#### **2.2 Access to education**

Education is a basic right that enables individuals to shape their future with dignity and make significant contributions to society. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) highlights the vital role of universal education, viewing it as essential for advancement. Goal 4 of the SDGs aims to ensure inclusive and equitable access to quality education while promoting lifelong learning opportunities for everyone (UNESCO, 2024). This goal emphasizes the necessity of removing obstacles and establishing pathways for every individual to succeed academically, regardless of their situation.

In Afghanistan, over the past four decades, education was restricted for girls due to the war, poverty, and discrimination. It is the nation with the greatest illiteracy rate in the world (UNAMA, 2013). Girls in Afghanistan are currently not allowed to receive an education, making it the only country with this restriction. The ban on girls' education is not a recent development; it dates back to September 27, 1996, when the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan was formed following a civil war (Hamidi, 2024). Throughout the first government of the Taliban, the people of Afghanistan observed numerous fluctuations in their day-to-day lives. The education system changed when the Taliban took control of Afghanistan. They set up a new system different from before. The Taliban's first move was to create a government based on strict Islamic law and undo all the changes made by the previous government. They took out books that didn't follow Islamic teachings and stopped girls from attending school and universities. Taliban officials stated that they closed girls' schools during the 1990s due to an inability to finance separate classrooms for girls and boys, recruit female educators, or arrange transportation for girls (Hamidi, 2024).

Correspondingly, in Islamic State of Afghanistan, according to Article 43 of the constitution, every citizen has the right to education. The state should provide learning for free up to a bachelor's degree. The government is responsible for creating effective programs to promote well-rounded education throughout Afghanistan and ensure that all children obtain mandatory education up to the lower tributary level. Article 44 emphasizes the importance of implementing effective programs to offer equitable education for girls and eradicate illiteracy (The Constitution of Afghanistan, 2004). However, in the current situation, the previous government's role and law are not acceptable and adaptable for the Taliban, and they call that role and regulations illegitimate. As stated in Article 2, the law of Afghanistan education aims to provide equal education rights for Afghan citizens by enhancing and establishing a free, balanced, and fair educational approach.

Furthermore, Article 3 of the education law underlines that every individual in the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan possesses equal rights to education with no form of bias (Law, 2008).

On the other hand, ensuring equal access to education for women is crucial because it has a profound impact on both societal development and personal empowerment. Promoting gender equality in education not only aligns with the principles of justice and human rights but also contributes to economic growth, social unity, and sustainable progress. When women have the same educational opportunities as men, they gain the knowledge and skills needed to engage fully in social, economic, and political life. This leads to a more diverse and inclusive workforce, boosting productivity and fostering innovation(Hamidi, 2024).

According to cultural norms, some families prefer boys rather than girls and invest in boys ' education. In the current situation, some families do not even provide a smartphone for their wife or daughter to get online education and do housework for them.

## **2.3 Online Higher Education**

As stated by the Center for Strategic & Regional Studies (2020), “Online education refers to a learning method where educators teach their students without the need for physical presence or fixed schedules. This implies that the interaction between instructors and students occurs entirely or predominantly through digital or automated means” (p. 3).

Online higher tutoring is a newfound vision of technology that has increased the demand for modern society, particularly in education. Its primary objective is to provide for individual learning needs and personal growth rather than entirely focusing on awarding university degrees. The modern higher education system has recently introduced online learning as a new form of education in addition to full-time and correspondence options (Havrylenko, 2024). This type of

education utilizes specialized computers and educational data to reach a wide range of people through educational technologies provided by institutions. The demand for online learning is increasing the social need for advanced educational equipment, which traditional forms of education cannot fully meet. Implementing an online education system based on laptops, videotapes, Zoom, Google Meets, YouTube, and different media interaction tools effectively addresses this challenge. (Havrylenko, 2024).

Furthermore, offering courses via the internet has become a significant avenue for higher education. A recent annual survey report by SLOAN-C (Allen and Seaman, 2013) indicates that over 6.7 million students are taking at least one online course, accounting for 32% of all students in higher education. Moreover, more than 69% of higher education institutions now view online learning as a vital component of their long-term strategies (Allen and Seaman, 2013).

Because some media channels, such as Tolo Television, are interested in producing online learning content, many international organizations are also supporting learning through the internet, radio, and television. For instance, UNESCO is providing financial assistance and training for Afghan media channels to create content. The Begum Organization for Women launched a radio station in March 2021 and initiated a wire network in March 2024, backed by UNESCO. The educational content aired by UNESCO's media partners has reached an estimated 17 million Afghans. Although these alternative learning approaches are beneficial for resilient Afghan youth, UNESCO stresses that the importance of face-to-face education in a classroom setting remains unmatched. Therefore, the organization, represented by its Director-General, urges the international community to continue its efforts to fully restore the right to education for Afghan females in Afghanistan (UNESCO, 2024).

Finally, significant advancements have been made to enhance educational access for girls, encompassing online learning, financial incentives, internet packages, and the provision of devices. These initiatives have been driven by international donors, media organizations, civil society, and NGOs. Such collective efforts have fostered awareness within Afghan society regarding the importance of educating women and girls, as well as the overall development of the nation. (Frogh, 2022).

### **2.3 Challenges for Afghan Girls**

In Afghanistan, the pandemic prompted education systems across the globe to investigate online learning, while it also presented a significant challenge to prove their capability in delivering effective online courses. Some universities in Afghanistan initiated online education using platforms like Telegram. Nonetheless, feedback indicated that students were unhappy with online learning because of difficulties like insufficient access to essential resources. After the Taliban closed the doors of schools and universities, girls started learning online because the Taliban could not close the online programs; it is out of their control. Some organizations support financially linked providing to the up card, but others don't because of the many learners, due to financial issues, who do not have enough money for internet facilities, which delays the progression of online learning in the background of Afghanistan (Sarwari et al., 2021).

Hamidi (2024) states that customs and societal practices about girls in Afghanistan can restrict their learning opportunities. Several ethnic groups have their traditions about women's roles, and some have even limited the activities of women, education being one of them. Due to the influence of leaders and fundamentalists, girls' education is particularly restricted in many areas (p 230).

## **2.4 Mitigating the challenges**

As a result of the Taliban's overthrow of Afghanistan and the ban on education for women and girls beyond the sixth grade, various individuals and organizations have created alternative approaches to facilitate women's and girls' education through online platforms, including universities and courses. Most of these institutions were founded afterward the failure of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. The Afghanistan Human Rights Center found, through discussions with officials and educators from online educational centers, that nearly 60% of these institutions were established post-2021. The creation of these organizations was a direct response to the ban on education for Afghan girls and an attempt to uphold their right to education. Almost 70% of these educational organizations are registered and operate outside of Afghanistan. Some officials from these institutions informed the Afghanistan Human Rights Center that there is no possibility for such organizations to function within the country, prompting them to register their educational entities abroad (Afghanistan Human Rights Center, 2024).

Access to online higher education is one opportunity for Afghan girls to mitigate the challenge of continuing their education (Ahmadzai, 2023).

Currently, UNESCO is one of the international organizations that supports online learning via two-way wireless and TV by offering financial aid and educating to Afghan media interested in creating and airing educational programs (UNESCO, 2024).

As stated by Zirack (2023), Afghan girls have been denied access to education for over 600 days since the fall of the previous government, when the Taliban closed schools and universities. In general, earlier studies have emphasized the historical and socio-political backdrop affecting

Afghan girls' access to higher education within schools and universities throughout different periods, highlighting both the accessibility and obstacles within Afghanistan's educational framework. Additionally, these studies conducted comparative analyses of female education in contemporary times and explored the Taliban's perspectives and limitations regarding education. They also looked into the influence of cultural and religious elements on educational opportunities for females, along with the technological hurdles encountered by educational institutions in Afghanistan during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, much of the current research has centered on the broader challenges, neglecting to examine how Afghan girls are finding ways to navigate these difficulties.

In contrast, the present study aims to fill the gap left by prior research and address a critical issue concerning Afghan girls' access to higher online education, especially in light of the repercussions stemming from school and university closures. This study delves into these issues to gain a new and contemporary perspective on the situation based on the personal experiences and insights of Afghan girls who are covertly pursuing their education online despite the restrictions imposed by the Taliban.

The educational policy of the Taliban, encompassing both Islamic and secular education, primarily targets boys and young men, while only providing minimal opportunities for girls' education based on civilian demand, and does not have any specific official policy for online higher education (Amiri & Jackson, 2021). The obstacles they encounter and the methods they employ to overcome these challenges. Gaining an understanding of their resilience and coping mechanisms can provide important insights for supporting other girls facing comparable circumstances.

## **Conceptual framework of the study**

A conceptual framework provides a structured approach to understanding the relationships between key concepts in a study (Grant & Osanloo, 2014, as cited by Adom et al., 2018). In this research, the framework is designed to analyze the realities Afghan girls face, the challenges that limit their access to online higher education, and the strategies they employ to overcome these barriers.

Feminist theory serves as a foundation for analyzing gender-based educational inequalities and systemic barriers that Afghan girls face in their pursuit of learning. This theoretical lens highlights the power structures that restrict women's access to education, particularly under patriarchal regimes like the Taliban, where gendered oppression is institutionalized (Lorber, 1997).

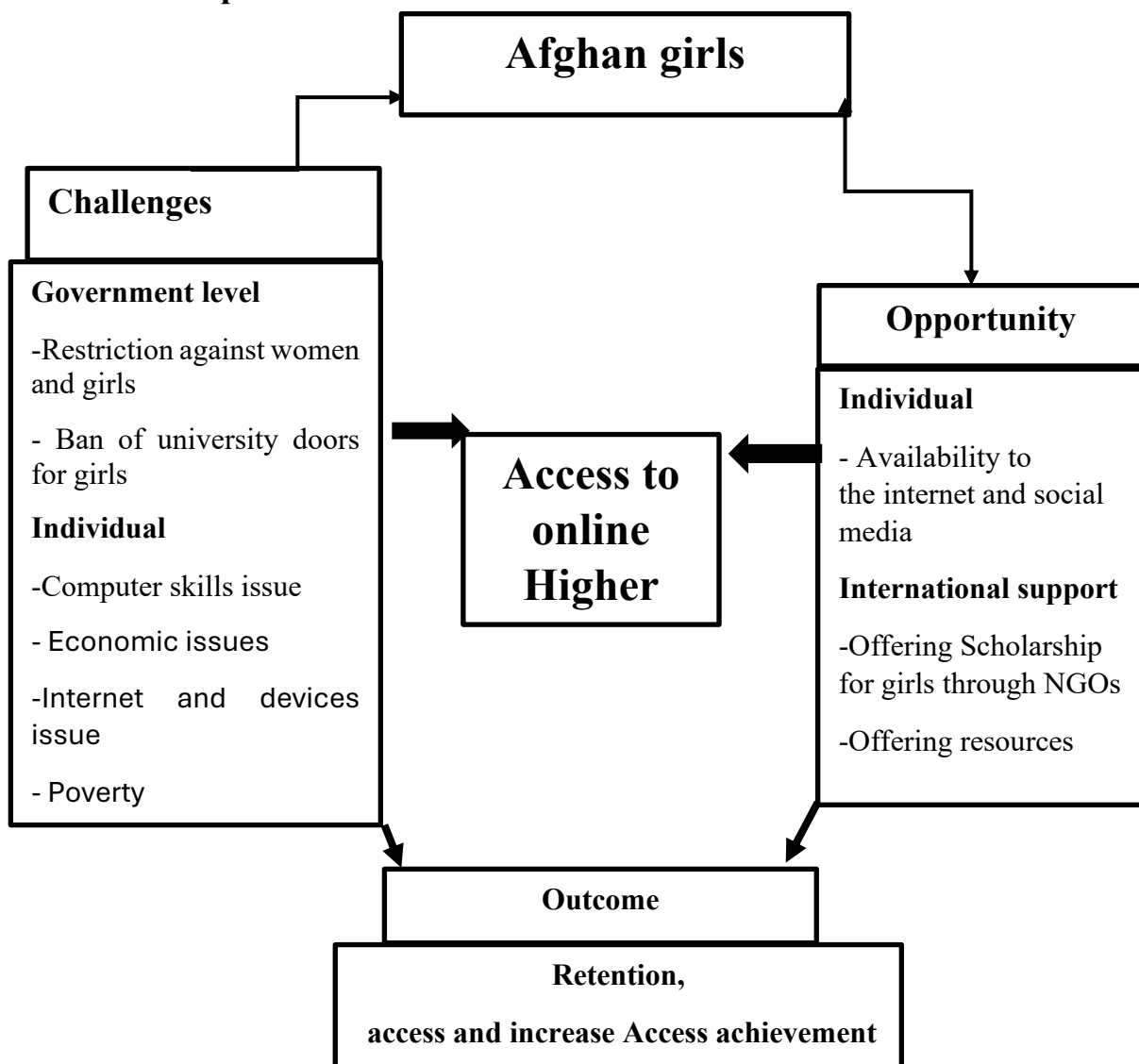
According to feminist scholars, education is a fundamental tool for empowerment, allowing women to challenge societal norms, gain economic independence, and reshape their communities (Tong, 2009). However, the Taliban's restrictions reflect a deliberate effort to exclude Afghan girls from formal learning spaces, reinforcing traditional gender roles that confine women to domestic spheres (UN Women, 2023).

Despite these barriers, Afghan girls demonstrate resilience by looking for alternative learning approaches, including underground schools and online education. From a feminist perspective, these attempts represent resistance against unjust structures, showcasing the transformative power of knowledge even under restrictive conditions.

In this research, I intend to explore the current situation of Afghan girls, the challenges they encounter, and the ways they overcome these barriers to engage in online higher education. There is a lack of scholarly work, especially articles and books, regarding Afghan girls' access to online higher education. However, not all girls can benefit from online learning opportunities. The

insufficient availability of dependable technology and internet service presents a major obstacle in Afghanistan, where connectivity is notably limited. Moreover, the high cost of internet access makes it challenging for many families to afford online education. With a large portion of the population living in poverty, investing in internet data has become a significant challenge (Zirack, 2023). Additionally, the existing curriculum does not provide training in computer skills, which results in many girls lacking the essential digital literacy required to succeed in online education (Ahmadzai, 2023).

### Conceptual framework



## **Chapter Three**

### **Methodology**

#### **Research Methodology**

The present research explored the perceptions of Afghan girls' access and adaptation to online higher education in Afghanistan. The methodology section of this study utilizes qualitative research to gather data, employing semi-structured virtual interviews and a virtual focus group discussion. This chapter will cover the methodology, research location, research participants, sampling methods, data collection techniques, the researcher's role, data analysis, ethical considerations, issues of credibility and rigor, as well as the study's limitations.

The study used a qualitative research approach to gain an in-depth understanding of Afghan girls' perspectives. This study further analyzed the experiences and perceptions of Afghan girls and teachers to provide concrete documentation of girls' accessibility to online higher education in Afghanistan.

#### **3.1 Research Approach**

The qualitative approach is inherently inductive and is utilized to direct the research process. Creswell (2014) states, "Qualitative research entails exploring and understanding the ways individuals or groups view social or human issues. It includes formulating questions and procedures, gathering data in natural environments, analyzing data inductively to uncover themes, and interpreting the significance of the data. The final report is organized flexibly to adjust to the findings" (p. 40).

As indicated in the research title, a qualitative approach was the most appropriate method because I examined the perceptions of Afghan girls through online interviews and online Focus Group Discussions (FGD). This method offers a more profound understanding of the experiences and perspectives of Afghan girls. I employed qualitative techniques to explore Afghan girls' access to online higher education and how their perceptions are influenced by their existing circumstances.

### **3.2 Research Site**

The study was carried out in collaboration with AUAF University and Online Women's University to gain insights from Afghan female students regarding the current circumstances. The American University of Afghanistan was founded in 2004 and offers a modern, globally recognized education for its students, ensuring equal access for women and girls while promoting a more just society. However, following the change in regime and the Taliban assuming control in Afghanistan, the university relocated to Doha, Qatar (American University of Afghanistan, n.d.).

Women Online University (Zan Online Education) was founded on December 22, 2022, to provide online education for Afghan women deprived of formal learning opportunities. Currently, 14,000 Afghan women are enrolled in the university, offering free courses across 14 faculties. The university's classes are instructed by 450 professors and lecturers, both from Afghanistan and globally (Asia, n.d.).

This university operates entirely online and is not physically based in Afghanistan. Most of its instructors are located outside the country, and all educational activities are managed virtually.

I selected these two universities because they provide online higher education for Afghan girls, offering an alternative after the closure of schools and universities in Afghanistan.

Regarding the official position on this university teaching women online from Afghanistan, the Taliban has not granted accreditation to such institutions and generally does not recognize them as formal education providers. However, Afghan women continue to enroll in these programs as a means of pursuing education despite restrictions.

### **3.3 Research Participants**

The research study participants were Afghan girls, and for triangulation, I added teachers as well. The total number of participants was 12. Six Participants for individual interviews (two students and one teacher from a women's online university, and two students with one teacher from AUAF University) and six participants for the focus group discussion.

In addition, the participants are from different tribal groups (Tajik, Hazara, Uzbek, Pashtun) and diverse ages (18- 30 years old). Moreover, the participants were from different provinces, which are Balkh, Badakhshan, Baghlan, and Kabul. Furthermore, the participants are doing their bachelor's in different departments of the two universities. For instance, in Computer science, Economics, literature, and midwifery. The two lecturers, one teacher in the midwife department and the other is lecturer in the economics department.

Finally, I chose these Afghan girls and teachers to gain insight into their views on their experiences with online higher education in Afghanistan as female students. In the end, they provided me with a comprehensive understanding of their circumstances, accessibility to online higher education, the various challenges they faced, and the strategies they employed to overcome them.

### **3.4. Sampling Procedure**

For this research, I utilized the purposive sampling method, which is appropriate for qualitative research and enabled me to identify and select information-rich participants who align with the study's objectives. According to Creswell (2014), purposive sampling is a widely used technique in qualitative research where researchers intentionally select participants who can provide rich and relevant information about the phenomenon being studied. This method allows researchers to focus on specific cases that are most informative and aligned with the research objectives. Through this sampling method, I conducted a systematic inquiry focused on participants' backgrounds, knowledge, and understanding of the context.

Furthermore, I employed criterion sampling as part of my sample selection process. According to Creswell (2007), criterion sampling involves selecting participants who meet specific criteria defined by the researcher. This approach is often used in qualitative research to ensure that selected cases align with the study's purpose and provide rich, relevant data. It helps researchers concentrate on participants who possess certain characteristics or experiences crucial to answering the research questions (p. 118).

To begin with, I selected Afghan girls who are currently living in Afghanistan, deprived of formal education, and studying at online universities. This included two bachelor's students and one teacher from the Online Women University, as well as two bachelor's students and one teacher from the American University of Afghanistan (AUAF), representing different departments for virtual interviews and a Focus group discussion.

Additionally, I selected six bachelor's students (three from each university) for virtual Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) from various provinces and fields of education. I ensured the inclusion

of participants from diverse ethnic backgrounds, including Tajik, Hazara, Pashtun, and Uzbek, as well as a variety of provinces such as Herat, Badakhshan, Baghlan, Balkh, and Kabul.

The criteria for selecting participants were critical in ensuring that I collected rich and varied data from a diverse group of individuals, which contributes to the validity of the findings. As Creswell and Poth (2018) emphasize, sampling criteria should be thoughtfully chosen to reflect the diversity of the population of interest. In qualitative research, the aim is to achieve a deep understanding of social contexts, human behaviors, and the factors influencing them (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Unlike statistical sampling, qualitative sampling prioritizes alignment with research goals and relevance to the population under study.

In summary, the purposive sampling technique employed in this qualitative study allowed me to select a diverse sample in terms of ethnicity and region. This approach enabled the collection of rich, detailed insights into the experiences and perspectives of Afghan girls enrolled in bachelor's programs at two online universities in Afghanistan.

### **3.5 Data Collection Methods**

In this qualitative research, I employed two data collection methods: virtual semi-structured interviews (using open-ended questionnaires) and a virtual Focus Group Discussion (FGD). I conducted six virtual semi-structured interviews and one FGD. The primary tools for this study were the interview guidelines and the FGD guide, which served as key instruments for gathering data.

Through the interviews, participants shared their thoughts and knowledge, enabling the collection of in-depth information. Additionally, the open-ended questionnaires facilitated the exploration of new concepts that were not included in the set structure in advance of the interview guide. The

discussion in the focus group examined the availability of online higher education for Afghan girls in Afghanistan. Before carrying out the interviews and focus group discussion, I made sure to fully understand the research instruments and practiced utilizing the interview questionnaire. This preliminary exercise enabled me to enhance the inquiry framework by adjusting, such as including or excluding various points, to increase its effectiveness.

### **3.5.1 Interview method**

An interview is among the most efficient approaches for researchers to quickly obtain substantial information (Marshall & Rossman, 1989, 1999). Likewise, Johnson and Christensen (2024) assert, “The interview captures direct quotations about people’s perspectives and experiences” (p. 135). Within the qualitative research framework, interviews serve as the primary and most commonly utilized method for data collection, allowing me to obtain detailed and rich insights into the experiences of Afghan girls who have access to online higher education in Afghanistan.

I conducted four separate online interviews with two educators and four female students. As the person conducting the interviews, I collected information through virtual meetings after identifying the target demographic and distributing meeting links via email and WhatsApp. Prior to the interviews, I made sure that participants were thoroughly informed about the study’s objectives, ethical considerations, and timeline. I introduced the topic and began each interview with preliminary questions to help participants feel at ease and confident in their answers.

An interview guide, which included open-ended questions in English, was utilized to facilitate the collection of detailed information. Each online interview lasted between 35 to 60 minutes. These interviews were conducted via Zoom, with participants joining from their homes across various

provinces of Afghanistan. To ensure accuracy, I recorded the interviews using Zoom's recording feature and my mobile device, and I promptly transcribed the recordings.

The interviews were structured around a detailed interview guide prepared in advance. The open-ended format of the questions was significant in capturing the participant unique perspectives and insights.

### **3.5.2 Focus group discussion**

I employed an online Focus Group Discussion (FGD) as a qualitative method for data collection. Due to the ongoing political circumstances, I was unable to visit Afghanistan for in-person data gathering. This approach allowed me, as a researcher, to understand the participants' current situations, views, and experiences. According to Creswell (2012), referenced in Basnet (2018), “A focus group interview/discussion involves gathering data through questioning a small group of individuals. The researcher asks several broad questions and collects the responses from all participants” (p. 82).

Focus groups are helpful when the interaction between participants is expected to generate the most insightful information, especially when participants share similarities and work well together. They are also helpful when time for data collection is limited, and when individuals may be reluctant to share details (Creswell, 2012).

I conducted an online FGD via Zoom, involving six Afghan girls, three from AUAF university and three from Online Women's University, to explore their perception of and adaptability to accessing online higher education. Utilizing technology for data collection played a meaningful role in my study. While I cannot go to the Islamic State of Afghanistan to gather data in person,

online equipment enabled me to record participants' voices, see their faces, and effectively gather data.

Before the online Focus Group Discussion, I sent participants a letter of consent. After receiving their acceptance, I shared the Zoom link via email and WhatsApp. I facilitated the discussion, took notes on key points, and created a welcoming atmosphere to encourage participants to share their ideas and thoughts openly. Although there were occasional interruptions due to internet connection issues, this method helped me gather deep insights and experiences that enriched my research questions.

### **3.6 Role of the Researcher**

As a researcher, I drew upon my prior knowledge and professional experience during the data collection process. My background includes working as a Research Associate and Monitoring and Evaluation Officer in the Aga Khan University Academic Project for Afghanistan, as well as completing a research fellowship with Unisfere, where I maintained strict confidentiality regarding the information of beneficiaries and participants. Additionally, I shared a similar cultural and contextual background with Participants in the research contributed to a more profound comprehension of their experiences.

Throughout the interviews and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), I remained mindful of my own potential biases. I ensured that I was fully attentive to participants' responses, aiming to gather genuine data and insights. To create a supportive environment, I established a welcoming atmosphere, demonstrated respect and encouragement toward the participants, and upheld strict measures to ensure their confidentiality and safety.

To ensure the study's credibility, first, I piloted the tools with one of the students and I shared my research step-by-step with my research supervisor.

### **3.7 Data Analysis**

Clarke and Braun (2013) describe thematic analysis as “a straightforward and effective approach to qualitative analysis. They regard it as a valuable entry point for acquiring understanding and executing rigorous qualitative research due to its theoretical adaptability and as an analytical technique, rather than a comprehensive methodology” (p. 120). After carrying out focus group discussions and interviews, I utilized thematic analysis to make sense of the data. First, I gathered the raw data, which included recordings and notes, and organized each item into individual files or folders. Next, I transcribed the audio recordings from the interviews and focus group discussions involving Afghan girls. In the third phase, I meticulously examined all the data to become well-acquainted with its content.. Coding was then carried out to analyze the data, focusing on identifying terms that represent key concepts.

According to Rosario (2023), “A theme represents a collection of data that arises from the research and is assigned a title by the researcher. The list of themes serves as a framework of subjects to direct focused or thorough interviews during the fieldwork (p. 1). This phase enabled me to identify trends and themes within the data, leading to a more profound comprehension of the participants' experiences and viewpoints. Furthermore, I utilized qualitative data analysis methods, such as taking comprehensive notes and contrasting the information, to maintain transparency throughout the analytical process (Lester, J. N., Cho, Y., & Lohmiller, C. R., 2020).

In the end, I extracted themes from the categories recognized during the data analysis. These themes were conveyed in a narrative format, with the findings explained thoroughly in line with the analysis process. By following a systematic and thorough approach to data analysis, I was able to generate deep and nuanced insights into the present circumstances of Afghan girls' access to and adaptation to online education. This encompassed an understanding of the obstacles they encounter and the strategies and methods they use to navigate these challenges.

### **3.8 Ethical Issues and Concerns**

In this study, it was ensured that this research was performed ethically and responsibly. Before carrying out the data collection, I distributed consent letters via email and traditional mail to all participants involved in my research. The letters discussed ethical considerations and assured confidentiality. During the interviews and focus group discussions, I provided a summary of the main points outlined in the letter of consent. Participants were informed about the recording process and my note-taking approach, which involved using pseudonyms. For student interviews, I assigned pseudonyms (S1, S2, S3, and S4), while for professors, I used T1 and T2. In the focus group discussion, I utilized names such as Karima, Mahsoma, Wodana, Nargis, Marina, and Anara. The universities were referred to as University A and University B. Furthermore, the consent letters included details about the research and relevant contact numbers. I ensured their identities were verified and maintained confidentiality, and I am confident that no risks would endanger their safety.

Participants were invited to share their opinions and had the option to pose questions or skip any they preferred. They were also allowed to review the written data and could withdraw from the

study at any time. I remained impartial regarding Afghan girls' access to online higher education. As a researcher, I guaranteed that their identities would be kept confidential.

### **3.9 Credibility and Rigor**

As the researcher, I took several steps to confirm the credibility and accuracy of this study, which explored the perception of Afghan girls' access and adaptation in two online universities. The focus was on their motivations for choosing an online higher education and their aspirations to overcome challenges. To begin, I submitted the research proposal to a committee for approval before starting the study. I then used two research tools, interviews and Focus Group Discussions, to collect data. To ensure the study's credibility, I piloted these tools with two of the students. Data collection involved virtual interviews and virtual FGDs, with participants' consent obtained beforehand.

To further strengthen the rigor of the study, I relied on my previous research experience. This included conducting research during my one-year research fellowship at Unisfere and completing two relevant modules during my M.Ed. program. The guidance of my supervisor also provided valuable quality assurance. These efforts ensured that the findings of the study were both reliable and valid

### **3.10 Limitations of the Study**

As a researcher, I face obstacles when gathering data. Firstly, collecting data directly is challenging because I am currently based outside the country. As a result, I plan to carry out interviews and focus group discussions online through platforms such as Zoom, which can be problematic, particularly concerning internet reliability and the risk of power outages in Afghanistan that affect the quality of recordings. Another major concern I faced was the availability of participants. Many times, due to an internet connection issue, they were not able to join, and I lost them in the middle

of the interview. Some others were busy, and I canceled the interview date and time. Moreover, due to the winter holiday, I was not able to interview one of the teachers and University A.

## **CHAPTER Four**

### **RESULTS**

#### **4.1 Introduction**

In this chapter, the research findings are presented, based on data gathered from 12 participants through six virtual interviews and one virtual focus group discussion with Afghan girls pursuing their undergraduate studies and two teachers at AUAF University and Online Women's University. The data collection procedure took place online between January and February 2025. The results of this research are connected to the objectives and goals of the study.

After analyzing the data, I categorized it into five main themes, accompanied by several sub-themes. The following classifications have been established from the gathered data in response to the research questions and aims.

- Afghan girls' perception about access and adaptation to online higher education
- Difficulties that Afghan girls face in online higher education
- Technical barriers for Afghan girls
- Support for Afghan girls' online higher education
- Influence of online higher education on Afghan girls' lives.

## **4.2 Afghan girls' perception about access and adaptation to online higher education**

### **4.2.1 Educational limitations**

In the current situation, the doors to schools and universities remain closed for Afghan girls due to political circumstances. These restrictions have motivated Afghan girls to pursue online higher education as an alternative way.

As S3 stated, “As an Afghan girl, it's super hard to access education. The Taliban have banned education for Afghan girls. It is getting even worse. I was fortunate enough to find an online scholarship, but other Afghan girls are banned from education. Women have recently banned from going to school and work.”(Interview #3, 19.01.2025)

Supporting this statement, S4 emphasized the importance of online education in the current context, stating, “Online classes are the only hope for us. I chose the Faculty of Education to continue my studies, learn more about teaching, and provide effective education for my children. We are hoping that our schools will reopen. Therefore, I joined Online Women University to continue with my education.”(Interview #4, 24.01.2025)

In addition, S1 explained: “Unfortunately, I didn't choose an online university. It was the only option for me. The government banned our universities”(Interview #1, 02.01.2025)

Further insight was provided during a focus group discussion by Karima and Narin, who shared, “We are in a situation where there is no school or university. In this situation, I am lucky enough to have access to online education and pursue my bachelor's at Online Women's University. Despite its challenges, I find it very useful. I can learn my lessons online and access many valuable

resources, but unfortunately, many other Afghan girls do not have access to online education.” (Focus Group Discussion, 2.2.2025).

Furthermore, Madrina from Focus Group Discussion mentioned that she has access to online education. Still, the university has some criteria for candidates, and when they want to apply for the application, they should meet them. “University A provides online education for Afghan girls who are in Afghanistan, where I am studying for my bachelor’s in law and political science, which is my 3 years. It has some specific criteria for admission: girls should have good language skills, and their transcripts are important. At least 75% is required on their high school transcript. For AUAF, they need TOEFL, IELTS, or Duolingo scores. Girls must achieve at least a 90 in Duolingo to be eligible to study at University A. Duolingo will be provided for candidates by the university.

lack of English proficiency is a major factor affecting their access to online higher education” (Focus Group Discussion, 2.2.2025).

During interviews and focus group discussions, Afghan girls shared their experiences about the strategies that they adopted for online higher education.

#### **4.2.2 Coping Mechanism**

After schools and universities were closed for Afghan girls, they started seeking online opportunities to continue their education, which helped them adapt to the new situation. According to S1, she stated:

“I forced myself to adapt to online education. The first month was very boring for me, but after that, I found some new friends when I exchanged ideas in the classes. When I started, I became adapted” (Interview #1, 02.01.2025). Marina, a focus group participant, shared a contrasting experience.

“ While some students gradually adapted, others faced ongoing difficulties in engaging with online learning instances. Some days, I have unexpected guests in the room, and I need to be with them to show respect. Or perhaps I am sick and unable to join. I have experienced this with online education; sometimes, I get a headache and cannot open my eyes due to the pain, making it impossible to look at the screen. Sometimes, I joined a class without looking at the screen, taking notes, and listening to lectures. When I had assignments on my PC, I took a day to rest and then completed the assignments the next day. ”(Focus Group Discussion, 2.2.2025).

In addition, S2 added to her point that she saved charges in advance to cope with power outages as she stated, “I have made my timetable, managed house chores, studied, and made time for myself. For electricity issues and Internet connection, I made sure to have mobile data and Wi-Fi ready whenever I had a major assignment or quiz. I don't use my mobile or laptop unnecessarily to save charge because we are facing electricity issues. These are the steps I have taken to adapt to online education” (Interview #2, 1.24.2025).

In addition, S3 mentioned: “Adapting to online education was very hard for me due to Internet issues. Once I had a quiz from University A, and because of Internet issues, I was not able to take it and got a zero” (Interview #3, 19.01.2025).

Moreover, S4 credited her family's support for helping her become familiar with online learning tools. “I have the support of my family; they are supporting me financially to join my classes. I watched some videos about using Google Meet on YouTube, and my family also helped me” (Interview #4, 24.01.2025).

As T2 noted, financial difficulties in activating internet access push girls to find creative ways to adapt and continue their education. “ To afford internet access, some girls engage in handcrafts, knitting, or sewing to earn money”(Individual Interview# 6, 2.4.2025).

Furthermore, T1 stated, “Students in remote areas make every effort to maximize their learning opportunities, individually requesting study materials or even some of them climb hills or higher elevations during class hours seeking ways to stay connected ”(Individual Interview# 5, 2.4.2025).

Beyond financial and technical barriers, time-zone differences present another challenge for students like Karima, as she said, “I have time from 10:00 to 11:00 PM and from 11:00 PM to midnight. One day, I fell asleep. When I woke up in the morning, I saw on my phone that I had been in a meeting. The meeting has just finished. The time zone is very challenging for us. For that reason, I messaged them, I requested a recording, then they shared the recording.”(Focus Group Discussion, 2.2.2025).

### **4.3 Difficulties that Afghan girls face in online higher education**

#### **4.3.1 Cultural Barriers for Afghan girls to online higher education**

Based on interviews and focus group discussions, it is out that there are several challenges and obstacles for girls seeking online higher education in Afghanistan. Numerous factors impede Afghan girls in Afghanistan from continuing their online higher education. This section of the study presents shared data gathered from interviews and focus group discussions related to the challenges that Afghan girls face in accessing online higher education in Afghanistan.

#### **4.3.1.1 Gender inequality**

Gender inequality remains a significant issue in Afghanistan, with families often prioritizing their sons' education over their daughters. For example, one of the participants mentioned that she is suffering from inequality because of her gender. As she stated, “The first social behavior inequality. For example, boys get support from society and their parents. As girls, no matter what happens, we must attend classes and do our work inside and outside the home. So that's one of the problems. Social barriers that I face personally. ”(Interview #2, 1.24.2025).

Expanding on this issue, Mahsoma and Anara discussed how governmental policies and familial restrictions limit women's access to education,

“As we know, the government doesn’t respect women, and they don't even allow them to work with men Focus Group Discussion, 2.2.2025).

Moreover, T1 and T2 addressed political barriers more deeply:

“Politically, the government has completely banned education for girls because of their gender, and there is a fear that if the government finds out about online education for girls, they might ban it as well. If the government identifies an organization providing online education for girls, it will shut it down. ”(Individual Interview# 5, 2.4.2025 & Individual Interview# 6, 2.4.2025).

#### **4.3.1.2 Family Restriction and Community Pressure Due to Cultural Beliefs**

Some families do not support their daughters in continuing their education online. According to T2, who mentioned that “ Some families are not willing to provide computers or mobile phones to their daughters for use. It is not part of their customs. Girls have very limited access to these

technologies. Even if some girls have access, their families do not activate the internet for them. If girls request a phone call, most families refuse, or if they do provide one, they do not cover the costs. “Culturally, especially in some families, there are strict restrictions that do not allow girls to have phones. Having a phone for a girl is considered unacceptable, and online education is not highly valued by these families. They believe that girls will misuse smartphones. Traditional cultural norms in Afghanistan reinforce the belief that girls should prioritize household responsibilities over education, leading to discouragement and restriction from online education.”(Individual Interview# 5, 2.4.2025 & Individual Interview# 6, 2.4.2025).

In addition, S2 mentioned that, “ While I am joining in my online class and studying, I must go and do the house chores, or when my mother calls me I have to answer to her and go and do the work or my siblings come to the room and disturbing me it is so hard to focus” Individual Interview#2, 1.24.2025.

Furthermore, Mahsoma state “Some families restrict girls from studying online, believing that a girl’s primary responsibility lies in housework rather than education. Additionally, in some communities, particularly in Afghanistan, societal pressures further hinder girls’ access to education. Many families and community members consider studying, especially through online platforms, to be inappropriate for girls and women”(Focus Group Discussion, 2.2.2025).

In an individual interview, S4 added discouragement from her community: “ In my community, when people ask what I am doing, I tell them I am studying online. Instead of encouraging me, some dismiss online education, saying it is not valid and that I am wasting my time”(Interview #4, 24.01.2025).

Meanwhile, expanding on this issue, Wodana highlighted how societal attitudes further discourage girls from pursuing online degrees. “ So, I just want to add one thing more. One of the other factors that prevents girls from education is the validity of online education. Many families discourage their daughters from studying online, believing that online degrees lack value and will not serve as legitimate qualifications for future employment(Focus Group Discussion, 2.2.2025).

### **4.3.2 Social Barriers for Afghan girls to online higher education**

#### **4.3.2.1 Financial Barrier**

Financial barriers are one of the significant issues in Afghanistan, where many Afghan families struggle to provide sufficient support for their daughters' education.

Additionally, Mahsoma and Wodana from the focus group discussion stated that, “Besides an unstable internet connection, it is too expensive in Afghanistan. Many students, including myself, rely on costly data packages instead of stable Wi-Fi, making connectivity a constant struggle. For instance, I once failed to upload an assignment on time due to poor internet, and it was marked late. Research for coursework is equally challenging, as many materials require reliable streaming access. Interactive elements like screen sharing during online classes are often impossible because of weak connectivity.

Moreover, Marina further highlights the financial struggle of obtaining devices, stating, “Due to financial hardships, many Afghan girls do not own high-quality devices, with most students

lacking access to laptops. Many rely on mobile phones for studying, which presents significant limitations as most quizzes or applications we use, like Ed, puzzle, Canva, and similar tools, require a PC with a keyboard and other features.

Another significant financial challenge involves the cost of mobile data activation and limited access to credit cards. Based on my experience, each month, I spend 1,200 Afghanis on my SIM card, which gives me 20 GB of data. However, this was often not enough for my studies because most activities, such as attending lectures on Zoom or Google Meet and doing tasks on a PC, require a lot of Internet data, and 20 GB couldn't meet my needs.”(Focus Group Discussion, 2.2.2025).

Furthermore, Narin also emphasized that the price of the Internet is very high, and it is one of the significant issues. She also pointed out the lack of awareness issue and shared her own experience:

“The cost of Internet bundles is very expensive right now. One of my experiences was that after the Taliban came, the price of SIM cards increased dramatically. The cost of one SIM card was approximately 10,000 or 15,000 Afghanis. In one month, if you wanted to activate data or Internet, you had to pay 1,000 Afghanis. I was lucky that my family supported me. There is also a lack of awareness. Some families do not fully understand the opportunities online education provides, and some girls don't have proper devices like a phone or a laptop to access online education” (Focus Group Discussion, 2.2.2025)

Finally, T1 and T2 noted the same issues and added that most of the girls rely on their families and cannot afford their necessities.

“Access to online education for girls is very limited because they do not have financial independence and cannot access the internet on their mobile phones. In Afghanistan, there are not enough facilities, such as proper internet services and financial support. Another major issue is the unreliable internet connection, which my students always struggle with (Individual Interview #6, 2.4.2025).

#### **4.3.2.2 Regional Aspect**

Due to the provinces and districts' locations, many girls are not able to have access to or awareness of the online opportunities. Narin mentioned that “ When I was in Badakhshan. The internal SIM cards, like Roshan and MTN, did not work there. People had to use Tajik SIM cards, like Megafon or Tcell. Most of the girls in Afghanistan don't have access to the Internet or Wi-Fi. So, we cannot say that all girls can learn or continue their education online”. Also, Mahsoma added to her points of view that “ Mazar Sharif, Kabul and some developed provinces have access to the Internet, but not all, like, Badakhshan Province, Samangan Province, or like South, Northern. They don't have access to the Internet, and they don't know about the online opportunities (Focus Group Discussion, 2.2.2025).

#### **4.3.2.3 Invalidity of Online Degrees**

Afghan girls who are doing their bachelor's degree online while they want to apply for a job face difficulty. Marina faced direct discrimination when seeking employment due to perceptions about online education. She applied for a job but was denied the opportunity because her education was online. As she states, “So, I applied for a job last year, and when I shared my CV with the person in charge of hiring, he asked, 'Are you in Qatar?' Since the university is based in Qatar and has an

educational campus there, I replied, 'No.' He then questioned how I could be studying law at AUAF online, implying that it wasn't valid. He said that when I send my CV to the UN or other institutions, they might think I am creating a fake CV because online education is considered less valid than physical education.

This was my experience, and I explained how hard I worked to study online, much harder than physical studies. Yet, my CV might still not be recognized simply because my education was online. This is a challenge that many others will likely face as well” (Focus Group Discussion, 2.2.2025).

#### **4.4 Technical barriers for Afghan girls**

Afghan girls pursuing higher education online face significant challenges stemming from technical limitations that are deeply interconnected, creating a compounded barrier to academic success. As Karima and Narin mentioned, “ Afghanistan doesn't have good Internet. There are a lot of problems with the Internet, and if we have Wi-Fi, sometimes the big problem is the power that we don't have, and for that reason, we can't join our classes. We are fortunate to study online, but we know that in some provinces, many girls don't have access to phones or other resources. For example, in Badakhshan, particularly in districts like Shughnan, there is no reliable Internet service. I'm not sure, but I think around 80% of girls in the Shughnan district of Badakhshan province lack access to the Internet. This prevents them from attending online universities.” (Focus Group Discussion, 2.2.2025).

Electricity shortages have become even more severe, making it difficult to charge mobile phones and laptops. Without power, students are unable to attend online classes, adding to the challenges

of remote learning. Additionally, online education lacks sufficient hands-on experience, which limits practical learning opportunities. These barriers collectively hinder my ability to fully engage with my studies and achieve academic success. (Focus Group Discussion, 2.2.2025).

Furthermore, T1 and T2 mentioned that, also, if their computer or mobile phone breaks down, they cannot go out to repair it themselves. They must wait a day or two until their father or brother takes it for repair. Another issue is related to phone systems: some girls do not have their own phones and have to use their fathers or brothers' phones. Many of them are not familiar with using applications like Google Meet, Google Classroom, Zoom, WhatsApp, and Telegram. If the Wi-Fi runs out, they cannot go to the provider to renew it themselves and must wait for the men in the household to handle it.

Despite the current issues with internet connectivity, poverty, and economic challenges, Afghan girls still strive to connect to online classes and continue their education, despite these problems”(Individual Interview# 5, 2.4.2025& Individual Interview #6, 2.4.2025).

## **4.5 Support system for Afghan girls' online higher education**

Afghan girls face significant challenges in accessing online higher education, yet various support systems have emerged to help them continue their learning despite restrictions. However, access to these resources is not universal, and many still struggle to receive the necessary support.

### **4.5.1 Family support**

Data gathered from participants highlights the support Afghan girls receive from their families, institutions, and communities in continuing their online education.

According to S2's experience, she expressed that, “My family is supporting me, but not as much as my university and classmates. They said that, yeah, you should study, but at the same time also it is not very much in comparison to support from the university and my classmates.”(Interview #2, 1.24.2025).

In addition, S1 and Narin from the focus group discussion added, “My family supports me in any way they can, assisting me whenever needed.” I am fortunate that my family provided me with the opportunity to buy a SIM card and activate my Internet. ”(Interview #1, 02.01.2025&Focus Group Discussion, 2.2.2025).

Moreover, Karima state,

“Our family supports us, but there are others who joke or dismiss us. They say things like, 'Oh, this online education is not useful for you, and you should just stay at home and not bother studying online because it's not necessary. However, as I mentioned, I don't let others' opinions affect me

or my perspective on my education system. I focus on what I enjoy and work hard to improve myself. I pay no attention to what others think or say about me or my education. I simply strive to grow and better myself, and I have confidence that I can achieve that. Inshallah, I will continue to move forward.” (Focus Group Discussion, 2.2.2025).

#### **4.5.2 Institutional Support**

As S2 states, “I’m grateful for my university, teachers, professors, and classmates. Throughout my online education, I’ve been blessed with great professors who are flexible and accommodating. When students face challenges such as electricity outages or Internet issues, they extend deadlines or adjust the timing of quizzes to suit our needs.

The support from my classmates has also been invaluable. For instance, when I was online and struggling to complete assignments or when my PC wasn’t working, their emotional support made me confident and hopeful. Emotional support is crucial in online education because it is stressful to study while being far from professors and classmates.

I’m fortunate to have professors, teachers, and classmates who consistently support me. Their efforts even include mental health session classes focused on student well-being. The university library is one of the most valuable resources, providing access to books, research papers, and academic journals essential for students. These initiatives motivate students not to give up and encourage us to keep studying, no matter what challenges we face (Interview #2, 1.24.2025).

Building on this, S1 added her perspective, emphasizing the accessibility and dedication of teachers. “My teachers are always accessible and responsive whenever I need academic support” (Interview #1, 02.01.2025).

Although many participants expressed gratitude for institutional and peer support, some also noted difficulties that persisted alongside these benefits. For instance, S4 from University B explained that. “My family provides Wi-Fi and devices for me, and the university offers free lessons; however, the teacher's behavior is not good sometimes. While they are providing free service, they act badly, which creates mental issues for us”(Interview #4, 24.01.2025).

Moreover, building on the discussion of institutional support, S3 and Marina elaborated on additional resources provided by their university. “ The first support I had was the fully funded scholarship from University A. They also sent us 1200Af top-ups for the Internet. Teachers were responsive to our technical difficulties, offering necessary support to ensure we could continue our studies. In addition, some websites and applications require payment, but by using our university email, we can access their pro features. For example, there is an application for designing posters and PowerPoints called Canva Pro, which we can access using our email address. Additionally, there is a website for job seekers where you can generate your CV to send to organizations, making it smooth and easy to understand. There are also websites for reading and finding online resources, such as articles and books, although I'm not sure if we can access all those books. We have an online library as well. (Interview #3, 19.01.2025 & Focus Group Discussion, 2.2.2025).

Shifting focus to financial and organizational support, Narin and Karima from university B shared state,

“ My university is only providing free lessons without a top–up card, but some organizations also provide credit to support students like us. For example, I am currently studying English online, which is offered by AKF. This organization sends credit to students—500 Afghani, to help activate Internet services.

Another organization, Elevate, based in America, also provides credit. They send approximately 1,000 Afghanis to students so they can activate their Internet and join online classes.

While some organizations assist with credit for internet access, others focus solely on providing free education without financial aid”(Focus Group Discussion, 2.2.2025).

Finally, educators also play a crucial role in empowering Afghan girls through online learning. T1 and T2 shared their perspective as teachers committed to supporting students in remote areas, and T2 from University B described their efforts to provide support and empower Afghan girls through online education:

“ The motivation and last hope of Afghan girls is online education, and as a teacher, I try my best to share my knowledge with them. The girls have a great eagerness to learn and request lesson recordings to keep up with their studies. Those who are in remote areas and have limited internet access climb hills or higher elevations during class hours to connect to their online classes and benefit from them. Every student individually messages for study materials. They make every effort to use each moment and second to their advantage.”

“Our only support is providing free online education for girls. I answer every question they have at any moment and understand their internet issues by recording lessons to share with them. Some families provide all the necessary tools, such as computers, phones, and internet access, for their daughters to study. However, others cannot afford to provide

anything for their daughters due to poverty. Some families are narrow-minded and do not allow their daughters to use phones. Some girls try to earn money for internet access by doing handicrafts, knitting, or sewing. They strive to cover their expenses through their handmade crafts”(Focus Group Discussion, 2.2.2025).

## **4.6 Influence of online higher education on an Afghan girl's life.**

Afghan girls shared their perspectives on the impact of online higher education, highlighting how it fosters hope, enhances their skills, and facilitates new friendships.

### **4.6.1 Global learning**

Marina highlighted the high quality of education at University A and compared it to globally recognized institutions:

“If I evaluate the way teachers instruct us at University A, including the websites and platforms we study on, the types of assignments we complete, and the quizzes we take, everything aligns with American educational standards. It’s like studying at institutions like the American University of Paris or the American University of Central Asia. The curriculum, assignments, methods, and professors, most of whom are from America or the UK with PhDs or at least master’s degrees, are of very high quality. Many of them have also published books, which speaks to their expertise.”

She further reflected on how her academic journey shaped her personal and professional growth:

“Studying at University A has brought significant changes to my life. I began my academic journey in 2021 with courses in grammar and writing. Over the last three years, it has greatly improved my speaking, communication skills, and networks. Though I haven’t had any paid jobs, the volunteer

work I've done for nonprofit organizations has provided me with valuable experience and a strong foundation created with University A's support. Through online education at the American University of Afghanistan, my communication skills have advanced, and it has brought meaningful changes to my life"(Focus Group Discussion, 02.02.2025).

Karima emphasized the benefits of online learning and stated,

"In this situation, I say it's very useful for us. We can learn our lessons online. There are a lot of useful lessons. We can use, for example, Zoom. If we don't have an online university, we cannot use it. And, Google Forms and other things that we know better with technology, and we can find a lot of resources online.

Additionally, there is a global learning opportunity where you can study from institutions around the world without relocating. It also allows for a work-study balance that helps professionals develop skills for good jobs. It's also environmentally friendly" (Focus Group Discussion, 02.02.2025).

#### **4.6.2 Skills Development**

S3 and S1, in individual interviews, described how online scholarships provided them with educational opportunities after facing inactivity following their school graduation.

S3 shared,

"It was hard but helpful. After graduating from school, I was at home for about two years doing nothing. Getting accepted to University A gave me hope and helped me in many cases; it was a good experience for me." (Interview #3, 19.01.2025)

Similarly, S1 explained that

"At least we know we are busy with our studies. We reviewed our past lessons. We learn something from being free and not doing anything. So, it is a good option" (Interview #1, 02.01.2025)

Mahsoma discussed the accessibility of online education and the variety of resources available to students, where we can learn the usage of online platforms, applications to enhance our English skills and writing or overall general knowledge.

"We have so many facilities available to us because we are at home. This provides a sense of safety and security, allowing us to continue our education whenever we want. There are now numerous online applications, like Coursera, that enable self-study anytime and anywhere. Based on our schedules and free time, we can manage these resources and learn effectively.

Through these platforms, we have the flexibility to learn anything we're interested in. Reflecting on my experience with online education, it has opened opportunities for me to gain knowledge in ways I couldn't have imagined before."(Focus Group Discussion, 02.02.2025).

S4 acknowledged that while online education has advantages, it cannot fully replace in-person learning:

"It is not as effective as face-to-face classes, but we are trying our best to use it positively" (Interview #4, 24.01.2025).

## **Chapter 5**

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

This section reviews the findings and information gathered in Chapter Four, comparing the collected data with other research studies and written works to highlight the key takeaways. The study examines Afghan girls' access to and adaptation to online higher education, identifying the main challenges they encounter and the strategies they employ to overcome them, enhance their skills, and achieve their academic goals.

At the end of the chapter, recommendations are presented for the government, community, organizations, and universities to help mitigate the barriers to online higher education. These suggestions consider the current circumstances and the position of Afghan girls within the country.

#### **5.1 Discussion**

Education is a fundamental necessity and an integral part of human life, essential for all individuals regardless of gender. However, following the collapse of Afghanistan's republic government on August 15, 2021, progress in women's education has sharply declined. Initially, the de facto government announced a temporary suspension, citing the need to align the curriculum with Islamic principles. However, subsequent actions and statements revealed a sustained effort to restrict women's access to higher education. As a result, women are now prohibited from pursuing higher education (Hasin et al., 2015).

The findings indicate that after being deprived of attending universities and schools, many Afghan girls sought alternative ways to continue their education, such as enrolling in online universities that offer higher education programs. However, online education presents numerous challenges.

Additionally, the findings show that some girls do not speak English and, therefore, cannot meet the criteria of universities that offer lessons in English or require an English proficiency test. The analysis highlights that some organizations provide free English courses online for girls to help them meet the criteria. However, other universities, such as University B, offer lessons in Dari. To enroll, students must have a strong academic transcript. Nonetheless, those who meet the requirements are continuing their education online.

Moreover, the data reveals that Afghan girls are making significant efforts to continue their education despite the obstacles. They employ various strategies to overcome these challenges. Many manage their time efficiently, balancing house chores while creating and selling handmade crafts to afford internet access for their online classes. Some request recorded lessons to enhance their learning and avoid missing opportunities. Those without personal electronic devices rely on their family members, borrowing their mothers' or brothers' phones and charging them whenever possible to attend classes. This motivation drives them to achieve their academic goals. These proactive strategies demonstrate their determination to pursue education despite the hardships they face.

Building upon previous findings, online education requires students to manage their time effectively and develop strong self-motivation skills. In many cases, they must make sacrifices and adapt to an entirely digital learning environment (Culduz, 2024). Mashriqi (2016) also supported that and mentioned that women who obtain higher education perceive that they can significantly contribute to society in areas such as health, agriculture, and more.

According to some participants, time zone differences occasionally cause them to miss classes, while others manage their schedules to attend classes at times that best suit their availability. This finding is consistent with previous studies, such as Surjono et al. (2015) and Basar et al. (2021), which state that online learning provides a flexible and distributed education system. Students can choose the time and location of their studies without the need to be physically present in a classroom.

Furthermore, cultural barriers like gender inequalities, cultural beliefs, and a lack of family support are the problems that Afghan girls are dealing with. Another significant barrier highlighted in this study is deeply entrenched gender norms, which limit online access. Many families prefer that their daughters, wives, and sisters focus on household responsibilities rather than education or restrict their use of smartphones altogether. These patterns reflect broader societal expectations, as explored by Ahmed et al. (2020), who found that cultural beliefs often prioritize domestic roles over academic achievement for women.

Moreover, some community members, including both relatives and nonrelatives, actively discourage online education, dismissing it as a waste of time and money. Despite this lack of encouragement, many Afghan girls remain determined to continue their studies. While this finding is in contradiction with the literature where Mashriqi (2016) highlights the importance of self-motivation, stating that “Afghan women might be driven by their motivation due to the advantages they perceive in gaining an education, such as acquiring more knowledge and enhancing their chances for improved employment and quality of life. This self-motivation could also stem from the understanding that advanced education offers Afghan women greater possibilities to aid in the advancement of society.”

Similarly, about the social barriers, poverty or low income of the family is another barrier that Afghan girls are struggling with it. Also, findings reveal that familial support for online education varies significantly based on education level and financial stability. While some well-educated and financially stable families encourage their daughters to continue studying online, others, due to financial hardships and concerns over government restrictions, struggle to provide similar support. Mashriqi (2016) reinforces this idea, stating that “Threats to safety are another barrier to female Afghans’ ability to obtain higher education” (p.5).

The high cost of internet packages prevents many students from attending their virtual classes. These barriers are especially significant for girls in rural areas, many of whom are unaware of online learning opportunities as a result, many girls face difficulties in pursuing online higher education and achieving their academic goals. According to the result, University A provides a top-up card which is not enough for the lesson. These results also contradict the work of Smith & Johnson (2021), who highlight that financial uncertainty remains a main barrier to girls' education in low-income areas. According to the Afghanistan Human Rights Center (2024), Afghanistan is an economically disadvantaged nation, with 92% of its population living below the poverty line. According to the Afghanistan Human Rights Center's findings, the cost of online education significantly affects student enrollment due to the country's severe economic conditions. However, all universities that the Human Rights Center contacted reported that their services are provided free of charge (p.27).

Technical problems such as slow internet speed, lack of access to computers, and frequent power outages prevent girls from accessing online higher education. Afghanistan relies on imported electricity, and only those living in the capital and a handful of major cities have access, which

tends to be inconsistent. Many remote villages experience a complete lack of electricity, not even on an occasional basis. Afghanistan has one of the lowest internet usage rates globally, and a significant portion of the population, especially those in rural regions, lacks the necessary technology, such as computers and stable internet connections, to participate in online education.

Moreover, another concern emphasized by both online educational institution students is the difficulty in accessing essential online learning tools like smartphones, laptops, computers, and tablets. A considerable number of female students and their families are unable to purchase these devices because of financial difficulties.

Afghan girls studying online are fully supported by their universities, meaning they do not have to pay tuition fees. University A provides top-up cards, free access to some applications, a free Duolingo test, and library resources. One participant noted that their university offers online internships and volunteer opportunities, allowing students to gain skills and experience. They receive both academic and emotional support from their teachers, helping them navigate challenges. Teachers guide them and, if needed, extend deadlines to create a friendly and safe environment that enables them to continue their education and enhance their knowledge and skills.

These findings align with existing literature on language development programs. Global organizations have introduced online language courses to empower Afghan women with communication skills essential for higher education, scholarships, internships, and career opportunities (European Organization for Integration, 2025).

However, while online learning provides valuable opportunities, participants expressed concerns about the recognition of online degrees. Many reported that online degrees are not considered valid

in Afghanistan, preventing them from securing employment. Some graduates applied for jobs but had their CVs rejected due to their online education background. Similarly, previous studies show that virtual learning limits students' ability to develop face-to-face communication skills, which could affect their career prospects (Hamid et al., 2015)

Additionally, Hashemi (2021) states that during the COVID-19 pandemic in Afghanistan, educators were unprepared for online instruction due to a lack of sufficient pedagogical training needed to promote student engagement. However, unlike previous findings, this study reveals that teachers at Universities A and B are highly trained in online education methods. Most professors hold PhDs or master's degrees, have published academic research, and follow internationally recognized curricula, ensuring a high-quality learning experience. This finding is consistent with studies conducted by Ahmadzai (2023), which revealed that during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, many Afghan students and educators became familiar with online classes and learning platforms. The transition to online learning was necessary as schools and universities closed.

Results from the study indicate that through online higher education, girls can connect with different people around the world safely from their homes without relocating, which enhances their communication skills, friendships, and knowledge and understanding. Mizrak (2023), cited in Culduz (2024), reported that “Online education enhances access to learning and training options, leading to greater opportunities for updates, refresher courses, and personal growth. Moreover, it boosts the cost-efficiency of educational resources, enriches the quality and diversity of current educational frameworks, and builds and strengthens capacity. A diverse array of materials is available to cater to various learning preferences. Additionally, a key advantage of online education is its convenience, as most technology can be easily accessed from home”(p.9).

On the other hand, some participants argue that online higher education makes them isolated; they spend all their time online and do not interact with teachers or classmates. Numerous students and educators who spend a significant amount of their time on online activities might start to show signs of social isolation because of the insufficient human interaction in their lives. Online education does not allow students to work on their face-to-face communication skills (Culduz, 2024).

## 5.2 Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, I would like to provide recommendations that offer a clear understanding of Afghan girls' perceptions regarding access and adaptation to online higher education. For many, online education represents the only viable path to pursuing higher studies. Therefore, institutions and organizations should consider these insights to enhance accessibility and support for Afghan girls in their academic journey.

- It's important that organizations and institutions ensure that all Afghan girls have equal opportunities to access online education regardless of their background. Supporting students from different tribes and races fosters inclusivity and fairness. Additionally, many girls struggle to afford data bundles, making it difficult to attend online classes. If institutions and organizations have the funds, they should help in this area as well. Providing top-up cards for internet access would help bridge the gap and ensure more girls can continue their studies without financial constraints.
- Online universities should be flexible for students regarding the resources provided. Additionally, some professors are not flexible, so my recommendation is that they should be more adaptive. When assigning an assignment, they should also ensure that students have access to the necessary resources.
- It would be great if institutions that provide online education in Afghanistan could provide electronic devices or financial support for Afghan girls, enabling them to join online classes without difficulties. This would be an important step toward achieving their educational goals.
- Teachers should provide their voluntary teaching in the right spirit and not put undue pressure on the students. I often suggest to the university that while they are offering their

services to support Afghan girls, they should also consider providing mental support for the students. I believe this is equally important.

- Awareness should be raised in rural and urban areas so that all other girls can participate. It involves creating a culture where families allow their daughters to study online and support them by buying phones and laptops and activating the internet.

### **5.3 Conclusion**

This study provides insights into the current circumstances faced by Afghan girls, particularly regarding their experiences and views on accessing and adjusting to online higher education. The research indicates that Afghan girls have been denied educational opportunities since the Taliban regained power and shut down schools and universities. Following these restrictions and the closure of educational institutions, several Afghan academics established online universities to offer higher education to girls. Likewise, AUAF also started providing online educational programs for Afghan girls residing in Afghanistan.

Furthermore, certain Afghan girls, especially those in city environments, have the opportunity to access the internet and receive support from their families to pursue their online education. However, others, especially those in rural areas, lack internet access and are unaware of online learning opportunities.

Furthermore, Afghan girls in both urban and remote areas face numerous challenges in accessing online education. These include limited internet access, difficulties meeting institutional criteria, technical obstacles, lack of devices, and cultural barriers such as gender inequality. Many families hold misconceptions about allowing their daughters to have mobile phones, further restricting their educational opportunities. Social barriers also play a role, including financial constraints and concerns about the validity of online degrees within prevailing norms.

Some girls report experiencing gender discrimination in their households, where families prioritize opportunities for boys over girls—an issue highlighted in both the literature review and research

findings. While some receive full support from their families and overcome these hurdles, others must find alternative ways to continue their studies. Many engage in handicraft work, selling their products to buy electronic devices and secure internet access. Others go to great lengths, even climbing hills in search of a stable connection.

Despite these obstacles, online higher education remains the only hope for Afghan girls, providing them with an alternative path to acquiring skills and knowledge for a better future. They are actively adapting to this mode of learning and developing strategies to overcome challenges. Some charge their devices in advance, request recorded lessons from professors when live attendance is impossible due to internet issues, and meticulously prepare to make the most of their educational opportunities.

Moreover, universities are offering fully funded scholarships, with some even covering internet costs and providing emotional and academic support to ensure Afghan girls can pursue their education.

Lastly, Afghan girls express great satisfaction with online education, stating that it has given them renewed hope and the ability to continue their studies despite adversity. NGOs and institutions should expand access to education for all girls, and organizations should recognize and accept online degrees to further support their academic and professional growth.

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## **Appendix A:**

### **Consent Letter**

Dear Participant,

My name is Aliya Haidari, and I am from Afghanistan. Currently, I am pursuing my master's degree in educational leadership and school improvement at BRAC University, specifically at the Institute of Educational Development (BRAC IED) in Dhaka, Bangladesh. I am researching "The Perception of Afghan Girls on Access and Adaptation to Online Higher Education." The goal of this study is to identify the accessibility gap, the main obstacles to accessing online higher education, and how Afghan girls adapt to and overcome these challenges.

To gather data, I will be holding online interviews and focus group discussions. I would greatly appreciate your participation, as your insights and experiences would be invaluable. It's important to note that there are no immediate benefits or risks associated with participating in this research.

Furthermore, the interviews will be recorded. I assure you that your confidentiality will be maintained; your name will not appear in the thesis, ensuring that your personal information stays anonymous, and all data will only be utilized for research purposes.

I am more than happy to answer any questions you may have about this study. Please feel free to reach out to me at any time via phone at +93797721482 on WhatsApp, or through my email at [aliya.haidari19@gmail.com](mailto:aliya.haidari19@gmail.com).

Best regards,

Aliya Haidari

## Appendix B:

### Interview Guidelines

#### Section A: Demographic Information

Participant's name: S3 Faculty : \_BBA\_ Gender: \_Female\_ Age: \_23\_

University: \_AUAF\_ Date: \_1/19/2025

1. As an Afghan girl, can you describe your current situation of access to online higher education in Afghanistan?

As an Afghan girl, it's super hard to have access to education. The Taliban has banned education for Afghan girls. It is getting even worse. I was fortunate enough to find an online scholarship, but other Afghan girls are banned from education. Women are recently banned from going to school and work

**Prob:** Can you please tell me why you chose it and what you want to learn from it?

I have chosen online studies for a brighter future like the studies education, and everything was banned for a spread-up Afghanistan. The only way that I was able to do my studies was through online tools and online education.

2. What are the main challenges in adapting to online higher education? How long does it take?

Personally, when I have my online classes, my siblings and parents don't always understand that I have assignments to complete or classes to attend. No matter what happens, I am still expected to do house chores, manage my time, cook, or go wherever my mother calls me. This disrupts my studies and affects my concentration when working on assignments. Additionally, I face many difficulties due to internet issues.

**Prob:** Can you elaborate on how you adapt to these challenges?

Adopting to start online was very hard for me due to internet issues. Therefore, I have created my timetable, ensuring time for house chores, studying, and free time. Due to electricity issues and internet connectivity challenges, I make sure I have mobile data and Wi-Fi ready whenever I have a major assignment or quiz. To conserve battery, I avoid using my mobile or laptop unless absolutely necessary, as we are facing power shortages.

3. What social barriers have you faced in pursuing online education and how do they impact your ability to access online higher education?

I had the full support of my family. They provided the internet and a quiet space for me to study. Fortunately, I didn't face social barriers, but I faced many technical issues

**Prob:** Can you tell me an example of What technological issues have you faced during your online learning?

Once, I had a quiz from AUAF, and due to internet issues, in the middle of the quiz, I got disconnected I was not able to take it and got a zero.

**Prob:** Have you faced issues with software or platforms?

No, I was not. now I am familiar with Google Meet, and also now we continue our education with it.

4. What kinds of support have you received to help mitigate the challenges in online higher education?

The first support I had was the fully funded scholarship from AUAF. They also sent us top-ups for the internet, they give us free access to applications and library. The teachers understood our technical issues and supported us. Also, my family always supported me.

5. How effective do you think the support systems have been in helping you navigate these difficulties?

It was hard but helpful. After graduating from school, I was at home for about two years doing nothing. Getting accepted to AUAF gave me hope and helped me in many ways it was a good experience for me.”

6. Do you have any organizations or NGOs that assist you and provide opportunities for online education? If so, please describe each of them.

The best support would be stable internet and financial support. AUAF sent money for internet activation. Institutions should provide financial support to help Afghan girls join online classes and build a brighter future.

7. How effective is online education for you, and what are your recommendations for reducing the barriers as an Afghan girl?

I believe it would be highly beneficial if institutions in Afghanistan could provide financial support for Afghan girls, enabling them to join online classes without difficulties. This would help them achieve their educational goals. As you know, some of the biggest challenges in Afghanistan include internet instability, technical problems, and financial difficulties. Due to widespread low financial status, many students struggle to access online education.

Given these challenges, financial assistance is urgently needed. I strongly recommend that institutions provide support to help Afghan girls continue their education and build a brighter future for themselves.

## Appendix C:

### Interview Guideline for Teachers

#### Section A: Demographic Information

Participant's name: \_\_\_\_\_ T2 \_\_\_\_\_ Degree: \_\_\_\_\_ bachelor \_\_\_\_\_ Gender: \_Female\_

Age: 28\_ University: \_Online women university\_\_ Date: 02-04-2025\_\_

1. How long have you been teaching online for Afghan girls?

It is one year that I have been teaching

2. What is the accessibility and adaptability of Afghan girls to online higher education in the current situation in Afghanistan?

Access to online education for girls is very limited because they do not have financial independence and cannot access the internet on their mobile phones for use. In Afghanistan, there are not enough facilities, such as proper internet service and financial support. Some families are not willing to provide computers or mobile phones for their daughters for use. It is not part of their customs.

3. What challenges are they facing during their online learning?

Girls have very limited access to these technologies. Even if some girls have access, their families do not activate the internet for them. If girls request a phone call, most families refuse, or if they do provide one, they do not cover the costs. The final problem is the unreliable internet connection.

While learning, they become familiar with the platforms, but some have weak internet connections, preventing them from joining their classes.

4. Do cultural and political influences prevent Afghan girls from accessing online higher education? In what ways does this happen?

Culturally, especially in some families, there are strict restrictions that do not allow girls to have phones. Having a phone for a girl is considered unacceptable, and online education is not highly valued by these families. They believe that girls will misuse smartphones. Politically, the government has completely banned education for girls, and there is a fear that if the government finds out about online education for girls, they might ban it as well. If the government identifies an organization providing online education for girls, it will shut it down.

5. What kind of technological issues are they facing during their online lesson? How do they overcome the barriers and challenges?

Afghan girls suffer from technical problems, with the first issue being internet connectivity. For example, if their computer or mobile phone breaks down, they cannot go out to repair it themselves. They must wait for a day or two until their father or brother takes it for repair. Another issue is phone systems; some girls do not have their own phones and have to use their father's or brother's phones. They are not familiar with using applications like Google Meet, Google Classroom, Zoom, WhatsApp, and Telegram. If the Wi-Fi runs out, girls cannot go to the provider to renew it themselves and have to wait for the men in the household to do it.

6. How do you support them, and what is your evaluation regarding the motivation and progress of these girls?

The motivation of Afghan girls is that their last hope is online education, and as a teacher, I try my best to share my knowledge with them. The girls have a great eagerness to learn and request lesson recordings to keep up with their studies. Those who are in remote areas and have limited internet access climb hills or higher elevations during class hours to connect to their online classes and benefit from them. Every student individually messages for study materials. They make every effort to use each moment and second to their advantage.

7. Which kind of support do they receive from their family members or any other resources?

Some families provide all the necessary tools, such as computers, phones, and internet access, for their daughters to study. However, others cannot afford to provide anything for their daughters due to poverty. Some families are narrow-minded and do not allow their daughters to use phones. Some girls try to earn money for internet access by doing handicrafts, knitting, or sewing. They strive to cover their expenses through their handmade crafts.

8. How do initiatives contribute to enhancing the involvement of Afghan girls in online education?

Sharing information with other girls raises awareness because girls are highly motivated and always looking for even the smallest programs to benefit from.

Organizations that provide online education for girls have enabled them to safely connect to their studies from home.

9. What are your recommendations for reducing the barriers and providing more opportunities for these girls?

Awareness should be raised so that all other girls can participate. It involves creating a culture where families allow their daughters to study online and support them by buying phones and laptops and activating the internet.

## **Appendix D:**

### **Focus Group Discussions Guide**

#### **Section A: Demographic Information**

Participant's name: Madiha \_\_\_\_\_ Degree: Bachelor at low \_\_\_\_ Gender: \_\_\_\_ Female \_

Age: 24                      University: AUAF                      Province: Kabul

Date: \_\_\_\_ 03-03-2025

#### **Questions:**

1. Can you share your experience of access to online education in the current situation in Afghanistan?

The situation where schools and universities are closed. I am studying online and facing poor internet connectivity and frequent power outages. Even when Wi-Fi is available, the lack of reliable electricity often prevents me from attending online classes.

Prob: Do you have access to a computer or other necessary devices? Can you explain how reliable your internet connection is?

Most students don't have laptops because they come from poor families or face financial difficulties, as purchasing a PC with a good operating system is expensive.

As a result, they study on their phones, which presents significant challenges. Many quizzes and certain applications, such as Ed Puzzle, require a PC because they rely on keyboard input and other functionalities that mobile devices cannot fully

support. This has been a major hardship for students trying to participate in online education.

2. Do all female students in Afghanistan have the same access to online higher education, and what are the primary obstacles that hinder Afghan girls from pursuing online higher education?

One of the key factors preventing girls from accessing education is the perceived validity of online education. Many families do not support their daughters studying online because they believe that online university degrees are not as valuable as traditional bachelor's or master's degrees. As a result, they fear these qualifications may not be useful in the future.

Additionally, most girls in Afghanistan lack access to the internet or Wi-Fi, making online education an unrealistic option for many. We cannot assume that all girls can continue their studies online due to these significant barriers. Another major issue is the high cost of internet bundles, which has become increasingly expensive.

A lack of internet access is a critical obstacle. Some girls do not have access to a stable internet connection, while others lack awareness about available online education opportunities. In many cases, families are not fully informed about the benefits of digital learning. Furthermore, many girls do not have a proper phone or laptop to participate in online education.

Based on my own experience in Badakhshan, local SIM cards, such as Roshan and MTN, do not function properly in certain areas. As a result, people often rely on Tajik SIM cards, such as Megafon or T-cell, for internet access. However, after the Taliban took control, SIM card prices skyrocketed. A single SIM card costs approximately

10,000 to 15,000 Afghans, and maintaining mobile data for one month requires an additional 1,000 Afghans. Fortunately, I was lucky enough to have my family's support during this time.

**Prob:** Can you describe a social issue affecting Afghan female students' ability to access online higher education?

Poverty and some people and family, instead of encouragement they demotivate us from it.

3. What facilities do you need while continuing your online education?

I need proper and stable internet with computer and silent space where I can continue my education and join my online classes.

**Prob:** What kind of support do you receive from your family and teacher? Do they encourage you?

I need my family's support financially and emotionally, teachers and institutions that provide education.

4. Which specific issues are you facing while joining the class, and how do you overcome the challenges you face during your learning?

It is normal to experience difficulties when attending online classes on time. Unexpected guests may arrive, requiring attention out of respect, or health issues such as sickness can prevent participation.

One personal challenge I have faced in online education is dealing with severe headaches, which make it difficult to open my eyes or focus on the screen. Since prolonged use of electronic devices can negatively impact health, I once emailed my professor to explain my situation. Fortunately, my professor was understanding

and marked me as absent. Unlike in school, university professors often provide support even when students cannot attend live sessions.

In some cases, I have joined classes without looking directly at the screen, opting to listen to lectures and take notes instead. This allows me to participate without straining my eyes. Additionally, when I have assignments on my PC but feel exhausted, I take a break and complete them later.

One major difficulty with online education is the lack of direct interaction with professors. Since students primarily listen and take notes, absorbing all the information can be challenging. However, adapting study strategies—such as reviewing notes after class, participating in discussions, and taking breaks when needed—helps manage these challenges.

5. Are there any facilities or support you receive from the government or any International NGOs?

The government is against girls' education, and if they understand it will bond. the education. Support from the university. For instance, some websites and applications require payment, but using our university email, we can access their pro features. For example, Canva Pro, an application for designing posters and PowerPoint presentations, allows access via an email address. Additionally, there are websites designed for job seekers where users can generate CVs to send to organizations, making the process smooth and easy to navigate.

There are also platforms for reading and accessing online resources, such as articles and books, although I am unsure whether all books are available for free.

Additionally, we have access to an online library, which provides useful educational materials.

6. How is the effectiveness of online education in your life and what changes has it brought to your life?

I started studying in 2021 with academic courses, grammar, and writing. In three years, it has greatly improved my speaking, communication networks, and job experience. Though I don't have any paid jobs, the volunteer work I did for nonprofit organizations provided me with a background that AUAF helped create. It improved my communication and brought significant changes to my life through online education at the American University of Afghanistan.