

Opportunities for Women's Education in Afghanistan: A Socio-cultural Perspective

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ABSTRACT Women in Afghanistan have always faced socio-cultural barriers to their access to education. Over the last two decades, notable efforts have been made to change the point of view and attitudes of people about women's rights in general and the right to education in particular. The present study explores whether the attitude and perspective of parents and society have changed toward women's education. Further, the study examines other socio-cultural factors supporting girls' education in Afghanistan. The data for the study was collected from the Kandahar, Kapisa and Bamyan provinces of Afghanistan using a structured questionnaire. The sample of this study includes 200 respondents, selected through non-probability purposive sampling. The data were presented in a percentage table to explore the result. Findings suggest that although socio-cultural, political and economic barriers persist, positive socio-cultural changes as emerging opportunities cannot be overlooked. Today girls' education receives further parental, social and religious support. In addition, the media and civil society also play a prominent role in promoting girls' access to education.

INTRODUCTION

During the past two decades (2001 to 2021), significant efforts have been made to expand educational opportunities for girls and narrow the educational gender gap in Afghanistan. As a result, girls' enrolment rate has considerably increased. The improvement is the outcome of efforts and programs implemented by the government, donor countries, media, civil society and NGOs. The joint efforts have significantly increased the awareness of Afghan society about the importance of women's education and its role in the development of Afghanistan. Overall, significant changes have occurred in people's attitudes towards women, their rights, and their activities. Today, women's education receives further socio-cultural support compared to the past. It is noteworthy that there are still several socio-cultural barriers to women's access to education. However, at the same time, positive socio-cultural changes as emerging opportunities cannot be overlooked. In the recent history of Afghanistan, in the 1980s, during the rule of the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA), the government planned to expand modern education for girls. However, the program faced high social resistance. But in the past two decades,

from 2001 to 2021, while the government of Afghanistan, with the direct support of the international community, implemented its educational programs for women and girls, one has not seen social resistance against women's education. Following the Taliban takeover in August 2021, the de-facto government of the Taliban banned secondary education for girls. The decision faced widespread criticism and anger from different segments of society. When the girl students cried in front of their school gate, asking to open secondary schools, people from across the country supported them and demanded the same. There are increasing demands for opening girls' secondary schools. It indicates a socio-cultural shift from resistance against girls' schooling to social support for girls' schooling. The present study examines the opportunities, particularly the socio-cultural opportunities supporting girls' education in Afghanistan.

Objectives of the Study

This study aims to investigate opportunities for women's education in Afghanistan from a sociological outlook, focusing mainly on socio-cultural factors supporting women's education, including the attitudes of parents and society, religion, media and civil society.

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Literature Review

The rights and social status women enjoyed in Afghanistan from 2001 to 2021 were incomparably better than during the 1990s (Jureňczyk 2019). Women were progressively represented in public service and politics. Nearly twenty-one percent of all civil servants were women, compared with a negligible number in 2001. About sixteen percent of civil servants in senior positions (grades one and two) were women. Afghanistan women had notable representation in politics. For instance, twenty-seven percent of parliamentary seats were occupied by women, which was higher than the average for low-income countries (Haque 2020). The government of Afghanistan (Islamic Republic of Afghanistan) made numerous legislative and institutional developments to empower women. These efforts included the foundation of the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC), the Ministry of Women's Affairs and Departments of Women's Affairs and Gender, and Human Rights Units in different ministries. Afghanistan had also signed several international human rights conventions, including the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women in 2003. To combat violence against women, the government also passed the Law on Elimination of Violence Against Women (EVAW Law) (Qazi Zada 2020). Notably, Afghanistan's constitution guaranteed a series of significant rights for women, such as equality before the law, the right to education, and the right to work (Reddy 2014). According to Article 43 of the constitution, "Education is the right of all citizens of Afghanistan, which shall be offered free of charge up to the bachelor degree in the state educational institutes by the state. The government must design, implement effective programs to expand balanced education throughout Afghanistan, and provide compulsory education till lower secondary level". Article 44 emphasises implementing effective programs to provide a balanced education for women and eliminate illiteracy (The Constitution of Afghanistan 2004). Education law of Afghanistan in Article 2 declares one of the law's aims as providing an equal right to education for Afghanistan citizens through improving and developing a public, balanced, and justly edu-

cational system. Also, Article 3 of the law emphasises that citizens of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan have an equal right to education without discrimination (The Education Law of Afghanistan 2008). According to the Law on the Elimination of Violence against Women (EVAW), the prohibition of women from the right to education is considered violence against women. If someone prohibits a woman from her right to education, work, and health services, they will be subjected to short-term imprisonment (Law on Elimination of Violence against Women 2009).

After 2001, developing Afghanistan's educational system became the main objective of many international aid organisations, including UNICEF and the World Bank. Many NGOs have worked closely with the government of Afghanistan to increase educational opportunities for Afghan children, particularly girls. These organisations have devoted significant attention and substantial financial assistance to expanding educational opportunities for girls (Kissane 2012). The cooperation and efforts have significantly impacted raising enrolment, especially for girls. The number of students in government public education increased from 2.3 million, including 700,000 girls, in 2002 (Samady 2013) to 9.1 million, including 3.5 million girls (39%) in 2019. The total enrolment at the primary level reached 5.7 million students, of whom 2.3 (40%) were girls. In the lower secondary and upper secondary levels, girls constituted thirty-eight and thirty-six percent, respectively (National Statistic and Information Authority 2019). Also, in 2018 the Ministry of Education recorded 459,586 attending students in private education centres (till 14th class), of whom twenty-nine percent were girls (Ministry of Education of Afghanistan 2018). In higher education, the enrolment of girls increased from 4, 200 (13%) in 2002 (Samady 2013) to 54, 861 (28%) in 2019 in government universities and higher education institutions (National Statistic and Information Authority 2019).

Despite all the impressive progress regarding women's education from 2001-2021, millions of girls and boys were still out of school. Reuters reported in 2018 that closely half of the Afghanistan school-age children were out of school. According to the report, around 3.7 million children aged 7 to 17, or forty-four percent, were out of school. Of the number, 2.7 million (72%) were

girls. In some provinces, up to eighty-five percent of girls could not attend school (Reuters 2018). According to another report by the Asia Foundation (2015), as cited in Pherali and Sahar (2018), 54.5 percent of Afghans had no formal or home-based education, with a substantial gender disparity of 37.8 of males without formal education and 69.3 of females. Insecurity, corruption, shortage of female teachers, poverty, patriarchy, socio-cultural norms, and child marriage are the main challenges that impede women's right to education (Jackson 2011; Shayan 2015; Barr 2017).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The descriptive method was adopted as the most suitable method for the present study to investigate and describe the opportunities for women's education in Afghanistan. The present study examines women's education opportunities according to the understanding and experience of Afghanistan women. Hence, the study participants are female students, teachers, homemakers, and employees of educational departments. Respondents are from different age groups, educational qualifications, and economic backgrounds. The three provinces, namely, Bamyan, Kandahar, and Kapisa of Afghanistan, have been selected as the field of study. The three provinces represent three different geographical locations and more or less different socio-cultural settings. Further, the provinces share similar socio-cultural values and norms with the neighbouring provinces in Afghanistan. Therefore, the result can be generalised to larger parts of the country.

Because the population units list or sample frame was unavailable, non-probability purposive sampling was used to select the respondents. The respondents have been selected purposively according to the judgement of the researchers. The purpose was to choose interested participants and respondents with at least a primary understanding of women's education, mainly when data were collected from ordinary females. The sample comprises 200 respondents selected from Kandahar, Kapisa and Bamyan provinces. Table 1 presents the details of the study sample.

Table 1: Sample details

<i>Area</i>	<i>Total number of respondents</i>
Kandahar	N=75
Bamyan	N=75
Kapisa	N=50
Total	N=200

Source: Survey Data

Data Collection and Analysis

The data was collected from respondents through a structured questionnaire. The four-point Likert scale questions with possible responses of 'strongly agree', 'agree', 'disagree' and 'strongly disagree' have been used to gauge respondents' experience and perception of opportunities for women's education in Afghanistan. The data was collected between July 2019 and September 2020. The data were presented in a percentage table to explore the result.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Afghanistan has witnessed significant and remarkable changes in its socio-cultural aspects in the last two decades. One noteworthy evolution was women's participation in politics, economics, and social activities. Women have played a constructive and meaningful role in Afghanistan over the past years. The efforts made in the past two decades by the government and international community and the role played by women and their part in the country's development process have changed peoples' opinions and mindsets on women's rights. One area in which women and girls had significant achievements was education. Despite severe socio-cultural barriers to women's education, there are emerging opportunities to extend women's chances of getting an education. The present study examines socio-cultural opportunities supporting women's education in Afghanistan. Table 2 presents the results.

According to the result, ninety-two percent of the respondents agree that the attitudes of parents are changing toward women's education, while only eight percent disagree. One cannot ignore parents' negative perspectives and attitudes toward girls' schooling in Afghanistan, where some families are unwilling to let their

Table 2: Opportunities for women's education in Afghanistan

<i>Opportunities for women's education in Afghanistan</i>	<i>S</i>	<i>A%</i>	<i>D%</i>	<i>SD%</i>	<i>Total %</i>
Changing attitudes of parents toward women's education	24.0	68.0	5.5	2.5	100
Changing attitudes of people toward women's education	23.5	61.0	12.5	3.0	100
Religious support	21.0	55.5	19.5	4.0	100
Support of religious leaders	17.0	31.5	39.5	12.0	100
Good security in your area	23.5	26.0	36.0	14.5	100
Media support	17.0	51.0	24.0	8.0	100
Awareness-raising programs by civil society and NGOs	16.5	58.0	21.0	4.5	100

Source: Survey Data

daughters get an education. However, there are good signs of changing parents' attitudes and behaviours towards women's education. The last twenty years and the efforts made to expand women's education seem to have changed the negative view of many families about women's education. Although there are still many opposing views on women's education among families and parents, it is hopeful that these negative views are changing for the better. According to the respondents' experience, there were parents and families in their neighbouring areas who opposed education for their daughters. However, seeing other girls go to school, their view on their daughters' education changed, and they finally allowed their daughters to attend school. The researchers have discussed with university students in the three provinces, and they all mentioned that their families support them in getting higher education. They said that their parents are encouraging them to get higher education and become an important and useful person in the future. They also stated that they would not be able to continue until the university level without family support. In the meantime, almost all did agree that mothers support the most. One of the respondents said that her parents keep telling her to get an education because they do not want their children to be as illiterate as they are.

Results also suggest that 84.5 percent of the research participants agree that people's attitudes are changing toward women's education, while only 15.5 percent disagree with the statement. Afghanistan's society and culture have been exposed to new, modern and democratic values in the last two decades. As a result, significant changes have occurred in society's socio-cultural aspects, especially people's attitudes towards women, their rights, and their activities. It

is emphasised that there are still many cultural and social problems in the way of women's rights that have hindered women's significant progress. Still, at the same time, positive changes as emerging opportunities cannot be ignored. In the past, especially in the 1980s, during the ruling of PDPA, the governments made notable efforts to expand modern education for girls. However, the agendas faced resistance from Afghanistan society. Public opinion was that modern education is a Western phenomenon and contrary to Islamic principles that harm Afghanistan's socio-cultural and tribal values and lead to societal corruption. Therefore, opposing modern education, particularly women's education, was one of the main reasons for resistance. Local leaders, tribal chiefs and Mullahs were the leading opponents of the modernisation agenda, particularly modern education for women. While the PDPA government wanted to implement literacy programs in rural regions, many families fled to Pakistan to escape the forceful implementation of the literacy program for their women (Dupree 1984: 321). However, the country had not observed social resistance in the past two decades, when the Western-backed government of Afghanistan expanded educational opportunities for girls. After the Taliban's takeover in August 2021 and banning secondary education for girls, the decision faced widespread criticism and anger from different segments of society. There are increasing demands for opening girls' schools at secondary and high school levels.

According to Table 2, 76.5 percent agree that religious support is an opportunity for women's education, while 23.5 percent disagree. Concerning women's education in Islam, one of the very significant rights that Islam grants women is education rights. Education and knowledge form

essential parts of Islam, and both are strongly emphasised (Jawad 1998). Gaining knowledge is a right and the responsibility of each male and female Muslim. Muhammad, the prophet of Islam, asserted that “the acquisition of knowledge is the duty of every Muslim man and Muslim woman”. The word “knowledge” in the Quran refers to theoretical and practical knowledge that is important to human beings to meet the objectives of creation. This knowledge might be religious, secular or scientific. According to Islam, there is no discrimination in gaining knowledge between men and women, and both have equal rights to education and knowledge acquisition. No verse in the Quran can be found to directly or indirectly encourage education only for men (Abukari 2014; Islam 2016).

Further, 48.5 percent agree that religious leaders’ support is an opportunity, while 51.5 percent disagree. Despite the fact that Islam encourages education for girls and boys, in Afghanistan, religious leaders have no consensus regarding women’s education. Some clerics support education for women, while at the same time, some do not consider modern education, particularly higher education, as an Islamic right for women. They believe and openly speak out that being able to read religious texts, particularly the Quran, is enough for women. The result also confirms disagreement between Mullahs on women’s education as almost half of the respondents agree that religious leaders’ support is an opportunity, while the remaining half disagree.

Based on the result, fifty-two percent of the respondents indicated that good security in their areas is an opportunity, while forty-eight percent disagreed. To cross-compare respondents’ agreement and disagreement about this statement, the majority of the respondents (86%) from Bamyan agree that security is an opportunity in their area. In contrast, the majority (84%) of the respondents from Kandahar disagree. Also, in Kapisa, almost half of the respondents agree, and half disagree. In the past two decades, from 2001 to 2021, Bamyan was one of the most secure provinces of Afghanistan, where all parts of the province were under the government’s control, and schools were functioning for both boys and girls. However, in Kandahar, except in the centre of the province, the security situation was very concerning in the other parts. In Kapisa,

the security situation in some districts, including Mahmud Raqi, Hesa-e-Awal Kohistan, and Hesa-e-Duwum Kohistan was stable, and girls could attend schools without having security concerns, while, in other districts, conflict and insecurity disrupted girls’ schooling.

From 2001 onward, with the direct support and donation of the international community, Afghanistan has experienced rapid media growth, with a significant number of television channels, radio stations, newspapers and magazines established. Given this, sixty-eight percent of the respondents agree that media support of women’s education is an opportunity, while thirty-two percent do not agree. In the past two decades, the media in Afghanistan has played a significant role in defending and protecting women’s rights and promoting their position in society. The media played a vital role in spreading messages and raising awareness about women’s rights and women’s constructive roles in Afghanistan. By giving Afghanistan women a voice, the media helped women to engage with Afghanistan society and government. One of the primary financial resources of the media in Afghanistan was the international donors’ fund, allocated for the media to enable them to function. Funding was given to the media in the form of awareness-raising projects on human rights, women’s rights, good governance, elections, and peace. Therefore, women’s rights were one of the main topics of media publications across the country. More importantly, women were significantly visible in the Afghan media. Many worked as journalists, producers, and anchors or had a leadership role in television channels, radios and magazines. Afghan women’s participation in media made it possible to have their independent voice, raise their concerns and have their point of view on the issues being discussed in Afghanistan society. The contribution considerably enhanced the position of women and changed the public perception in favour of women’s rights (Hassanzadeh 2018).

On the other hand, the media advocated and pressured the government to extend more educational facilities, especially for girls. Numerous and continued media reports on lack or shortage of school buildings, shortage of teachers, and corruption in the educational system forced the government to some extent, address the chal-

lenges. Therefore, despite the criticism that the media is only looking for project money and not playing a significant role in promoting human rights values, it is justly to point out that the media have played a significant role in empowering women in Afghanistan. Even now, amid increasing political and financial restrictions, they continue to stand and advocate for girls' education, especially for opening girls' schools at the secondary level. In addition to the media, civil society in Afghanistan has played and still is playing a constructive part in promoting women's rights in general and the right to education in particular. The result indicates that 74.5 percent of the respondents agree that awareness-raising programs by civil society and NGOs are an opportunity to raise awareness about women's education.

CONCLUSION

The present paper studied the factors supporting women's education in Afghanistan, focusing mainly on socio-cultural opportunities. Results reveal that despite serious social, political and economic barriers to women's education, there are factors and prospects supporting women's education in the country. Findings suggest that attitudes of parents and society are changing towards girls' education in the sense that presently women's education receives further family and societal support compared to the past. Further, the result indicates that women's education also receives religious support as education forms an essential part of Islam. Islam encourages education and knowledge for men and women, and there is no discrimination in this regard. However, regarding the support of religious leaders from women's education, the study found that 48.5 percent of the research participants agree and 51.5 percent of them disagree. In Afghanistan, religious leaders have no solid consensus regarding women's education. Some clerics support education for women, while at the same time, some do not consider modern education, especially higher education, a fundamental Islamic right of women. Further, the study found that media and civil society also play a constructive role in supporting women's education in Afghanistan through awareness-raising and advocacy programs. Media and civil

society also give women a platform to have their voice and engage with Afghanistan society.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings suggest that girls' education in Afghanistan receives more social and cultural support compared to the past. Significantly, Islam encourages education for girls and boys. Therefore, the de facto authorities of Afghanistan must uphold the right of girls to education at all levels, including secondary and higher education. Further, the media and civil society should work hand in hand to raise awareness and shape the public perception and attitudes in favour of women's education. The present study investigated the opportunities for women's education in Afghanistan with a limited number of variables, setting a quantitative method. Further research is urged to explore more factors supporting women's education by applying different methodological approaches. Future research may also investigate the topic in other parts of the country, particularly in the northern and western provinces.

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