

Higher Education Opportunities and Challenges in Afghanistan: Afghan Women's Perspective

By

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

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Declaration

It is hereby declared that

1. The thesis submitted is my/our own original work while completing degree at Brac University.
2. The thesis does not contain material previously published or written by a third party, except where this is appropriately cited through full and accurate referencing.
3. The thesis does not contain material which has been accepted, or submitted, for any other degree or diploma at a university or other institution.
4. I/We have acknowledged all main sources of help.

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Ethics Statement

Hereby, I consciously assure that this paper is my original work. The manuscript “Higher Education Opportunities and Challenges in Afghanistan: Afghan Women’s Perspectives” is authentic and the presented findings are without any manipulation. I have intentionally kept myself aware of personal biases, opinions and prejudices in order to be completely neutral during the research.

The thesis was conducted with eleven female participants and has the legitimate justification for doing so. The research participants include two women rights activists, two high school graduates, and seven university students inside and outside of Afghanistan. The activists and high school graduates were interviewed and focus group discussion was held with university students. This study honor the privacy and confidentiality of its participants and to address the ethical concerns the informed consent was designed.

The thesis is a firsthand paper and it is not submitted or published by a third party. The main sources used in this study are properly acknowledged through accurate referencing. The soft and hard copy of data is stored accurately and will be shared only for a reasonable cause through a formal procedure.

I declare that this paper followed all the ethical procedures of the institution and maintained the highest possible code of conduct.

Abstract

Education for women has been a critical topic for the last four decades in Afghanistan. In this country, the literacy rate for women is significantly low compared to its neighboring and any Asian country. In the past two decades, several educational development attempts were taken to increase literacy rate among men and women. However, access to education, particularly higher education, is still a serious issue for women in the country. This study is conducted to investigate the perception of Afghan women regarding the opportunities and challenges of higher education in Afghanistan and how to address this issue. The data for the study was collected through qualitative research and the finding uses focused group discussion (FGD) and in-depth interview as a tool to ascertain Afghan women's attitude and understanding of higher education. The central finding of this paper is that there is a critical link between girls' access to higher education and their families' support and background. Another major finding is lack of facilities and resources of higher education in provinces and remote regions that have direct or indirect influence on girls' access to higher education in Afghanistan. Community awareness programs, investing on girl's higher education and scholarly investigation can help Afghan women in obtaining higher education

Keywords: Girl's access to education, Higher education and women; Opportunities and challenges; Women's perception; Practices and attitudes; Afghanistan

Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my late father who taught me to be strong and independent and my beloved mother for her unconditional love and support.

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I would like to express my wholehearted respect and gratitude to my honorable supervisor Nafisa Anwar, BRAC Institute of Educational Development, for her unwavering support and understanding to complete my thesis.

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List of Acronyms

CSO	Central Statistics Organization
FGD	Focused Group Discussion
MoE	Ministry of Education
MoHE	Ministry of Higher Education
MoLSAMD	Ministry of Labor, Social Affairs, Martyrs and Disabled
MDGs	Millennium Development Goals
NESP	National Education Strategic Plan
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
SDG	Sustainable Development Goals
UN	United Nations
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNICEF	United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund
WB	World Bank

Glossary

Kankor	A University entry exam in Afghanistan
Mullah	A Muslim learned in Islamic theology and sacred law, a Muslim teacher or leader
Shura	The principle of consultation, in particular as applied to government.

Chapter 1

Introduction and Background

1.1 Introduction

The past few decades of violent conflicts and political unrest in Afghanistan has negatively impacted on women's access to education in the country. Overall, in Afghanistan the rate of literacy is significantly low due to long years of conflict and poverty, in which more than half of the women population are not able to read and write. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) (2021) reported that in 2018 from a total of 39.6 million population of Afghanistan, 29.81% of females are literate. Since 2002, the education sector by support of the international community has been at the forefront of ideological and political battles for development of education in Afghanistan, specially addressing educational opportunities for girls. The adopted Constitution of Afghanistan in 2004, declares that primary education (nine years of study) is compulsory for all Afghan boys and girls who are between six and fifteen years old. It adds that up to university level the governmental schools and institutions are free. Three ministries of Afghanistan, including the Ministry of Education (MoE), Ministry of Higher Education (MoHE) and Ministry of Labor, Social Affairs, Martyrs and Disabled (MoLSAMD) are responsible for the education sector. The article titled *Afghanistan: Promoting Education During Times of Increased Fragility* by the World Bank demonstrates that MoHE "is responsible for all higher education institutions including public, private, and community colleges (p. 17). The article reports that in 2015, MoHE (grade 13 or higher) of Afghanistan had 144 public and private higher education institutions.

Besides, the National Education Strategic Plans (NESP) were designed for the improvement of education and inclusive access in the state level, with special reference to women and girls

into education. The three main component of NESP III is ‘Quality and Relevance’, ‘Equitable Access’ and ‘Efficient and Transparent Management’; The equitable and access component of NESP III emphasizing on preparing boys and girls for the “higher education and job market” and “promote equity in status of girls and boys”.

1.2 Research Topic

As a war-torn country, the history of education in Afghanistan has experienced many ups and downs, particularly women have always been deprived of their educational rights. Women’s education compared to men’s education continued to be challenging and has not been in a satisfactory condition. According to Jackson (2011) cited in (Mashwani, 2017) Afghan girls’ access to education decreases as they grow older. To understand the current situation, challenges and opportunities of higher education for women, it is important to take into account the Afghan female perceptions. Therefore, the research topic for this study is selected *Higher Education Opportunities and Challenges in Afghanistan: Afghan Women’s Perspectives*. The study will try to explore the perception of female students on girls’ accessibility to higher education. At the same time it aims to look for the alignment and difference between the students’ perception and the existing literature. The research also will look for differences in perception and experience of female students who are students at universities and high school graduates. Furthermore, it attempts to identify the challenges and opportunities for female students in higher education.

1.3 Statement of the Problem

Gender and education has been a crucial topic in Afghanistan since the 1990s. Though, there are some significant improvements in girl’s education but still a huge number of female students do not have access to education. MDG reports (2010) cited in (Mashwani, 2017) indicates that “at present Afghanistan has the lowest rate of literacy among other developing

countries which is 23.5% of which 87% females are illiterate” (p. 45). According to Human Rights Watch (2017) millions of children are out of school where 85% are girls.

Based on statistics, the gender gap is interrelated to level of education, the ratio of female students in higher levels decreases while the ratio of male students increases (Mashwani, 2017). Likewise, there are less female students at school and university level compared to male students. For instance, Samady (2013) states that in 2012 the number of enrollment for men was 81783 whereas the number of female enrollment at universities was 19215. As there is a problem related to Afghan women and their access to higher education, so this study attempts to find out the reason behind the big gap of inequality in higher educational institutions. The study intends to explore women’s perception, experience and attitude in access to higher education.

1.4 Research Questions

This paper developed the following main research questions to explore more on the given topic.

Q1. What is the current situation of girls’ access to higher education in Afghanistan and how do the Afghan female students experience their access to higher education?

Q2. What are the opportunities available in Afghanistan for girls’ access to higher education and how can that be ensured?

Q3. What are the barriers for girl’s access to higher education?

1.5 Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study is to understand the current state of girls’ access to higher education and explore the opportunities that girls obtain while pursuing higher studies. Likewise, this research aims to find out the barriers that girls encounter and the main reasons

behind girl's inaccessibility to higher education. Also, it aims to find out the female student's perspectives regarding higher education accessibility through inclusion of a few sample educational institutions inside and outside of Afghanistan. Moreover, the study collects data from participants and literature to answer the above research questions and to have a closer insight into women's status and higher education.

1.6 Significance of the Study

The findings of this research might redound in the benefit of community development in consideration of girl's access to higher education. This study may help us and the national and international educational NGOs in Afghanistan to understand the status of girls in higher educational institutions, their inaccessibility to higher education, the challenges they encounter and its negative impact on individual and community in short and long term. Herein we can get the idea of how to address the problems that hamper girls' higher education from women's points of view and how we can improve their situation. Also, it would help the researchers to explore critical areas on gender and higher education as there is not enough study in the Afghanistan context.

Chapter2

Literature Review and Conceptual Framework

2.1 Literature Review

This chapter explored themes related to higher education and women and their perception on challenges and opportunities of access to higher education. Therefore, a number of books, research and policy documents, academic websites, articles and journals are reviewed that are related to the topic of the study. In a broader term, there is no extensive research on higher education and gender; specifically there is no sufficient research in the Afghanistan context. Through the reviewed literature and published academic papers, I have classified the literature into four categories i) Education ii) Higher education iii) Views on Higher Education for Women iv) Contextual view of Afghanistan.

2.1.1 Education

Education contributes in the betterment of societies and it benefits people for a better life. Education's aim is the integral development of individuals and groups. According to the study by International Institute for Applied Systems Analysis (IIASA) (2018) it is worth investing in education because the processes of educating and learning are a "natural and defining characteristic of human society".

Education is an essential mechanism for the developmental level of communities at national and international level. The policy brief by IIASA (2018) states, "there is a positive relationship between education and other dimensions of development" and it adds the progress in education and educational sectors is "in everyone's interest". Thus, the demand for a quality education is high in a global level.

Education as human rights has been a priority in international frameworks and practices. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) reflects on the importance of education for all. According to Goal 4 of SDGs, it aims to "ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all" while Millennium Development Goal (MDG) two was only focusing on "achieve universal primary education."

Qian Tang (2017) the Assistant Director-General for Education of UNESCO which is a specialized agency of United Nation for education says, education is a goal as well as a mean to reach and accomplish other SDGS and education is not only an important section of SDG but also "a key enabler for it." Strengthening the system of higher education would be an advantage in attaining other SDGs like ending extreme poverty, improving health quality, assisting the people to be accountable consumers, take initiatives towards climate change, or forming secure and peaceful communities (Owens, 2017).

Universal completion of primary school has been a priority for MDG but SDG focuses on education in a broader term. Considering the importance of education in other Sustainable Development Goals, the target 4.7 by United Nation (2015) declares:

By 2030 ensure all learners acquire knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including among others through education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship, and appreciation of cultural diversity and of culture's contribution to sustainable development.

In developing countries, access to education has been problematic due to different influential factors like extreme poverty, violent conflicts, natural disasters and issues. The international communities and World Bank supported these countries through some educational collaborative programs. As Orazem (2012) mentions, in the past five decades the World Bank

invested around \$70 billion around the world in order to increase enrollment at in developing countries.

2.1.2 Higher Education

The increasing demand for highly educated professionals resulted in changing the educational policies and expansion of higher education systems (Katz-Gerro & Yaish, 2003). The effectiveness of MDG 2 leads into introducing higher education in the agenda of Sustainable Development goals. The main driving force that higher education is included in SDG 4 is that more people are enrolling in higher educational institutions than previous times and the demand for higher education has been increased (Owens, 2017).

The SDG 4 has 10 targets in which three targets focus on higher education. Owens (2017) argues that after a long period of time higher education is at the ‘development table’ in a formal way and outlined the SDG targets on higher education as below:

- *Target 4.3:* introduces technical, vocational, tertiary and adult education into the global development agenda, stating ‘By 2030, ensure equal access for all women and men to affordable and quality technical, vocational and tertiary education, including university’
- *Target 4.b:* calls for more study abroad scholarships for students from developing countries
- *Target 4.7:* challenges schools and universities to build in key sustainability concepts across the curriculum, such as climate change, human rights and peace studies (Owen, 2017).

Higher education is an influential factor that leads to inequality. As Sachs (2012) describes that an increased inequality which is the result of unequal access to education “adds to longstanding inequalities in other dimensions.” In most cases, the level of education decides the level of your employability and income. The salaries of the highly educated have remarkably grown and the wages of workers who did not have proper education or less skilled workers decreased dramatically (Sachs, 2012; Hughes & Mwiria, 1989).

2.1.3 Views on Higher Education for Women

Education plays a crucial role in socioeconomic development in a society and women’s higher education is associated with economic stability of the community as well as to the growth of the individuals (Renn, 2012). In some countries like Europe, Australia and North America, women are the majority in pursuing their postsecondary studies; but worldwide women are much less likely than men in the universities (Becker et al., 2010; Renn, 2012). The authors adds that women are relatively less than men in tertiary education because of uneven distribution and sex segregation in a high level across different fields of study (Becker et al., 2010; Renn, 2012; Roof, 2015).

The feminists’ perspectives on educational experience of women highlights the women ‘underrepresentation’, ‘under-participation’ and ‘underachievement’ (Megarry, 1984, cited in. Chanana, 2007). The women’s representation around the world decreases in higher levels as there are less women as Ph.D. graduates and researchers than men (Chanana, 2012). Throughout history, women were excluded from ‘athletic colleges’ or ‘university graduate schools’ and it was not expected from women to be the ‘researchers or scientists’ (Howe, 1977). Women usually face challenges during their study or work at university e.g. traditional attitudes of teachers and scholars, ignoring the women’s contributions, the curriculum that presents women in stereotypical terms, social expectation and institutional barriers (Ryan, 1993; Chanana, 2012).

In addition, a smaller group of women are in “fields that are important to economic and social development (e.g., science, technology, engineering, mathematics, business, medicine, law, government)” (Renn, 2012). Another similar issue is the ‘sex-typical occupations’ based on fields of study and social expectations from women, as the dominant occupations by men are paid much higher than dominant occupations by women (Katz-Gerro & Yaish, 2003; Reimer& Pollak 2010; Adsera, 2017).

In some of the countries, the senior positions are occupied by men and women remain in lower positions due to gender discrimination at workplace even though they are highly educated (Lori, 2017). Therefore, a relevant question was raised: “why do women academics stagnate and remain relatively disadvantaged when it comes to promotion and leadership positions?” (Chanana, 2012). In order to find an answer for this question, the author adds that the several research outcomes illustrate that the educational institutions are not gender neutral in their operation and management. Likewise, Thomas (1990) says that the lack of female leaders and professional in the country is as a result of less women in higher education sectors. This paper also discusses that though women’s success is based on their successful completion of higher education but “why fewer women than men reach in higher education in the first place” (p. 20).

In particular, social and economic benefits through women’s education in different communities are remarkable like “investing in women tends to increase economic development and social stability as birth rates fall and food security increases” (Rippenburg, 2004, cited in. Roof, 2015). Jacobs (1996) in article *Gender inequality and higher education* states higher education helps women to bring change in other arena and their contribution in society development. The author mentions that gender inequality is prominent in the educational system than other social class inequalities and adds that education is a “relatively

advantaged sphere of social life for women” (p.154). Adsera (2017) argues that the life expectancy of women is linked to the level of their education and highly educated women would have utilize the better tools to reach their goals.

Access to higher education enables women to be financially independent and the women who are highly educated are able to work in good positions at prestigious institutions. Guramatunhu (2015) in an article titled *The Gender Shift in Enrollment Patterns in Higher Education: A Case Study of a School Administration Program* discusses that more women in higher education increase in their employability in this difficult economic environment. Over five decades of experience, the women with higher education degrees and special trainings hold prestigious positions like deanships and administrative positions (Lupi, & Martin, 2005). Riley (2009) cited in Mashriqi (2016) adds that “educating women will help improve agriculture, health, manufacturing, and banking” (p.7).

2.1.4 Contextual View of Afghanistan

Education system in Afghanistan faces many challenges including lack of quality education and resources, social and traditional obstacles to girls’ enrollment, and other problems (Samady, 2013). Gender inequality is one of the most compelling issues in Afghanistan and women are faced with social, economic, cultural barriers to their advancement. According to a report in 2009, more than 90% of females are illiterate in Afghanistan (Roof, 2015).

Access to primary education is still a challenging issue in the context of Afghanistan and “achieve universal primary education” of MDG 2 goal is not achieved completely. As Human Rights Watch in April 2017 reported that 3.5 million children are out of school and the majority are girls. This article gives some facts regarding male literacy on a national level, 66 percent of youths and 49 percent of adult are literate, while female literacy is half of this percentage like 37 percent and 19 percent respectively.

Roof (2015) mentions that the prime responsible agency to provide higher education services in Afghanistan is the Ministry of Higher Education (MoHE) and World Bank is the main ‘international aid agency’ in forming higher education in the country. Though the enrollment in primary and secondary education increased, girls’ enrollment status at school and universities is still low compared to male students. Samady (2013) reported that from 2002 to 2012 the enrollment increased from 2.3 million to 8.6 million in general education which includes 3.2 million (38%) female students. Moreover, he states that the enrollment in higher education also increased significantly during this time period from “from 31,200 students to 101,000 including 19,200 female students (19%).” Compared to male students, the enrollment of female students is considerably low in colleges and universities. According to World Bank (2013) reports that five percent of total Afghanistan population are going to university, where only one fifth of it, are female university students (Burrige, Maree Payne, & Rahmani, 2016). The table and figures is given below that shows the number of female students at school and universities.

The studies on women’s education in Afghanistan have shown strong relations in other sectors. For instance, according to the Central Statistics Organization (CSO) report,

The Afghanistan Living Conditions Survey (ALCS) in 2014 found that the majority of children in Afghanistan suffer from malnutrition. Most are underweight but more than one in five is overweight. In both cases malnutrition is negatively correlated with the mother’s education. Children whose mothers have secondary or higher education are the least likely to be underweight, stunted or wasted compared to those whose mothers have no education. (NESP III, 2016, p. 17).

According to article titled *Afghanistan women perceptions of access to higher education* by Mashriqi (2016), based on Afghan women’s perception, “the benefits of higher education

include advancing the country, enhancing knowledge, obtaining better job opportunities, working toward a peaceful and safe society, and exercising the right to make decisions” (p.6).

Growth of Student Enrolment in Afghanistan: (2002 – 1012)

Table 1

Year	General Education			Higher Education		
	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total
2002	1,700,000	700,000	2,400,000	27,000	4200	31,200
2004	2,700,000	1,300,000	4,000,000	24,500	6200	30,700
2006	3,500,000	1,900,000	5,400,000	30,600	8800	39,400
2008	3,900,000	2,300,000	6,200,000	48200	12,900	61,800
2010	4,300,000	2,700,000	7,000,000	62,900	14,830	77,730
2012	5, 359,000	3,284,000	8,643,000	81,785	19,215	101,000

Table 1 1: Samady, 2013, Growth of Student Enrollment in General Education and Higher Education (2002-2012)

Student Enrollment in Higher Education

Afghanistan: 2002-2012

Figure 2

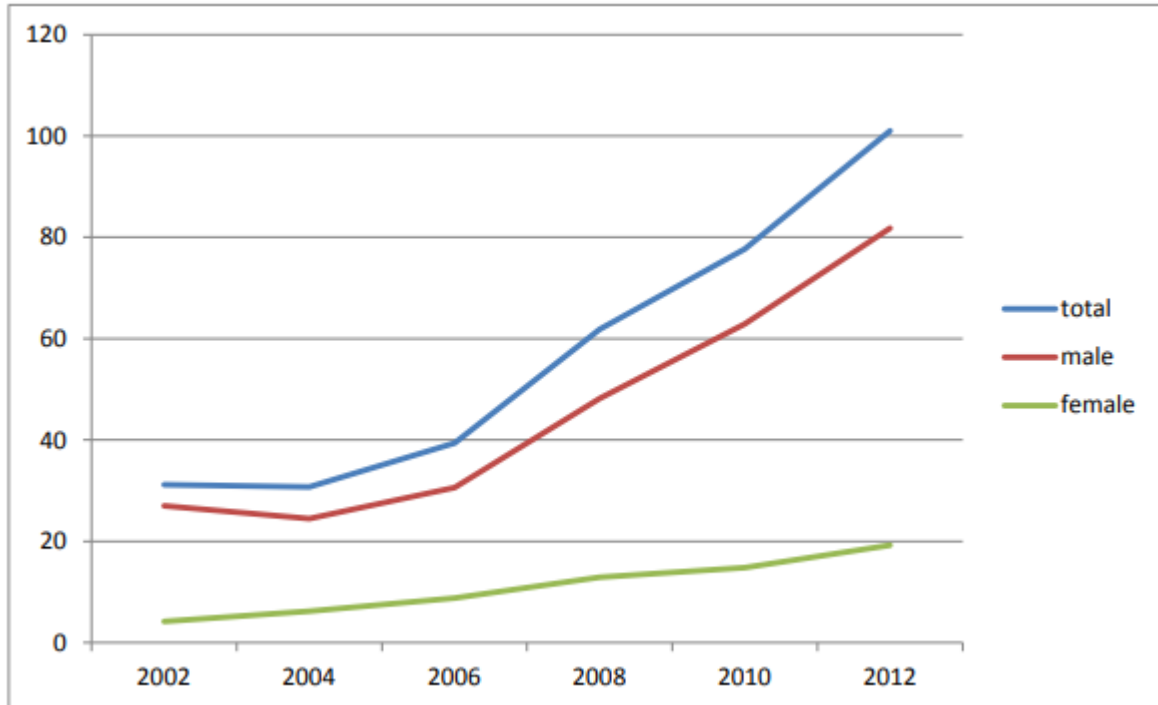


Figure 1 I: Samady, 2013, Growth of Student Enrollment in Higher Education (2002-2012)

This figure displays a big gap of inequality in education on the part of girls in the higher education level.

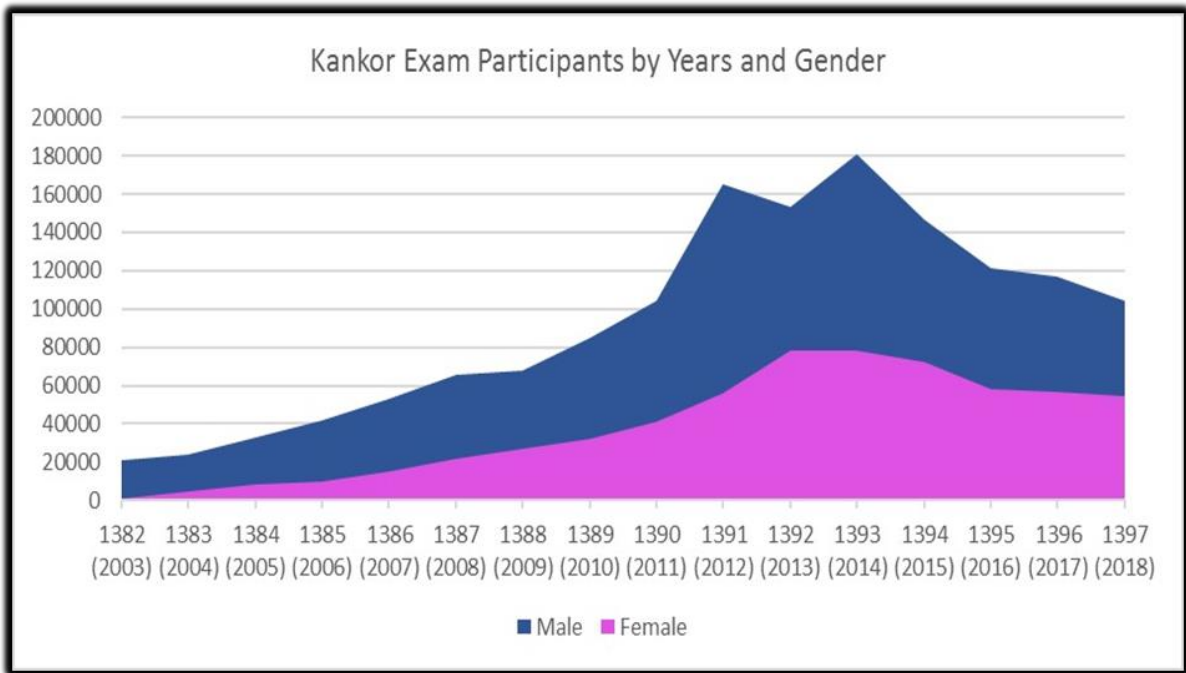


Figure 1 2: *The Diplomat*, 2021, Kankor Exam Participants by Years and Gender

2.2 Conceptual framework

In conducting research, it is essential to consider its “relationship to other research”; understand “why it was designed in a particular way”; “justify conclusions and their relationships” to the other research that leads the researcher “to look for arguments that provided conceptual coherence to the research for it to be a contribution to knowledge” (Leshem and Trafford, 2007).

In this research, I would like to find out the challenges and opportunities of higher education for women. Shayan (2015) cited in (Mashwani, 2017) adds “as compared to primary, secondary, and high school the inequality in gender is greater in higher education and the reason is that they are not provided with the opportunities to carry on their higher studies” (p. 46). As higher education benefits women in different aspects of their individual and social life and access to higher education helps them to be financially independent, lead individuals and groups and increase in their life expectancy (Lupi, & Martin, 2005; Guramatunhu, 2015;

Roof, 2015; Adsera, 2017). According to Drevitch (2010) claimed that “educating women and allowing them to work outside of the home will increase employment opportunities and decrease poverty” (Mashriqi, 2016, p.7).

An extensive number of studies were conducted in various context to examine the barriers for girls’ accessibility to higher education. The main barriers for girls’ education are traditional and religious practice, political instability, social barriers like child marriage, illiteracy, poverty and gender discrimination (Sachs, 2012; Renn, 2012; Roof, 2015; Lori, 2017). Similarly, according to Jackson (2011) cited in (Mashwani, 2017) the main problem that hinder women’s education in Afghanistan are “poverty, early forced marriages, lack of security, lack of family support, lack of female teachers, long distances to school, low quality of education, absence of female schools, harassment, lack of community support” (p.46). Because of these barriers the state and communities take specific measures to eradicate the barriers for girls’ higher education like provide special programs and offers to increase girls’ accessibility to higher education (Roof, 2015).

The three research questions addressed in this paper, aims to explore and understand the above concepts and theories. Based on this conceptual framework, I would like to find answers for the research questions and draw a conclusion to achieve the goal of the study.

Conceptual Framework

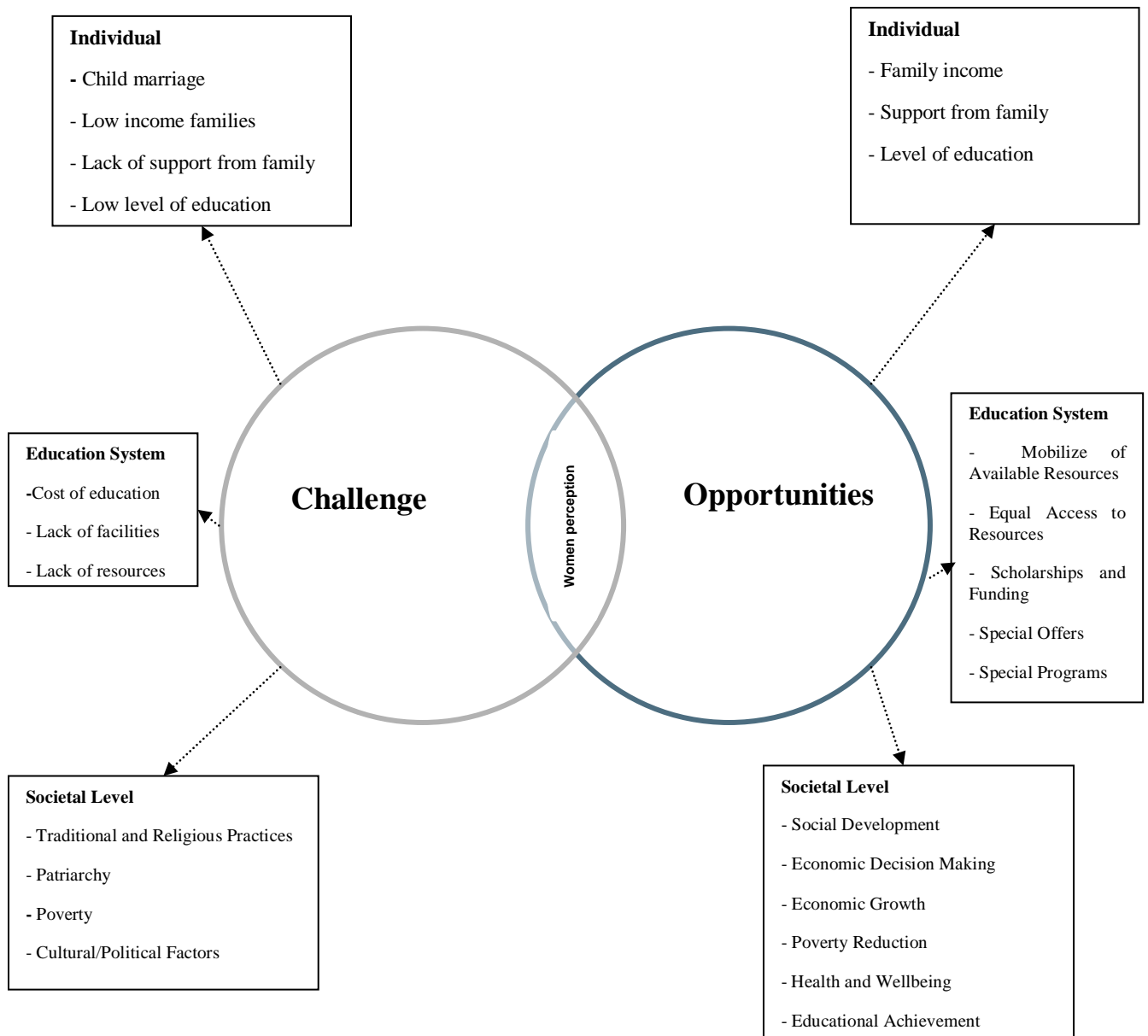


Figure 1 3: Higher Education Opportunities and Challenges in Afghanistan: Afghan Women's Perspective

Chapter 3

Methodology

3.1 Research Methodology

The methodology chapter of this study demonstrated the research design employed in this paper. This chapter contains the following points: Research approach, Research site, Research participants, Sampling procedure, Data collection method, Research tools, Data collection process, Role of the Researcher, Data analysis, Ethical issues & concerns, Credibility and Rigor, and Limitation of the study.

The study used qualitative research in an attempt to get an in-depth understanding of female's perspectives and attitudes. This study further analyze the experiences and opinions of women to provide a concrete documentation on girls' accessibility to higher education in Afghanistan.

3.2 Research Approach

Since the nature of this research was descriptive, the qualitative approach is adopted which gives direction to the research process. According to Gay and Airasian (2003) "the central focus of qualitative research studies is to provide understanding of a social setting or activity as viewed from the perspective of the research participants" (p. 169). As the title of the study suggests explorations and a detailed overview of collected data, the qualitative paradigm was chosen to be the most appropriate for the research. Which is a more useful understanding of things that are based on people experiences and opinions. As Ezzy (2002) states "qualitative research, and qualitative data analysis, involves working out how the things that people do make sense from their perspective." I have used qualitative methods to study girls' access to higher education and I have attempted to understand how female express their perception based on their practices.

As the study suggests to acquire an in-depth insight into women's viewpoints on girls' accessibility to higher education which requires a method like qualitative that is "less structured and generally considered to be more flexible than research design in quantitative research" (p. 201). The author adds that a qualitative researcher "do not manipulate and intervene" in natural settings. Therefore, this approaches is used as it allows the researcher to adjust and be flexible during research process.

The qualitative data collection methods are: Participation, Observation, In-depth interviewing, Field notes, Focused group discussion, Case study and Review of document (Marshal & Rossman, 1999; Wiersma, 2005; Hameed, 2020). This research employed focus group discussion and in-depth interview as it appears to be the best method to approach the objective and requirement of the study.

Moreover, it is necessary to understand that from the start the data analysis is integrated with all part of the research and it should not be an afterthought. I used coding and thematic analysis of data for the research. "On the one hand, coding is analysis. On the other hand, coding is the specific and concrete activity which starts the analysis and both are correct" (Punch, 2004). The study named and labeled the data which helped for the retrieval of information. As the author adds "a more advanced coding enables the summarizing of data by pulling together themes and identifying patterns" (p. 204-205).

Based on the above described strategy, the study used qualitative paradigm to explore a considerable number of ideas and beliefs on girls' access to higher education in Afghanistan context.

3.3 Research Site

The study is directly interrelated to current practices of girls' access to higher institutions, so some educational institutions have been used to collect the data. I have chosen five different

places of higher education that are situated inside and outside of Afghanistan. These five places includes Kabul University, Herat University, Badakhshan University and two abroad universities. Furthermore, I have selected two sample from two different high schools situated in Kabul city. These sites are chosen because I wanted to collect data from different perspectives. All these high schools and universities are located in crowded provinces and countries that can represent a good number of sample for my research. The three universities in Kabul, Herat and Badakhshan has a high numbers of female students. For instance, there are three participants from Kabul University where all girls from across country come for their higher studies. Though there are other governmental and non-governmental universities in Kabul that are mainly occupied by girls from capital and provinces. But I have selected Herat and Badakhshan universities to know the students' belief, points of view and experiences from a different angle. The other samples are chosen from two abroad universities that focus mainly on educating and empowering Afghan women. These two universities in other countries are selected because they engage Afghan female students who crossed all the barriers and came from vulnerable situations. In which I was able to interrogate more the challenges they encountered and the opportunities they achieved. The last two research sites, high schools in Kabul are designated based on their background. One is a typical public school where all girls are treated the same as other students. The second is a vocational educational center where they provide primary and secondary education for women.

Beside schools and universities, I have chosen two of my participants from civil society. These site is chosen, according to World Economic Forum (2013) civil society has been broadly defined that the space which is outside of our families, the market and state. Through this site, I was able to collect data from experts and professionals on this topic.

The study have chosen these samples from different sites to represent all Afghan female students in higher education or those student that do not have access to higher education. Besides, while selecting these samples from these sites, I asked for demographics data to describe the sample of my study that indicate inclusion and representation.

Field Plan

Sl. No.	Activities	Date	Participants	Strategy	Remarks
01	Focused Group Discussion	26,11, 2021	University Students	Zoom Recording & note keeping	Writing Transcription
02	Interview #01	26,11, 2021	High School Graduate Student #1	Zoom Recording & note keeping	Writing journal & Transcription
03	Interview #02	27,11, 2021	High School Graduate Student #1	Zoom Recording & note keeping	Writing journal & Transcription
04	Interview #03	27,11, 2021	Women's Rights Activist	Zoom Recording & note keeping	Writing journal & Transcription
05	Interview #04	27,11, 2021	Women's Rights Activist	Zoom Recording & note keeping	Writing journal & Transcription

Table 1 2

3.4 Research Participants

Research participants for this study are female students who studied at schools and universities. There are three students who studied in capital of Afghanistan, two female students from two provinces and two female students who studied abroad. The age range of these 7 students are between 18 to 34 years old. They are all doing their bachelors and

masters in these universities. All of these university students were asked for focused group discussion.

Also, two other research participants are female students who are graduated from high school but did not pursued their higher education. The age range of these students are between 18-34 years and both are single. They are asked for individual interviews.

In addition, there are two women from civil society. The first one is a former government official and a women's rights activist; who handled different projects and cases regarding girls' education in one of the province of Afghanistan. The second participant was a women from media and she had few conferences on women and education inside and outside of Afghanistan. Both of them had their master's degree and I had interviewed them individually.

In total, I had 11 research participants, seven university student, two high school graduate and two activist. They came from different backgrounds and live in different countries and cities. On average, each participants spent 50-90 minutes for interview.

All above participants for this research were selected based on objective of the study and research questions.

3.5 Sampling Procedure

For conducting this study, the researcher used purposive sampling to identify information and select cases that are rich to the research nature. In qualitative method like this study, a purposive sampling is beneficial "because it provides a wide range of non-probability sampling techniques for the researcher to draw on" (Rai & Thapa, 2015). By using this type of sampling, I did a systematic investigation based on research participants' background, knowledge and understanding of the context. As Rai and Thapa (2015) states that in "purposive sampling relies on the judgment of the researcher when it comes to selecting the

units (e.g., people, cases/organizations, events, pieces of data) that are to be studied” (p. 5). Furthermore, I used homogeneous sampling as the author adds that “homogeneous sampling is a purposive sampling technique” whose units “share the same characteristics or traits (e.g., a group of people that are similar in terms of age, gender, background, occupation, etc.)”. My research sample includes women who are student in higher educational institutions and the women who only completed their high schools. These samples came from almost similar background, age group and same gender.

In addition, I have chosen expert sampling for my study which is also a type of purposive sampling. Since there are less research in this field particularly higher education and women in Afghanistan, thus expert sampling helped my study to collect data which was difficult to uncover in this short period. As Rai and Thapa (2015) regarding expert sampling state that “it is particularly useful where there is a lack of empirical evidence in an area and high levels of uncertainty, as well as situations where it may take a long period of time before the findings from research can be uncovered” (p. 9).

In sum, I have chosen purposefully these small number of research samples from different backgrounds to collect information through in-depth interview and focused group discussion.

3.6 Data Collection Methods

The research method for this qualitative research are interview and focus group discussion (FGD) as a main research tools. In interview the participants shared their opinions and experiences that helped me to collect in-depth information. Regarding interview Donalek (2005) says, “It allows the researcher to come to deeply know and be present to other human beings. To successfully interview, is to connect with another person on a very profound level. The giving of one’s story is a deeply valued gift” (p. 125). Similarly, open-ended and close-ended questionnaire will make us to discover new

ideas that is not included in the structure of our questionnaire. Also, the focused group discussion included Afghan female students in universities of Afghanistan.

Prior to interview and focused group discussion, I have piloted the research tools. I practiced the questionnaire of the interview and focused group discussion and this piloting helped me to organize the questionnaire in sequence and add/remove some points.

In this study the theme for both interview and focused group discussion are: Demographic data, Educational achievement, Performance at school, Role of National Examination (Kankor Exam), Government/national or international NGOs role in their access to higher education, Self-motivation /Family support in acquiring education and Financial/family/religious barriers.

3.6.1 Interview method

“Interview research that has an idiographic aim typically seeks a sample size that is sufficiently small for individual cases to have a locatable voice within the study, and for an intensive analysis of each case to be conducted” (Robinson, 2014).

Interview as one of the main and most common method for data collection in qualitative paradigm. I had arranged four individual interview with two female activists and two female high school graduates. And as interview facilitator I had collected data online through virtual meetings. First, I had found the targeted sample then sent an invitation link through email and social media platforms. Prior to interview, I made sure that they know the purpose of the study, the ethical consideration and the timeline. Then I introduced the topic and started the interview by some rapport building questions so the participant feel at ease and confident while answering the questions.

The individual interview time depended on participants, the participant know they are expected to give time until interview finished and the minimum time period was 60 min. Over all, all interview was about 60-90 minutes for each participant in order to ask more in-detailed questions. In addition, I asked their permission to record their audio so it can help me in my transcription to be precise.

3.6.2 Focus group discussion

In my study I conducted one focus group discussion which is an important tool in qualitative research. As a “focus group discussion (FGD) is a good way to gather together people from similar backgrounds or experiences to discuss a specific topic of interest” (Mishra, 2016). This method helped me to discover some key points while listening to the group discussion. As a moderator of focused group discussion with female students in Afghanistan and abroad universities, I understood some common challenges and opportunities.

Prior to focused group discussion, I shared a link for the virtual discussion through their emails and other online social platforms. I started FGD by introducing myself and asking them for their introduction so they get familiar each other and feel comfortable while sharing their ideas and experiences.

In this focused group discussion, I had seven participants that includes only university students. As Mishra (2016) states that “small groups risk limited discussion occurring, while large groups can be chaotic, hard to manage for the moderator and frustrating for participants who feel they get insufficient opportunities to speak”. And the author adds that an optimum size of participants in FGD is six to eight.

3.7 Role of the Researcher

In November and December of 2021, I was able to conduct interviews and focused group discussion with research participants. As I am one of the students with similar background of my research participants who were university students. However, during the interview and focused group discussion I have tried to be cautious about my personal biases and be mindful towards their answers to the questionnaires.

In order to collect authentic data and information, I tried to create a friendly environment and showed respect to the participants. As KVALE (1996) describes “an interview inquiry as a "moral enterprise" this has to do with one aspect of the researcher's role” (cited in. Fink, 2000).

3.8 Data Analysis

In qualitative data analysis method, a researcher would have a variety of options for analyzing data. As Punch (2004) state

Qualitative research concentrates on the study of social life in natural settings. Its richness and complexity mean that there are different ways of looking at and analysing social life, and therefore multiple perspectives and practices in the analysis of qualitative data (p. 199).

For this study, as a first step the interview and focused group discussion was transcribed, based on themes and focuses the main data was gathered and grouped. Coding as a second step was used to gather data in different themes and “the analysis is to be viewed as the movement from the particular to the general” (McCRACKEN, 1988 qtd. in Fink, 2000).

Based on the purpose of the study, Qualitative Data Analysis (QDA) programming was chosen for analysis of qualitative data. I used Qualitative Data Analysis (QDA) to explore

the different themes and categories. This program is very supportive in term of making notes, comparing, coding, creating themes and categories. Through QDA programming, I have selected the commonality between the responses and organized it in one theme. I used thematic analysis to classify emerging patterns and themes from information rich data. Then it was presented in narrative method by critically investigating the similarities and differences of the themes.

3.9 Ethical Issues and Concerns

Prior to conducting interview and focus group discussion, I have sent consent letters to all of my research participants. In the letter, it was clearly mentioned about ethical consideration and confidentiality. While conducting the interview and FGD, once again I briefly explained the main points of consent letter. The respondents were aware of recordings, using pseudonyms and code of conduct. Lastly, the information about the research and the contact numbers are written in the consent letters. The research participants were informed to share their opinions and ask questions during or after research. Also, they would have the chance to look the transcribed data and they have the right to withdraw from the research at any point.

I have tried to uphold my personal biases regarding girls' accessibility to higher education. Since I shared the same background as my participants then I had tried to not involve with answering the questions but act as a facilitator of the study.

3.10 Credibility and Rigor

In this study I did an in-depth study to investigate on higher education and gender in Afghanistan. The topic for this study was developed by writing a research proposal and presented to a committee of experienced researchers for their feedback and approval. I have used different tools to intrigue the information and give rationale to themes to certify the credibility of this study.

The data from all these groups were collected online through zoom calls. Prior to completing the data collection procedure, the consent letters were sent for their approval to join as a participant in the research. In which, the participants were informed about the research aims and objectives. Also this letter made it clear to the research participants that in this study, their names will be presented anonymously.

From the study, two well-articulated courses on research methods were completed as part of MA degree requirement. These module covered the educational research starting from identifying problem, designing research, conducting research, analyzing research, writing research proposal and preparing students for writing the dissertation. Furthermore, I had attained few research and writing courses during my bachelor's degree, participated in an intensive research program in Kyrgyzstan, and was trained as a research fellow in Sri Lanka.

Across to the entire research process, there are a number of experienced individuals including the supervisor for guidance to ensure the highest quality of the research.

3.11 Limitations of the study

A number of limitation of the study is presented here that impacted the research and some specific strategies were taken to avoid the negative impact on the outcome of the research.

A major barrier to conduct this study was collection of data, the participants did not feel comfortable and confident while answering the questions. There was a confusion that were they supposed to talk about current government or the previous one. Therefore, I had prepared an exact timeline for the participant clarification. A period of time that has a starting point and an ending.

The second limitation was lack of literature and resources in the context of Afghanistan. On the basis of government and policies prioritization, many studies were conducted on

primary education, there were few studies discussing about higher education and gender. However, I managed my time for research and explored more about the topic and was able to use other related literature.

Chapter 4

Results

4.1 Introduction

In this chapter the findings of research have been presented based on data which were collected through interviews and focused group discussion from women rights' activists, female high school graduates and female university students. The results of this research is related to purpose and aims of the study.

By analyzing data, I classified it into seven topics and followed with some sub themes. In response to the research question and research purpose, the following classifications has been identified from the collected data.

- Female students perception and understanding on girls' access to higher education in Afghanistan
- Female students experiences on girls' access to higher education in Afghanistan
- Available opportunities in Afghanistan for girls' access to higher education
- Challenges and barriers for girls' higher education in Afghanistan

4.2 Female students' perception and understanding on girls' access to higher education in Afghanistan

Several themes were categorized based on perception and understanding of women on girls' access to higher education through interviews and focused group discussion.

4.2.1 Entrance examination into universities (Kankor Exam)

Each year for admission into universities, government arrange a nationwide entrance examination, called *Kankor* exam. Thousands of students around the country compete with

each other to get the highest marks and admit in their favorite fields of study. One of the participants, Zarmina from Zoom interview #1, 27.11.2021, has said that students have to pass the *Kankor* examination to their favorite field according to the score they have obtained. The highest score in Kankor, I think is 360 and in most cases one student should score above 300 to get into medical, political science/law, engineering and economic fields of study (Focus group notes #1: 30.11.2021).

4.2.2 Governmental and non-governmental universities and women

There are significant differences between governmental and non-governmental universities in terms of structure, quality of education and resources. *Kankor* examination in governmental universities are very competitive and the *Kankor* candidates are much higher than non-governmental universities. The governmental universities accept only students who pass *Kankor* examination (Focus group notes #1: 30.11.2021). While non-governmental universities has their own *Kankor* examination, which is helpful for students who did not get into government universities and the students who work in day time. The quality of education in government universities is better than private universities as As Ms. Sana participants of focus group #1, 30.11.2021 says “in particular public universities are better than private universities and also it is hard for individuals to get in and I think the environment of public universities are better”. Ms. Stanikzai participants of focus group #1, 30.11.2021 adds “In contrast, the quality of education is better in public universities than private. As I studied in both though I paid high amount of money in a private university and the instructors were not taking serious the class.” In addition, Non-governmental universities are very costly that girls cannot afford the cost of education. As Ms. Benazir participants of focus group #1, 30.11.2021 says that “The boys are more in private universities because girls cannot afford it. Since, boys get financial support from their families and also they can easily get jobs”.

4.2.3 Universities in capital and provinces

There are many public and private universities in capital and big cities than provinces and remote regions. Monika one of the participant says “Capital is completely different from the provinces, the government focus more on capital and big cities” (Focus group notes #1: 30.11.2021). In Afghanistan, there are some good higher educational opportunities and it depends the place they live in. Those who live in capital and cities they have easy access to higher education. As Ms. Stanikzai participants of focus group #1, 30.11.2021 mentions “I know there are only three province (out of 34 provinces) like Kabul, Herat and Mazar (Balkh province) that people can study in master level. Except these three province, there is no other province that offer master program.”

The universities in provinces are not equipped than universities in cities and capital. The universities in provinces usually lacks teachers, professional teachers, facilities, books and other teaching learning materials. As Zahra participant #3, 27.11.2021, states “Herat city have had well-educated female teachers but the government did not pay enough for the teachers to go to that villages and districts for educating others. Those female teachers said that we cannot go to those districts just for 10,000 Afghani (around \$ 120 USD). They were claiming that the government should pay for our security, for our *Mahram* (male member of their family accompanying them) and for our transportation.”

4.2.4 Non-Governmental Organizations and Women

There are many non-governmental organizations that are working for girls’ higher education. One of the participant, Mursal, interview #2, 26.11.2021 say “she international NGOs support a lot girls in their education. As an American NGO was my sponsor to study in India”. These NGOs always support the girls who are in need or the girls who meet at least the basic requirements for entrance examinations inside and outside of Afghanistan. For example,

Alina says “the NGOs always set criteria to choose the best candidates. For example, in a learning center they chose the fresh high school graduate or know the basics of language” (Focus group notes #1: 30.11.2021).

In contrast some of the participants do not believe that NGOs are useful in girls’ accessibility to higher education. As Zarmina, interview #1, 27.11.2021, states that the NGOs “may hold short-term vocational training or other workshops for girls, but in practice it has not been effective in providing higher education opportunities for girls.”

4.3 Female students experiences on girls’ access to higher education in Afghanistan

The participants shared their experiences regarding higher education accessibility based on their own experiences or the people they know.

4.3.1 Importance of higher education in women’s life

Higher education helped a lot of women in their life. Higher education helped women to be financially independent, employed and have dignity in the community. For example, one of the participants, focus group #1, 30.11.2021, Ms. Stanikzai says “higher education helped me a lot, when I was graduated from university I got a good job. I got financially independent and could support my family. My family was very proud. If I was just high school graduate then I wouldn’t get good job, not having confidence to take decision in my life and in my career.” Zahra, the women’s rights activists mentioned that,

“You know it is really hard to keep girls who studied abroad or can speak like English or any other foreign Language. It is really hard to keep them at home and it is really hard to keep them dependent. So I think it is really important and essential for girls to have access to education. I think it would be a great opportunity for the girls who can

go to abroad for education and come back with knowledge and skills. (Personal communication: Interview #3, 27.11.2021).

Generally, girls are struggling with problems is because they are not educated enough to fight for themselves and face their problems. As the activists adds:

The main reason that Afghan women and Afghan girls face domestic violence and face routine or family challenges is because women do not have the capacity to solve the problem and do not have access to education. I believe women will be empowered through education, they will become independent and can make decision for themselves. (Personal Communication: Interview#3, 27. 11.2021)

4.3.2 Educated girls as role models for others

The girls in Afghanistan are going to schools and universities because some pioneers stand for themselves and dared to go beyond the barriers. One girl could change a family or even a community perception towards girls' education.

One of the FGD participants expressed her experience as a university student who helped other girls in her community to go to university in other countries. Ms. Stanikzai says I got an opportunity to study abroad and later my sister studied abroad too which had co-education system. She adds "My experience helped my family and relatives to change their idea about girls' education in university and abroad. Girls are more interested to pursue higher education but they don't have opportunity because of some family, cultural, financial and other barriers" (Focus group notes #1, 30.11.2021). Another participants states that his family supported her to study in university and "as we grown up highly educated, now my aunts and uncles are focusing on their children education. The most influential person in girls' higher education is their parents" (Personal Communication: Interview #4: 27.11.2021).

4.3.3 Higher education for girls as a taboo/not a priority

The people in provinces and remote areas mostly do not appreciate women who are well-educated. For example, FGD participant Ms. Ms. Stanikzai stated “I was sharing my abroad experience with my relatives in a province and my mom said don’t share it with them because they would think you are not a good girl” (focus group notes #1: 30.11.2021). She also added that when she got a chance to study abroad her uncle said to her brother that “if you and your father cannot feed your sister then you can send her to my house I will feed her why you are sending her to study abroad.” Meantime, Ms. Barakzai says,

Unfortunately, in some remote areas people are not educated they are not allowing their girls to study in university. They are even pointing to girls who study in universities and they consider these girls characterless. (Personal Communication: Interview #4, 27.11.2021)

Sometime the girls in remote provinces have other priorities than pursuing their higher education. Basically, the families are mostly dependent on agricultural activities and having a degree for their girls would be a waste of their time. In provinces the girls are expected to feed animals, do the housework and raise the children. As Ms. Mursal state that the families in provinces “have more children and they are busy in farming and taking care of animals like cows, sheeps etc”. (Interview #2: 26.11.2021).

4.4 Available opportunities in Afghanistan for girls’ access to higher education

Through interview and focus group discussion, participants shared some ideas regarding opportunities that helped women in their higher education. These opportunities are classified as the following:

4.4.1 Special offer for female

The girls has the equal opportunity in national Kankor examination to study and compete. The girls who study hard can get the good grades in this entrance exam. As Nadiya says “I think government support and treat all citizens equally. As if students pass national examination then education and accommodation is free for both genders” (Focus group notes #1: 30.11.2021). Which means the government do not discriminate based on gender and both gender have equal access to higher education.

Some private universities inside and outside Afghanistan offer special services for girls’ higher education. For example, some universities abroad only provide scholarships for girls. In addition,

Each year, some private universities provide discount to admit more girls in their institution. Also, sometime they admit girls into university even if the girl did not meet the entrance requirement.

4.4.2 National and International NGOs role in Women’s Education

Non-Governmental Organizations supports girls to get access to higher education. As Halima says I believe NGOs are very important in educational opportunities for Afghan students. Because almost all of educational funding comes from these national and international NGOs and other external sources (Focus group notes #1: 30.11.2021). The female students who came from poor backgrounds and those who came from remote areas they are being sponsored by some national or international NGOs. As one of the participants, Benazir, focus group #1, 30.11.2021, states “There are some NGOs that helps female students financially like offering some funding inside and outside of the country. Less income families and with good English Language background are eligible for scholarships”. For example, the other participants, Monika, focus group#1, 30.11.2021, adds some NGOs in Ghazni are providing

monthly stipend for girls. Another good example of NGO services for girls' higher education is that some NGOs "facilitate language learning or preparation for Kankor examination" (Focus group notes #1: 30.11.2021).

4.5 Challenges and barriers for girls' higher education in Afghanistan

According to focus group discussion and interview, it seems that the challenges and barriers for girls' higher education in Afghanistan are countless. There are so many factors that prevent Afghanistan's women to pursue their higher education. In this section, the study present some common data collected through interview and FGD regarding challenges of higher education for women in Afghanistan.

4.5.1 Insecurity

The female are dropping out from schools and higher educational institutions because they do not feel secure at those places. The provinces are more insecure than capital and big cities when it comes to girl's education.

Ms. Zahra, one of the activists interviewed mentioned:

Two years ago a young girl come to the provincial council and complained that the elders of their village did not want their girls even go to school. They told my father to not send me to go to school but my father didn't accept it. Several weeks later, some young boys from that village raped this young girl just because they did not obey from their dominant culture of that community. She said she couldn't live in that society and decided to leave the village and came to the city of Herat. They rent a house I think in east part of Heart and lived there. She was really upset and said she really worry about the future of her sisters. After this incident happened to me, my family is not interested to send me and my sisters to school and university. Because

they are afraid this incident happen again to me or my young sisters. So, I think this kind of problems existed all the time but many don't want to raise this type of issues. Because it's cultural problem (Its taboo in Afghanistan culture), According to Afghan culture they blame more the victim than the person who did the crime. These are the problems that Afghan women face specially in districts. (Interview #3: 27.11.2021)

Insecurity in provinces and remote regions are challenging for girls to pursue their studies at schools and universities.

4.5.2 Poverty

Poverty is another challenging factor to ensure higher education accessibility for girls in provinces and cities. As one of the participants mentioned that "Afghanistan is under the red-line of poverty and most families are not able to afford the basics for their kids." (Focus group notes: 30.11.2021). Mursal, a high school graduate gave her thought on this matter by stating: "During my high school there was a lot of problems like family problem that they didn't want me to go to school and continue my education." ((Personal Communication: Interview#2, 26.11.2021)

The employment rate after high school graduation is low for girls and this limits girls to continue their studies in private universities if they did not get the chance to pass governmental entrance exam. As Ms. Zarmina, a high school graduate gave her opinion on girls' higher education and financial problems stating that "in Afghanistan, most girls do not have the opportunity to work, so they cannot support themselves financially and most of the time, families only think about their daughters marrying, not their education and future." (Personal Communication: Interview #1, 27.11.2021)

4.5.3 Afghanistan National Examination System

Some female students did not pass national *Kankor* examination and this is the only reason that they are left behind. According to one of the participants Zarmina, interview#1, 27.11.2021, who said that she did not go to university because she did not get the passing score for entrance exam. Therefore she needed to start work after school in order to support her family financially.

Kankor preparation is costly for girls as they do not have any source of income. Most of families in Afghanistan have more than four children which is difficult for parents to help them to study in private centers in order to pass the *Kankor* exams. Ms. Stanikzai, express her own experience about this matter by indicating, “from my experience, when I had Kankor examination then I knew it really needs three full years of preparation. You need to study hard and remember everything to get good grade or at least pass in exam.” (Focus group notes #1, 30.11.2021) The student who would like to pass are required to be prepared minimum three years in advance and without private centers it is quite challenging to pass. Another FGD participants stated:

As I was taking preparation for Kankor and to get in my favorite field, I give up to a lot of other things in my life. For example, for three years from grade ten to twelve I was studying from dawn to dusk. (Focus group notes #1: 30.11.2021)

The private centers for Kankor examinations are highly demanding in provinces. Ms. Barakzai regarding this issue stated, “Many families send their children from Bamiyan, Kandahar, Ghazni and Mazar to Kabul to study and be prepared for Kankor exam” (Personal Communication: Interview #4, 27.11.2021)

The number of girls in *kankor* exam is significantly less. As one of FGD #1, 30.11.2021, stated that “I think the participant of National Examination 30% are girls and 70% boys. In villages, the families allow their sons to take university entrance exam.”

The government signed a kind of decree for every province to have specific quota policy to enter to university. Through this policy for each province, the girls who get good score might not pass the exam because the quota system will select another person from another province who has the lower mark. As Ms. Benazir, focus group #1, 30.11.2021, mentioned that “Kankor is regulated by government quota system policy that do not consider the hardworking students but from which background they are coming.”

4.5.4 Gender based discrimination

In most cases, the families won't allow girls to study in university while they permit their sons to study at school and university. For example co-education system is not acceptable by some families. As Nadiya, one of the FGD participants stated:

The biggest challenged is the people mindset towards girls' education. For example: In a governmental university, I had an instructor who was highly educated. One day he said that he did not allow his daughter to study Medical at Kabul Medical University though her daughter passed in exam. We asked why he didn't allow his daughter to study in such a prestigious university. He said because it is co-education and I changed my daughter field to Islamic Studies at Kabul University where she can study only with girls. (Focus group notes #1, 30.11.2021)

Families allow girls to study university if the university is single education system. Ms. Stanikzai in this regard mentioned “I was the first female in my family and relatives that I got the opportunity to study in university and abroad. It was because the university I get into was teaching only women.” (Focus group notes #1: 30.11.2021)

The families in remote regions and provinces are conservative when it comes to girls education. Ms. Barakzai shared her experience regarding this issue by stating:

In Kabul University, I noticed that the girls from provinces were less than the boys but from Kabul there were more girls. So, I understood that people in provinces are not open-minded towards their girls' education and not allowing them to study in university. Boys were more than girls. (Interview #4, 27.11.2021)

The families invest more on their sons than their daughters. In the interview one activist said, "There is a cultural problem like families invest on their son's future more than their daughters because in Afghan culture they think girls belong to the other family (in-laws)." (Personal Communication: Interview #3, 27.11.2021). Also Ms. Stanikzai, focus group #1, 30.11.2021, express her opinion by mentioning: "people are very poor and they think they will benefit if they invest on their son. While their daughter will get marry and there won't be any benefit in return if they invest in their daughter's higher education."

If the families have more children and they do not have enough money to support all of their children, then they will only educate their sons. Ms. Zahra, the women's rights activists expressing this concern by stating, "the families who have 4-5 children, they invest on their son's education because they believe that male member of the family belong to their own family and the female member belong to the other family." (Personal Communication: Interview #3, 27.11.2021)

Giving priority for male member of the family is another indicator of gender-based discrimination in country. As Ms. Stanikzai, focus group #1, 30.11.2021, mentioned:

The quality of education is better in private schools than public schools. Few people are able to send their children to private schools, mostly their sons. For example, my neighbor was sending her son to private school and their daughter to public school. I asked why you do that? He said directly that the quality is very good in private school. From this example we can understand that families do not value their girls'

education. The girls have to bear all these and we cannot expect them to do well in national examination or get into university.

4.5.5 Early marriage

Early marriage is another problem for girls that constraint them in continuing their higher education. As Ms. Stanikzai, FGD participant indicated that “when their son or daughter are willing to pursue their higher education, they just get them married off. Which after marriage, they need to stop their education, need to work and feed their family.

The girls are normally marrying after high school graduation, which is difficult for them to continue their education afterward. Like early marriage, before 18 would not allow girls to have preparation for *kankor* examination, which is a very competitive university entrance exam. Ms. Stanikzai added “people do not allow their girls to go to university because they think it is time for them to get marry.”

4.5.6 Lack of higher education institutions and facilities in provinces

The female in most of the provinces are not going to universities because there is no university in their area. The families sent their sons to travel in other provinces mostly send them to capital to study, while they cannot let their daughters to travel and study in universities in cities and capital. For examples Ms. Zahra, an activist indicated that:

Not all girls have equally access to education. I can give some examples from Herat province, in some part of this province like Shendand the people do not like their girls to go to universities. There is some schools but there is no university in this region. So the families do not allow their daughters to go to university in the city of Herat like their sons do. It is because of cultural and security issues. As for Afghan culture it is not easy to send their daughters far away from their homes to study. I saw many

families send their sons to study in private and governmental universities. But in some districts like Shendand and Adarskan which are not far away like 50 to 100 km far from the center of Herat, they don't want to send their daughters to educational institutions. (Personal Communication: Interview #3, 27.11.2021)

Not permitting women to travel in other cities and countries would not be barrier for girls' education if the government was providing higher education facilities in those regions. Therefore, the government and NGOs are not cooperating the girls in their higher education in provinces and remote areas. As Ms. Zahra added, "discrimination of the central government of Afghanistan is another serious issue in not accessing of higher education for females in some part of Afghanistan" (Personal Communication: Interview #3, 27.11.2021)

There are not enough universities and facilities in provinces and remote regions because of corruption or problem with implementation of the projects. Ms. Zahra, one of the activists indicated:

Actually Afghanistan accepted Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) and other international convention and according to that they have to facilitate the accessibility of education for women. But in reality, as I mentioned earlier due to corruption, discrimination and insecurity they could not apply those kind of policies. Ministry of Education (MoE) and Ministry of Women Affairs (MWF) initiated some programs to increase the women accessibility to education and higher education in many of provinces that they could not apply those policies. (Interview #3: 27.11.2021)

Chapter 5

Discussion and Conclusion

This chapter analyzes the findings and information based on the study 'Results' presented in chapter four. A comparative picture of collected data in previous chapter with other studies and literatures will be discussed here. This research ascertained view of women, their current situation and higher education opportunities in Afghanistan. Moreover, it highlight the main challenges regarding girls' accessibility to higher education. At the end of this chapter, a few recommendation for government, community and educational leaders are suggested so the barriers for higher education can be addressed effectively considering the current situation and position of women in the country.

5.1 Discussion

According to World Bank (2018), Afghanistan has made a significant contribution in access to primary education however "progression to higher levels of education have been limited, both in terms of available spots and in terms of the diversity of programs" (p. 55). The instability in politics of Afghanistan made girls' access to higher education as a complex issue. Roof (2014) states, Afghanistan is one of the three countries worldwide that has the lowest rate of higher education enrollment, which is 5%. The two suspected reason for this problem is "the first is the impact of war and instability and the second is the low level of educational attainment among females (Aturupane, 2013, cited in Roof, 2014, p. 65). Women's rights, women and leadership, women and governance, women and power in Afghanistan context has always been highlighted. Different stake holders comes together to help women in developmental sectors. Although, less women are succeeded and less women are benefited from those projects and programs. The root cause of this issue would be girls' educational backgrounds. The literature findings indicates that there are less women who are

highly educated, less women who completed their bachelors and master's degree. Similarly a very small number of Afghan female have their Ph.D. degrees and working in academia. As UNWOMEN (2013) mentions that education for Afghan women has not been an easy option (cited in, Mashwani, 2017).

The findings of this research shows that at some point, for the sake of women's right advocacy and women empowerment the government and international communities that appoints women in highest positions of the government. But the women who are not skilled enough or not equipped with right education and knowledge, we cannot expect efficiency from them at individual and state level. In order to empower women, it is necessary to educate and empower them. From Afghan women points of view, access to higher education enables them to improve their quality of life and contribute in socioeconomic development. In alignment to this findings, the research by Mashriqi (2016) found that "many Afghan women enrolled in higher education believe that the benefits of higher education include advancing the country, enhancing knowledge, obtaining better job opportunities, working toward a peaceful and safe society, and exercising the right to make decisions" (p. 6). The author also adds that the women who are enrolled in universities believes that they would have many opportunities to improve and reconstruct Afghanistan.

Results from the study indicates that family background and support is an essential factors to get access to higher education. Bagguley and Hussain (2007) cited in Mashriqi (2016) reported that "South Asian women are more likely to obtain education when they receive family support" (p.7). Most of the participants views their family support as one of the main reasons behind their success to pursue their higher studies. One of the participants added that her mother and aunts are well-educated and they encouraged her to continue her higher education abroad. Manzo (2002) cited in (Mashriqi, 2016) mentions that Afghan families

want their daughters to be well-educated to have good job opportunities and better life style. Similarly, most of the participants were agreed that ethnicity, religious belief, financial and cultural backgrounds of families are very important in girls' access to higher education. For instance, families who live in big cities of Afghanistan or belong to Hazara ethnicity are more willing to send their daughter in universities. The study by Mashriqi (2016) demonstrates that the families who are educated they value education and they are not following the 'cultural traditions'. Also, the families who are financially stable they would send their children to pursue their education. Mashriqi (2016) adds that without family financial support the girls cannot afford the cost of higher education. In addition, World Bank (2018) reports "socioeconomic inequalities are revealed more clearly when enrollment data is used at different levels by the income quintile of the students' household. Children and youth from the highest income quintile constitute the largest share of students at all levels of formal education" (p. 31). Another reason behind girls' access to higher education is availability of resources and higher educational facilities. The constitution of Afghanistan (2004) allows and encourages both girls and boys to pursue their education and higher education. Most of the participants who are enrolled in universities are either received fully funded scholarships abroad or free higher education opportunity in Afghanistan's higher educational institutions.

The findings of this study addresses the main challenges that constraint women in access to higher education. Most of the participants sees lack of family support as a major barrier for girls' higher education in Afghanistan. As the World Bank (2018) study describes that girls in upper secondary levels stays out because their families do not allow them. The educational background of families is an influencing force in sending their daughters to school and universities. According to findings of World Bank (2018), the numbers of girls are significantly low at school than boys and the attendance rate of girls who have illiterate parents is 20 percent. It adds that "the gender gap begins to show in early grades and it

widens as students move up to higher grades” (p. 9). The research participants also emphasized on traditional and cultural beliefs of uneducated parents, leads them into child marriage and forced marriage of their daughters. As Burrige et al., (2016) mentions that “not surprisingly, as our interviews were conducted with women already enrolled in higher education, most respondents indicated a high level of family support for their higher education” (p.132). The research participants mentioned that the family poor financial background is another reason to not send their girls to universities or be biased towards girls. As World Bank (2018) reported that “poverty plays a significant role in parents' decisions to send their kids to school” (p 54). The second main barrier is lack of support from community and society. A research conducted by Cooray and Potrafke (2011) to investigate the cause of gender inequality in education. The result of their study indicates that “it is not a political institution that influences female education; it is neither autocratic regimes nor democracies that discriminate against girls in rejecting educational opportunities but it is culture and religion that cause gender inequality in education” (Mashwani, 2017, p. 44). Moreover, World Bank (2018) reports that girls are excluded systematically from education “either because they have little access or because there is family or societal pressure to keep these groups out” (p.28). Also, Afghanistan is patriarchal society and they are not allowing their girls to go to school especially in secondary and post-secondary levels (Roof, 2015). The traditional mindset of people prevents women to continue their higher education. Besides, religion is another reason for gender inequality and Muslim societies “have less parity and less women in higher education” (McDaniel, 2014 cited in. Roof, 2015). In alignment of study by Roof (2015), Mashwani (2017) says that “tradition is another cause that hampers female education. The majority of Afghan population consists of Pashtoon who traditionally do not give much importance to female education” (p. 44). The last problem with girls’ access to higher education is lack of resources and facilities of higher education. Most

participants emphasized that the government, national and international communities focus more on primary education than tertiary education. Many girls in Afghanistan are able to read and write and this cannot help them to be employed, financially independent and help them in their personal growth. Based on Afghanistan Constitution (2004), the government educational policy do not discriminate on the basis of gender. However, the implementation of these policies are not essential in girls' accessibility to higher education. In addition, the data from research findings shows that the people in provinces are not secure, more dependent on agriculture and living below poverty line. These are the reasons to keep away the girls from higher education. The participants also mentioned that the central government and stakeholders are concentrating on investing in capital and big cities like Herat, Mazar, Nangarher and Badakhshan. Also discussed that the corruption and discrimination by government officials prevents in facilitating higher educational institutions in remote regions which is another reason that girls became the victim of not having access to higher education. So, the poor regions and remote provinces are deprived of higher educational institutions and facilities. According to World Bank (2018) report "three provinces in Afghanistan have no higher education establishments, and therefore received no funding" (p 47). The parents and communities on those regions might be willing to send their female members in colleges and universities but they do not have higher education opportunities in those areas.

In sum, the above results indicate that families especially the parents are the main influencing individuals that affect either negatively or positively in girls' accessibility to higher education. The families who support their female members of their family in their higher education, then there is not a single force that hold them back from their access to higher education. In most of the cases, the girls who receive support from their parents and families they are able to continue their higher education. Besides, support from community and educational sectors are also effective in girl's access to higher studies.

5.2 Conclusion

This study examined female students' perception, experiences and attitudes regarding opportunities and challenges of higher education in Afghanistan. As per findings of data analysis, it was determined that girls' access to higher education is not prioritized by government and other national or international organizations. There are less female students during *Kankor* examination each year so very few female students from province are participating in this national examinations. Moreover, one fourth of students in universities are women in capital and big cities. Female students are significantly low in classrooms in different universities of Afghanistan. Though women are deprived of so many rights and opportunities as mentioned above but the government still allocating more budgets on primary education than tertiary education. Another issue which was highlighted in literature review and findings is parents support in children's education. As evident that parents are less supportive for their daughters' higher education because of their gender-biased attitude, poverty, insecurity and other issues. Lastly, there are less girls from provinces and remote regions who are enrolled in higher educational institutions. Girls in these regions do not have access to schools and universities. They are victims of early marriage, insecurity, lack of educational facilities and other problems. As the central government and national and international NGOs are only emphasizing on students in big cities and capital. Keeping in mind these challenges regarding girls' higher education, it is never too late to work on this issue and improve the quality of women's life by providing higher education opportunities.

5.3 Recommendations

This study indicates that women inclusion in higher educational institutions is a serious issue and to address this issue the following points are recommended.

- The importance of higher education in women's life should be identified and necessary measures should be taken to have more women in higher educational institutions.
- The government and educationists needs to focus on awareness programs regarding girl's access to higher education through media, *Shura* committees at school, *Mullahs*/preachers and other influential individuals and groups in their communities.
- The government should pay attention equally in core and periphery regions, especially in conservative communities of remote regions and invest on girl's higher education
- Women's higher education as an important factor for developmental levels so the research institutions should concentrate on conducting research on role of higher education and women empowerment. In addition, the government and policy makers should consider the importance of higher education for girls as important as primary education in the country. The government should develop strategies that support girls at school level. The government should have regular observations of student's progress at high school level, so the girls should be able to compete in national examination.
- The government should strictly prevent early childhood marriage in provinces and remote regions and penalize those who violate the child marriage policies. So the girls should be able to pursue their education in higher levels.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Consent Letter

Dear Miss _____

I am a student of BRAC Institute of Educational Development, BRAC University and pursuing my Masters in Education Leadership and School Improvement. This interview as part of an academic requirement from the university is being conducted to collect data of the study titled '*Higher Education Opportunities and Challenges in Afghanistan: Female Student's perspectives*'. The purpose of this research project is to explore female students' perception regarding higher education accessibility and the opportunities and challenges of higher education for women in Afghanistan context.

If you provide your consent to this interview, you will be asked to share your experience, opinions, knowledge, practices and attitudes regarding Afghan women accessibility to higher education. The researcher will schedule a time per your convenient for an online interview, requiring 60 min of your time. The full-interview will be recorded and you will have the right to go through transcription as soon as the audio file is transferred.

There is no risk to you in participating in this research. However, you have all right to withdraw the interview at any time. All information collected from you will remain strictly confidential. The participant should understand that the direct quote of yours will be used but your name will remain anonymous.

I would be glad to answer your questions regarding this study. You are welcome to contact me anytime over my phone +8801992026470 and my email Fahima.ahmadii@yahoo.com.

Sincerely

Fahima Ahmadi

I understand the purpose of the research and the process of the interview. I have read the above and agree to participate in the research.

Signature/Date: _____

Appendix B

Focused Group Discussion Tool

Section A: Demographic Information

Interview Date:

Interview Time: From ____ to ____

Participant's name: _____

Location/Province: _____

University: _____

Age: 18-25 years 26-34 years 35+

Marital Status: _____

Education Level: _____

Section B: Introductory Questions:

How are you doing?

How is your family?

Section C: Students knowledge and understanding regarding girls' access to higher education

1. As you are an Afghan student, can you please explain about accessibility of higher education in Afghanistan context?

Probes: Describe your experience about National/Kankor examination

Probes: What type of university you have pursued your higher education? And why you choose this university for your studies?

Probes: Is there any difference between governmental and non-governmental universities? Which one is better for girls? Inclusiveness and environment

2. What do you understand by gender equality in higher education? Repeated /equity

Probes: As gender equality in higher education means to you this, who do you think have more opportunities to continue their higher education, girls or boys? Percentage...

Probes: Do you think both gender are equally interested to pursue their higher education?

Probes: Do you notice any difference in the number of female and male students in the classrooms? Example

3. Could you please tell me the importance of higher education in female student's life?

Probes: do you think higher education have changed your life? If yes, Please share you experience how higher education changed your life? First female from family in joining university

Section D: The barriers and challenges female students encountered in pursuing higher education

1. According to you what are the challenges that a female student face in pursuing higher education?

Probes: Please describe any barrier related to social, cultural, political, economic and religion that prevent women to continue their education in college and universities.

2. Do you think the number of female that pass Kankor examination is less than boys? If yes, what are the reason behind?

Probes: Describe the standard of national examination and quality of education at schools?

Section E: Student's perceptions on policies and practices of Ministry of Higher Education and other educational sectors

1. Do you think government of Afghanistan support females in their higher education? (Before Taliban Government).

Probes: What specific examples you can give regarding government support?

Probes: Have you received any support from Ministry of Higher Education for your studies? Mental support/Toilets

2. What is the roles of national and international NGOs regarding girls' accessibility to higher education?

Probes: Do you think there are many/less NGOs that support girls in their higher education?

Probes: What type of services they provide to female students?

Probes: Who are eligible to receive their support?

3. What do you think about the role of community in girls' access to higher education?

Probes: Is there any community based organizations that encourage girls' higher education?

Probes: According to you, how society perceive girls who are in colleges and universities?

Probes: Do you think community can affect girls' accessibility to higher education?

4. What is your opinion regarding parents support in girls' accessibility to higher education?

Probes: Can you specify if the background of parents is important in girls' education?

Probes: Who else can be influential in girls' accessibility to higher education?

Probes: Who supported you the most in your higher education?

Appendix C

Interview Tool for High School Graduate students (currently not have access to higher education)

Section A: Demographic Information

Interview Date:

Interview Time: From ____ to ____

Participant's name: _____

Location/Province: _____

University: _____

Age: 18-25 years 26-34 years 35+

Marital Status: _____

Education Level: _____

Section B: Introductory Questions:

How are you doing?

How is your family?

Section C: Students knowledge and understanding regarding girls' access to higher education

4. As you are an Afghan student, can you please explain about accessibility of higher education in Afghanistan context?

Probes: Describe your experience about National/Kankor examination

Probes: Please share your opinions about students' access to higher education in provinces and cities.

5. What do you understand by gender equality in education

Probes: As gender equality in education means to you this, who do you think have more opportunities to continue their higher education, girls or boys?

Probes: Do you think both gender are equally interested to pursue their higher education?

Probes: Do you notice any difference in the number of female and male students in the classrooms?

6. Could you please tell me the importance of higher education in female student's life?

Probes: Please share you experience how could higher education change girl's life?

Section D: Student's perceptions on policies and practices of Ministry of Higher Education and other educational sectors

5. Do you think government of Afghanistan support females in their higher education? (Before Taliban Government).

Probes: What specific examples you can give?

Probes: Have you received any support from Ministry of Higher Education for your studies?

6. What is the roles of national and international NGOs regarding girls' accessibility to higher education?

Probes: Do you think there are many/less NGOs that support girls in their higher education?

Probes: What type of services they provide to female students?

Probes: Who are eligible to receive their support?

7. What do you think about the role of community in girls' access to higher education?

Probes: Is there any community based organizations that encourage girls' higher education?

Probes: According to you, how society perceive girls who are in colleges and universities?

Probes: Do you think community can affect girls' accessibility to higher education? And please share your own experience.

8. What is your opinion regarding parents support in girls' accessibility to higher education?

Probes: Can you specify if the background of parents is important in girls' education?

Probes: Who else can be influential in girls' accessibility to higher education?

Probes: Who supported you the most in your education? Is there anyone who were against your access to higher education? (In case if you feel uncomfortable, you may not mention their name).

Section E: The barriers and challenges female students encountered in pursuing higher education

3. According to you what are the challenges that a female student face in pursuing higher education? Please share your experience

Probes: Please describe any barrier related to social, cultural, political, economic and religion that prevent women to continue their education in college and universities.

4. Do you think the number of female that pass Kankor examination is less than boys? If yes, what are the reason behind?

Probes: Describe the standard of national examination and quality of education at schools?

Appendix D

Interview Tool (Female activists)

Section A: Demographic Information

Interview Date:

Interview Time: From ____ to ____

Participant's name: _____

Location/Province: _____

University: _____

Age: 18-25 years 26-34 years 35+

Marital Status: _____

Education Level: _____

Section B: Introductory Questions:

How are you doing?

How is your family?

Section C: Students knowledge and understanding regarding girls' access to higher education

7. As you are an Afghan activist, can you please explain about accessibility of higher education in Afghanistan context?

Probes: Please share your opinions about students' access to higher education in provinces and cities.

Probes: Is there any difference between governmental and non-governmental universities?

8. What do you understand by gender equality in higher education

Probes: As gender equality in higher education means to you this, who do you think have more opportunities to continue their higher education, girls or boys?

Probes: Do you think both gender are equally interested to pursue their higher education?

Probes: Do you notice any difference in the number of female and male students in the classrooms?

9. Could you please tell me the importance of higher education in female student's life?

Probes: Please share your experience how higher education changed your life?

Section D: Student's perceptions on policies and practices of Ministry of Higher Education and other educational sectors

9. Do you think government of Afghanistan support females in their higher education? (Before Taliban Government).

Probes: What specific examples you can give?

10. What is the roles of national and international NGOs regarding girls' accessibility to higher education?

Probes: Do you think there are many/less NGOs that support girls in their higher education?

Probes: What type of services they provide to female students?

Probes: Who are eligible to receive their support?

11. Is there any policy regarding females accessibility to higher education?

Probes: If yes, what do you think if they have been successful in implementing these policies?

Probes: If no, do you think it is important to have special policies and quota systems that support females in their higher education?

12. What do you think about the role of community in girls' access to higher education?

Probes: Is there any community based organizations that encourage girls' higher education?

Probes: According to you, how society perceive girls who are in colleges and universities?

Probes: Do you think community can affect girls' accessibility to higher education?

13. What is your opinion regarding parents support in girls' accessibility to higher education?

Probes: Can you specify if the background of parents is important in girls' education?

Probes: Who else can be influential in girls' accessibility to higher education?

Section E: The barriers and challenges female students encountered in pursuing higher education

5. According to you what are the challenges that a female student face in pursuing higher education?

Probes: Please describe any barrier related to social, cultural, political, economic and religion that prevent women to continue their education in college and universities.

6. Do you think the number of female that pass Kankor examination is less than boys? If yes, what are the reason behind?

Probes: Describe the standard of national examination and quality of education at schools?

Appendix E

Sample of Interview Transcript

Participant 3:

Interview Date: 27 November, 2021

Interview Time: From 10:30 p.m. to 11:30 p.m.

Participant's name: Zahra

University: UK University

Age: 35+ years

Marital Status: Married

Education Level: Master

1. As an Afghan activist, can you please explain about accessibility of higher education in Afghanistan context?

Probes: Please share your opinions about students' access to higher education in provinces and cities.

Probes: What do you think about the role of community in girls' access to higher education?

Probes: According to you what are the challenges that a female student face in pursuing higher education?

Probes: Please describe any barrier related to social, cultural, political, economic and religion that prevent women to continue their education in college and universities.

Ans: I think it is different in cities and provinces that women are living there. In big cities like Kabul, Mazar, Herat and other major cities women more or less have access to higher education and go to governmental and private universities. But there is a cultural problem like families invest on their son's future more than their daughters because in Afghan culture they think girls belong to the other family (in-laws). Another problem is the economy, because of their financial problem the families don't spend money in private universities. The families who have 4-5 children, they invest on their son's education because they believe that male member of the family belong to their own family and the female member belong to the other family. The other issue is the security, the families in rural areas and even in big cities and provinces like Kabul, Mazar and Herat concerns about security and they are not much interested to send their daughters to school and universities. I think the girls have access to higher education and it depends on their cultural belief, income and the security. Not all girls have equally access to education.

I can give some examples from Herat province, in some part of this province like Shendand the people do not like their girls to go to universities. There is some schools but there is no university in this region. So the families do not allow their daughters to go to university in the city of Herat like their sons do. It is because of cultural and security issues. As for Afghan culture it is not easy to send their daughters far away from their homes to study. I saw many families send their sons to study in private and governmental universities. But in some districts like Shendand and Adarskan which are not far away like 50 to 100 km far from the center of Herat, they don't want to send their daughters to educational institutions.

Two years ago a young girl come to the provincial council and complained that the elders of their village did not want their girls even go to school. They told my father

to not send me to go to school but my father didn't accept it. Several weeks later, some young boys from that village raped this young girl just because they did not obey from their dominant culture of that community. She said she couldn't live in that society and decided to leave the village and came to the city of Herat. They rent a house I think in east part of Herat and lived there. She was really upset and said she really worry about the future of her sisters. After this incident happened to me, my family is not interested to send me and my sisters to school and university. Because they are afraid this incident happen again to me or my young sisters. So, I think this kind of problems existed all the time but many don't want to raise this type of issues. Because it's cultural problem (Its taboo in Afghanistan culture), According to Afghan culture they blame more the victim than the person who did the crime. These are the problems that Afghan women face specially in districts.

It is more acceptable for the families to send their daughters and sisters to universities outside of the country than sending them to another province for their higher education. Due to insecure situation in provinces like sending their female members from Herat to Kandahar for higher education which is not acceptable for the families. The relatives would question the girl family by asking "how you can send your daughter to Kandahar". But everybody understand the security situation of countries like Bangladesh, United States, UK and other countries outside of Afghanistan. I think families are interested to send their daughters outside of Afghanistan than universities within Afghanistan because of some traditional issues, security issues. Then when they send their daughters from Herat to Kabul, Mazar or Kandahar they had send a lot of money for them because no one support them. But this type of opportunities outside of Afghanistan always supported by some donors and it is not

kind of burden on the shoulder of the family of the girls. So it is more acceptable than paying money for girl's education.

2. Could you please tell me the importance of higher education in female student's life?

Probes: Please share you experience how higher education changed your life?

Ans: You know it is really hard to keep girls who studied abroad or can speak like English or any other foreign Language. It is really hard to keep them at home and it is really hard to keep them dependent. So I think it is really important and essential for girls to have access to education. I think it would be a great opportunity for the girls who can go to abroad for education and come back with knowledge and skills. So it is really hard for families, society, culture and even the dictator state cannot keep these girls at home, dependent, force to marriage or discriminate towards these educated women. The main reason that Afghan women and Afghan girls face domestic violence and face routine or family challenges is because women do not have the capacity to solve the problem and do not have access to education. I believe women will be empowered through education, they will become independent and can make decision for themselves.

3. What is your opinion regarding parents support in girls' accessibility to higher education?

Probes: Can you specify if the background of parents is important in girls' education?

Probes: Who else can be influential in girls' accessibility to higher education?

Ans: I think in Afghanistan, families are more interrelated and it is easy to limit and deprive girls from access to education in a male dominate country. I think the girls need more support from their parents and without their support they cannot have access to education. For example, when I was nine years old in Iran and the principal of school said to my parents that your daughter is not allowed to come to school.

Because your identity card belong to Karanj city and not valid in Shahriyar city so she cannot join in this school. I was upset and it was really hard for my family to move the other part of the city, find job and house. Many families when they heard this news, they told to their daughters that it is enough for you, you studied until grade three and you can read and write. So, many girls stayed at home and started making carpets because of the poverty and these issues. However, my mother insist and fought with my father and after many days my mother convinced him to send me to school. My father bought a motorcycle, he gave me a ride early mornings to school and every afternoon he came afternoon to take me back home. So, without my parent support I was not even able to continue my primary and high school and I witnessed many of my friends couldn't go to school and give up on going school. I think the same situation exist in Afghanistan, if the parents do not support their children and specially their daughters they can't continue their education. Many school in insecure part of Afghanistan are closed and the girls need their parent's financially and psychologically support in their academics. I know fifty percent of girl's schools are closed due to direct and indirect threat of Terrorist groups. So if parents support their daughters and send them to other cities for continuation of their higher studies, I think they can continue their education. Without parent's support it is totally impossible for girls to continue their education due to security, cultural and other issues in a conservative country like Afghanistan.

4. Do you think government of Afghanistan support females in their higher education? (Before Taliban Government).

Probes: What specific examples you can give?

Ans: Yeah I think the government had essential role for making better situation for girls. Unfortunately, the former government because of corruption and insecurity did

not pay attention to anybody specially girls' education. I was witnessed in many part of Herat as Herat has 19 district and just in four district the girls' school were open. Schools in other districts were closed due to the Terrorist groups threat and lack of instructors and professional teachers. Herat city had well-educated female teachers but the government did not pay enough for the teachers to go to that villages and districts for educating others. Those female teachers said that we cannot go to those districts just for 10,000 Afghani (around \$ 120 USD). They were claiming that the government should pay for our security, for our *Mahram* (male member of their family accompanying them) and for our transportation. Most of the time, the government of Afghanistan was not accepting to cover these type of expenses. Most of the time, when I was going for monitoring the schools and educational institutions in Herat, I found the students suffers from lack of well-educated teachers and it was the problem of the government and Directorate of Education. Because the Directorate of Education in Herat did not have enough authority and resources to hire professional teachers. The other problem was we had a lot of ghost schools and ghost teachers (imaginary schools and teachers), especially in insecure districts because no one was going there and monitor the situation. The Directorate of Education in Herat reported that we have more than 300 schools are open in those part of Herat but in reality there was no school open there because of the security issues and the corruption. They were saying we are open and teaching students but the reality was different. Another problem was the discrimination based on provinces. The central government of Afghanistan was clearly discriminating some provinces over the other. Like some schools in Afghanistan were always deprived of schools, teachers and those equipment and facilities while the other students have access in another part of the country. So discrimination against some ethnic group of Afghanistan is another big

challenge, I witnessed it especially in Herat and also Kabul had the same situation and Mazar face the same situation. Many poor families send their children from Bamiyan, Daikundi and Ghazni to Kabul to study. Because they do not have enough school, enough teachers to study in those deprived provinces. But most of the time, as I witnessed they prefer their sons to send in cities not their daughter because of cultural and security issues. So discrimination of the central government of Afghanistan was another serious issue in not accessing education for females in some part of Afghanistan.

5. Is there any policy regarding females accessibility to higher education?

Probes: If yes, what do you think if they have been successful in implementing these policies?

Probes: If no, do you think it is important to have special policies and quota systems that support females in their higher education?

Ans: Actually Afghanistan accepted Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) and other international convention and according to that they have to facilitate the accessibility of education for women. But in reality, as I mentioned earlier due to corruption, discrimination (based on gender and ethnic) and insecurity they could not apply those kind of policies. Ministry of Education (MoE) and Ministry of Women Affairs (MWF) initiated some programs to increase the women accessibility to education and higher education in many of provinces that they could not apply those policies.

6. What is the roles of national and international NGOs regarding girls' accessibility to higher education?

Probes: Do you think there are many/less NGOs that support girls in their higher education?

Probes: What type of services they provide to female students?

Probes: Who are eligible to receive their support?

Ans: I think national institutions are not trying to facilitate girls' higher education. You know, two years ago during administration of Ashraf Ghani (The former president), they accepted and created a quota system for different provinces. It could be made based on male and female eligibility to enter to higher education institutions. Actually, they wanted these policies to deprive and limit them (some students) to have access to higher education in provinces and the capital and I think you know about that! They government of Afghanistan signed a kind of decree for every province to have specific quota policy to enter to university. Because of corruption, people of Afghanistan not even me cannot trust the policies and the government strategies. We are not sure that the government of Afghanistan has any idea to increase girls and young generations' accessibility to higher education. But I think international community have really important role on this regard like providing scholarship, supporting female technically and financially in some universities inside Afghanistan. I was witnessed in Herat that there was an international NGO belong to Denmark, supported girls' education by providing them a dormitory. Many girls staying in that dormitory could continue their education in various schools and Herat University. Their families also trusted on security and safety of that dormitory. Like this there were international organizations who were facilitating university opportunities and dormitories in some other part of Afghanistan to support girls' education in Afghanistan. Also, providing scholarship abroad Afghanistan and within Afghanistan, although many people think Promote was a fake project but I think many young girl could use that to get scholarship to enter higher education institutions and many girls had access to higher education through that programs and projects. I think these

programs of international organization had many positive impact on girls' accessibility to higher education.

Closing: Thank you very much for participating in this online interview.