

Afghanistan's Cultural Norms and Girls' Education: Access and Challenges

Hamidullah Bamik

Fulbright Scholar and Graduate Student in Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis
Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis
College of Education, University of Missouri-Columbia, USA
Email: hamidullahbamik@mail.missouri.edu

Abstract: *Female education in a traditional country like Afghanistan has always been a challenge for governments. A large portion of these challenges is not posed by poverty and insecurity, but by the traditional cultural norms in a male-dominated society of Afghanistan. Despite taken substantial measures by the governments to provide education for girls over the last decades, girls' access to schooling still remains trivial and limited. So, there is still a long way to go in improving female education in Afghanistan. This paper aims to examine the cultural norms that impede Afghan girls from going to school. The article is prepared by a desk study using a variety of presently available researches, papers, and data related to female education, women's rights, violence against women and girls, and cultural norms from national and international organizations.*

Key Words: *Cultural Norms, Girls' Education, Gender Stereotypes, Early and Child Marriage, Dominated Patriarchal Codes, Resistance anti Male Instructors, Gender Roles, Cultural Discrimination between Boys and Girls, Violence against Women and Girls*

1. INTRODUCTION:

Girl's education is one of the achievements that have always been reminded by the Afghan government and international funding agencies as a success. Currently, more than a million girls are going to schools all over the country who were not able to go to school at the time of the Taliban's regime. But the goal set for educating all girls and bringing them to schools is far from being met, and the proportion of female students in some parts of Afghanistan is declining in comparison to the past. According to the Afghan government statistics, about 3.5 million children in Afghanistan are deprived of school, 85 percent of whom are female students. And compared to 66% of adolescent literate boys in Afghanistan, only 37% of teenage girls are literate [1].

In 2017, the Human Rights Watch published a 102-page report entitled "I Won't Be a Doctor and One Day You Will Be Sick" regarding girls' access to education in Afghanistan. The report projects that how with the deterioration of the security situation in Afghanistan and the cessation of aid from international donors, girl's education has been worsened than the past. The report was completed via interviewing 249 persons in the provinces of Kabul, Kandahar, Balkh and Nangarhar, and mostly of the interviewees were girls aged between 11 and 18 who have been left away from continuing education and going to school [1].

In Afghanistan insecurity, poverty, and lack of girl schools, and declining international aids for girl's education are only one side of the challenges coin. The next side of the challenges coin are the predominant rigid cultural norms that ban girls from going to schools. These unyielding cultural norms include child marriage, not sending girls to co-ed schools, not allowing the girls being taught by male instructors, preventing girls from going to schools who have been abused sexually, gender stereotype and family discrimination between girls and boys, and the dominated patriarchal codes [2]-[3]-[4].

Culturally, in Afghanistan, many Afghan families tend to give the boy child better prospects while disfavoring the girl child despite the fact that giving equal social, economic and political opportunities like education, property ownership, and leadership would benefit both sexes. Still, among many communities in Afghanistan, it is considered culturally that the available opportunities are supposed to be exploited, first, by the boy child and the girl child comes in for the second option [3].

The Afghan government establishes fewer schools for girls in elementary and secondary level in comparison to boys. In less than half of Afghanistan's provinces, less than 20 percent of the teachers are women which it per se is a major problem for female students. There are many religious and traditional families in Afghanistan who do not allow their daughters to be taught by male teachers, especially as girls become mature. In addition to the impact of female teacher shortage on girl's education, 41% of schools in Afghanistan do not have buildings that challenge the girl's education in Afghanistan. Those schools that have a building but don't have toilets and clean water and that this matter affects girl's education inappropriately too [1].

In Afghanistan, recently much concern has been expressed by the educationists, human rights activists and the international institutions working on education over the slow progress of the girl's education. Although much effort has been made by the government to improve girl's education through the introduction of Education for All (EFA) and National Educational Strategic Plan (NESP), however, many studies still show that progress is still slow in respect to girl's education. Previous social and educational scholars conducted many pieces of research regarding girl's education in Afghanistan. They mainly focused on the issues of insecurity, poverty, international aids, and partly on the matter of cultural norms that deprive girls of going to school. But the current study on the continuation of the previous researches regarding girl's education in Afghanistan aims to delve deep into the predominant cultural norms in Afghanistan and examine the impacts of these cultural values and beliefs on girl's education in Afghanistan. Based on the author's findings, the major cause for girls' deprivation from schooling in Afghanistan is not merely pertaining to insecurity and poverty but the demand to respect the rooted rigid cultural norms and beliefs by their respective communities [5]-[6].

2. LITERATURE REVIEW:

2.1 *Girl's Education in Afghanistan over the Course of History*

Since the establishment of Afghanistan as a country until the time of King Amanullah Khan (1919), Afghan women have been kept within the four walls of the house let alone letting girls go to schools. Before obtaining the Kingdom throne by Amanullah Khan, women have been absent from the public eye. But since then the status of Afghan women changed slightly and girls were allowed to go schools. But due to tribal resistance against girls' education and the dominance of rigid cultural norms among the communities, educating girls was one of the most challenging issues in every subsequent government in Afghanistan including Amanullah Khan's era [7].

In Afghanistan, girls' schooling began with the inception of Afghan modernization program, which included a change in the status of women, under the rule of Amanullah Khan (1919-1929). One of the most important developments during the Amanullah era was girl's education and the establishment of girl schools. But unfortunately, Amanullah's reform program soon was faced with the reaction of tribal leaders and traditional families [7]. His reforms such as paving the way for women and girls to go school led Amanullah to a tribal rebellion and forced him to abdicate the throne and leave Afghanistan. So, eventually, his reform program was defeated.

After the overthrow of King Amanullah Khan from the power in 1929 by Habibullah Kalakani, the issue of girl's education again was forgotten. Upon obtaining the throne, Habibullah Kalakani closed all girl's schools and asked the girls who had gone to Turkey for gaining education at the time of King Amanullah Khan to return to Afghanistan. He ruled in Afghanistan for nine months and then he was executed by Nadir Shah, the next of King of Afghanistan. When Nadir Shah got the power in 1929, he did not have any strategic plan for girl's education, so he slowly and cautiously continued Amanullah Khan's reform programs including girl's education [8]. Although some changes were brought about in education in Afghanistan such as establishing Kabul University in 1933 during his tenure, he did not do any serious and tangible works in terms of girl's education.

Zahir Shah, the next King of Afghanistan and Nadir Shah's successor also continued slowly and cautiously King Amanullah Khan's reforms including girl's education during his 40 years of tenure [8]-[9]. During Zahir Shah era, for the first time in Afghanistan the elementary school became compulsory for 14 years - girls and boys from the age of 7 as per the Constitutional Law of Afghanistan. In the same period, the law of education was drafted on the basis of the Constitutional Law of Afghanistan. But Zahir Shah era as his previous era encountered by traditional and tribal communities and local elders regarding girl's education. Because the communities and families considered the girl's education against their religious beliefs and cultural norms [10]. So, King Zahir Shah's 40 years of tenure elapsed without any significant changes in girl's education.

In 1973, when President Mohammad Dawood Khan obtained the power as a result of a coup from his cousin King Zahir Shah, he developed a five-year development plan in all fields, including education. On August 23, 1979, Dawood Khan addressed the people that Republic Government of Afghanistan would eradicate illiteracy and bring about a serious cultural change in the country. The government would provide free primary education for all children, including girls and boys. The government would also prepare secondary and excellent secondary education in order to foster the scientific community. Not completed his strategic plans for improving Afghanistan including girl's education, he was overthrown from the power as a result of another coup by the Khalq and Parcham Faction in 1978 supported by the Soviet Union [11]-[10].

Upon usurping the political power, the Communist Government for implementation of their reform programs launched an organization called "Afghan Women's Democratic Organization". Its main activity was to combat the illiteracy of women in cities and villages. Since the communities were traditional and ruled by tribal codes and rigid cultural ties and norms, the literacy program for community girls faced the most resistance by local villagers. As literacy cadres forced villagers, even with the use of physical violence, to satisfy the presence of girls in classes, many of literacy cadres were expelled from villages or killed by villagers. The program of the liberation of women during Communist Regimes has once again struck at the contradiction in the top to down modernization projects as their predecessors'

reforms programs. On one hand, these projects called for a profound transformation in people's lives in the short term, and on the other hand, they faced by the same people with completely opposing reactions. Hence, the Communist Regimes because of their strict approach toward girl's education faced with serious resistance of local elders, religious people and communities [11].

During the reforming period that started for liberating and educating of Afghan women and girls in 1919 by King Amanullah Khan especially at the time of Communist Regimes, Afghanistan witnessed the massive immigration of those who did not want a forced cultural revolution from top to down. Many families immigrated to Pakistan, Iran and other Islamic countries to escape forced girls' education, which was considered a shame for them. Applying contingency and command policies, the Soviet-affiliated states faced with such resilience that in some cases forced them to stop enforcing their reforming policies. For example, though schooling for girls was compulsory, girls and boys were educated in separate schools [12].

In April 1992, the Communist Government transferred power to the Mujahidin Government. Upon gaining the political power by Mujahidin groups, various conflicts broke out among them in Kabul and other provinces of Afghanistan. This situation had a huge impact on education particularly girls' education. At the time of Mujahidin Governments, religious education was prioritized as more important than modern education, and there were no equal educational opportunities for boys and girls. Boys were more encouraged to join religious schools, and while girls were often deprived of going to schools partly because of insecurity and but mainly due to the rigid tribal and cultural norms. As a result of the internal wars and the security situation, schools and universities were often closed. The buildings were damaged. The fact that schools and universities were suitable for the scene of war and looting. Finally, the Mujahidin Governments were toppled by the Taliban groups, one of the most fundamental groups against girl's education in Afghanistan. As the Taliban era was the darkest period for education in general and in particular for girl's education in Afghanistan [7].

When the Taliban got the political power in 1996 in Afghanistan, resistance against girls' education was manifested in its most extreme level [8]. Under the rule of the Taliban in Afghanistan, girls and women were not allowed to go to school and work outside. When the Taliban groups arrived in Kabul in 1996, they blocked all girls' schools and ordered that religious books that have been prepared by their own government should replace the subjects taught by previous governments especially science subjects [13]-[14]. We can argue that the Taliban's regime was one of the darkest eras in the history of education in Afghanistan because, during the Taliban's time, almost all kinds of educational and academic activities went to their hibernation.

In a nutshell, though the previous Afghan rulers sometimes themselves opposed with girl's education such as Habibullah Kalakani and Taliban groups and sometimes they faced challenges by the people against girl's education, they adopted some important actions for improving the situation of women and girls. These actions include the abolition of traditional marriage practices, raising the maturity of girls up to 16 years of age, banning the burqa, holding education and training programs for girls, and women's right to vote. To what extent the abovementioned programs regarding improving the situation of Afghan women and girls was successful, it is important to look at them via the lenses of culture. Because all the Afghan previous rulers had one big common challenge with girl's education – resistance of locals, families, and communities against girl's education. This resistance was rooted in the rigid cultural norms among the people. People considered the governments' reforming programs particularly educational programs for educating girls as attacks on their cultural norms and practices. Therefore, they demonstrated their opposition with girl's educational programs even in killing the educational cadres and instructors during the Communist regimes. For this reason, the current study aims to examine the impacts of cultural norms on girl's education in Afghanistan.

2.2 Post-Taliban's Regime; A New Era for Girl's Education in Afghanistan

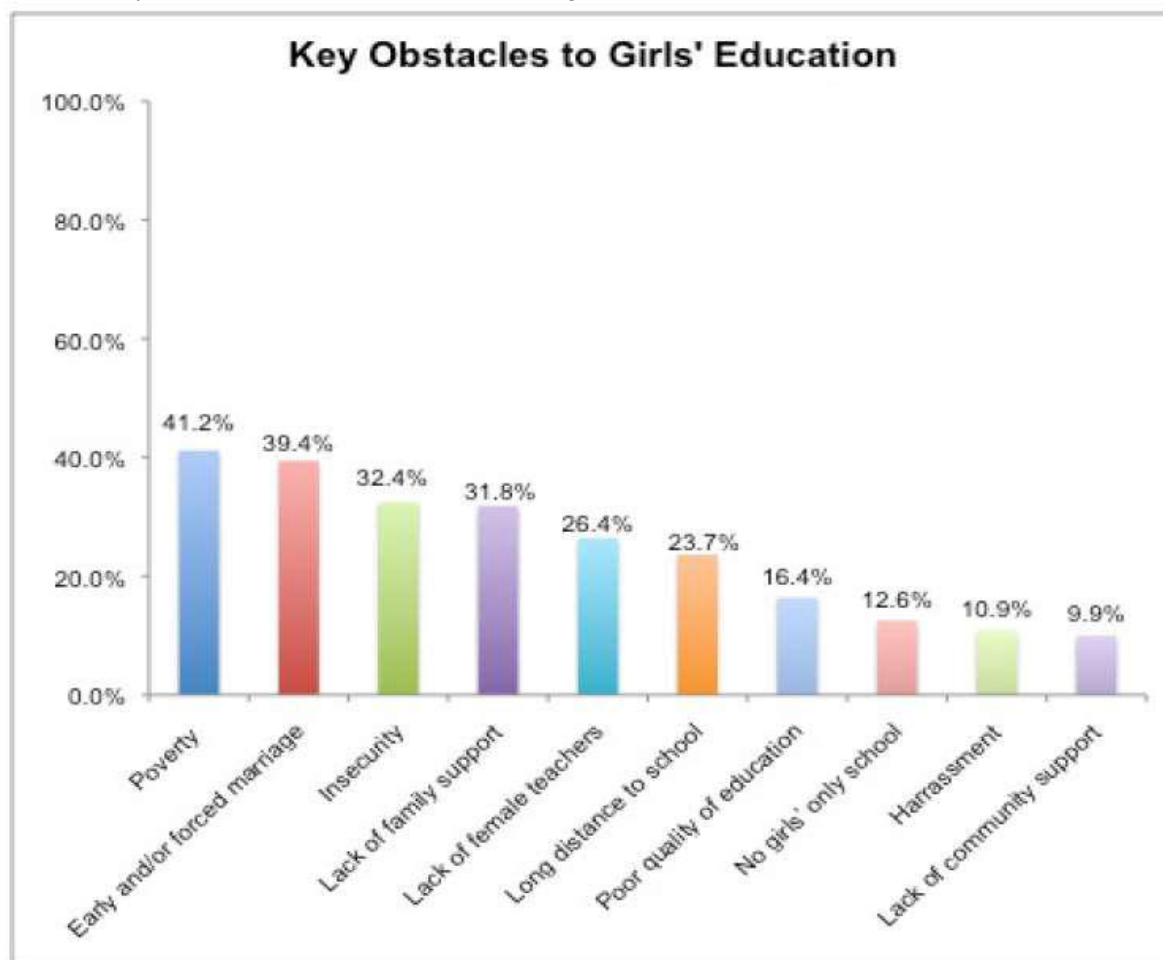
The new Afghan government, headed by Hamid Karzai, the first president of Afghanistan after the collapse of Taliban's government in 2001 and its international donors with millions of dollars and other resources embarked a new era in Afghanistan. Since then the governmental and non-governmental organizations funded by international donors built many schools, recruited and educated teachers and instructors, and families started sending their progenies including girls to school. There is not an accurate statistic regarding the number of girls who went to schools during this period, but there is a widespread consensus that, since 2001, millions of girls who were far from education during the Taliban's rule, found access to education [1]-[15]-[16].

Now that almost eighteen years have passed since the collapse of the Taliban's regime, the status of education particularly girls' education is not as good as it was expected. Roughly two-thirds of Afghan girls do not go to school according to the recent report published by the USAID. As the security situation worsens in Afghanistan, the progress that has been made towards girls' education may result in a reversal [1]. Despite the infusion of millions of dollars by foreign countries and other international independent institutions, the Afghan government could not fight with rampant challenges especially rigid cultural norms that ban girls' education in Afghanistan. Girls are often kept at home because of harmful gender measures and these issues impede their education. Even on the basis of highly optimistic figures about the participation of girls in education, there are millions of girls in the country who have never been to school, and many

more have just gone to school for a short time [1]. When it comes to obstacles to girls' education in Afghanistan, the government and other relevant institutions often mention insecurity the main reasons for the exclusion of girls from schools. They rarely touch the issue of cultural norms that deprive girls from education more than insecurity.

When the Taliban government collapsed in late 2001, the new Afghan government and its supporters, the countries that participated in the United States-led coalition in Afghanistan, faced with two major challenges: how to re-establish the educational system for half of the school-age population in a country with a high poverty rate and how to help girls who were excluded from education during the Taliban's era to go back to school [1]. To achieve this goal, the Afghan government, international donors, and foreign countries invested hugely in girl's education in Afghanistan [16]. They taught that by building schools, providing educational materials such as textbooks and other educational resources would help Afghan girls obtain education. There is no doubt that these aids paved the way for Afghan girls to find access to their basic rights – education. But unfortunately, neither the Afghan government nor the international organizations working on developing educational programs paid a serious attention to one of the key challenges to girl's education – the prevailing rigid cultural norms among the communities and families that ban hundreds and thousands of girls from going to school in Afghanistan.

Chart 1: Key obstacles to Girls' Education in Afghanistan



Source: High Stakes' Girls' Education in Afghanistan

The above chart (1) projects that after poverty, early and/or forced marriage is the second challenge toward girls' education in Afghanistan. Lack of family support, lack of female teachers, shortage of girl's schools, harassment, and lack of community support are the other problems that currently girls encounter in Afghanistan.

In Afghanistan, there are still a large number of tribes and communities who assume women as home keepers and believe that they don't have any kind of responsibilities outside the home. Given that they are not interested too much in sending their daughters to school. They still consider some of the common social norms as taboos such as schooling girls. Regardless of the fact that housekeeping and home affairs should be done well and appropriately, girls need to gain education. Some communities in Afghanistan think that schooling girls are a disgrace and for justifying their reasons, they refer to religion that actually, there is not any religious justification for halting girls from obtaining education. Among the number of Afghans who consider girls' education as taboo and forbidden, it is believed that women should raise their children and not spend their time in school. Being ignorant of the fact that raising children can

be done better if a mother acquires education [18]-[1]-[19]-[14]. However, these and dozens of other traditional beliefs in Afghanistan have caused a large number of girls to be deprived of going to school.

To fight with the abovementioned challenges, the Islamic Republic Government of Afghanistan passed the Law on the Prohibition of Violence Against Women in August 2009. This law for the first time in Afghanistan considers child marriage, forced marriage, compulsory self-immolation and other 19 types of violence against women, including rape as a crime, and for those who commit imposed a penalty [20]. Although the Law on the Elimination of Violence against Women is an essential step in the eradication of violence against women and girls, it does not help girls have access to education. In other words, the above law does not help girls and women in the fight against the rigid traditional norms and values that ban them from gaining education.

According to the Constitutional Law of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, education is the right of all citizens and is provided free of charge by the state [21]. To this end, the government is required to design and implement effective programs in order to promote the balanced distribution of education throughout Afghanistan, to provide compulsory secondary education. This constitutional principle stipulates the need for access to quality and balanced education services for all citizens of the country, regardless of cultural, linguistic, ethnic, gender and physical status. Article 44 of the 2004 Constitutional Law of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan specifically deals with the education of women. According to this principle, the government is obligated to plan and implement effective programs for the balancing and development of women's education. Another part of the government's obligation is to comply with a number of international treaties. These treaties include "Third Millennium Development Goals" and "Education for All." Under the two treaties, the Afghan government is required to provide all children with access to primary education [21].

2.3 Statistics: Girls and Access to Education

Finding the accurate statistics regarding the exact number of enrolled students, a number of students out school in Afghanistan is problematic and its accuracy is questionable. The Afghan government's 2015 report showed that more than 8 million children were enrolled in schools, of which 39 percent were girls. The Ministry of Education announced in December 2016 that 6 million children were enrolled in schools. In April 2017, a Ministry of Education official told Human Rights Watch that 9.3 million children were enrolled in schools, of which 39 per cent were girls. All of these figures come from a government census of schoolchildren who enter the school and then disappear for three years until they return to school [1].

According to statistics, even in the most optimistic means, the number of Afghan girls who go to schools has never been higher than fifty percent. According to UNICEF's estimates, in January 2016, 40 percent of schoolchildren in Afghanistan did not go to school. The UNICEF adds that from 2010-2011, 66 percent of Afghan girls at secondary school age, younger than 12 to 15, did not go to schools in comparison with 40 percent of boys of this age. The Afghan Ministry of Education knows that there are not many children in schools, but what are the key factors behind deprivation of children especially girls from schooling is a daunting and challenging question for the Ministry of Education [1].

Based on official statistics of the Ministry of Education, there are more than 17800 schools in Afghanistan. Of these 17800 schools, there are more than 2,700 girl schools and more than 6,300 boy schools and more than 8,700 girl and boy schools (co-education). Badakhshan and Bamyan are the two provinces where the number of girl schools is more than boy schools. Helmand province has eight girl schools, Kandahar has 11, and Zabul has 13 which are three provinces in Afghanistan that have the least girl schools in comparison to other provinces [22].

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK:

In Afghanistan, if we want to look at the roots of social challenges that impede girls from education, we need to delve more into Afghanistan's cultural norms and their impacts on girl's education. For example, in Afghanistan, boys' education is a priority over girls. Many girls refuse to continue their education due to the social conditions and customs prevailing in the communities where they are living. Particularly those girls who are living in far-reached areas encounter with these challenges more in comparison to ones living in big cities of Afghanistan. If school education is taken into consideration in families in Afghanistan, the son is a priority for the families because the husband is the head of the family's home and will be responsible for the home. Therefore, boys' education is more important than girls' education.

Since I am going to examine the impacts of cultural norms on girl's education in Afghanistan, my theoretical framework is based on gender theory and social norm theory. Gender theory, which is mainly based on sociological and anthropological insights, and the emphasis on how people support the dominant cultural values of gender and how gender norms reinforce the existing inequalities in power and access to resources can help me understand the cultural barriers to girls' education in Afghanistan. Likewise, the theory of social norms that essentially embraces social psychology and behavioural economics to understand why social expectations have a strong impact on how people behave, can help me look deeper into the dominant cultural and social values that deprive girls of obtaining education in Afghanistan.

On the other hand, gender norms don't seem to be essentially harmful to girls' well-being and development. As an example, they'll help the girls to develop specific skills that may be helpful to them, throughout adolescence and in adult life. However, it is argued that gender norms contribute to inequalities within the distribution of power and resources that usually disadvantage girls in comparison to boys [23]. Moreover, as gender is a cultural and social product [24], examining the cultural norms of Afghanistan that discriminate between boys and girls over opportunities and power especially in gaining education, is highly very important for academics.

3.1 Definition of Cultural Norms

Norms and the notions and rules that shape our relationships with other people and society as a whole. Norms are found in all social relationships in a society. They set boundaries for our expectations and how we are treating each other. These norms vary according to time and place. Most people, without thinking, are trying to adapt themselves to the norms. Perhaps the most interesting point in the existence of norms is that, as long as nobody has violated the norm, these norms remain invisible and nobody thinks about them. According to another definition, social norms are behaviour that is order-oriented and based on common social beliefs and is punishable in cases of violating these norms [25].

Norms are usually created for this purpose in order to work towards reducing the negative effects outside of the domain, but this does not happen in many social structures due to the lack of links in the social structure [25]. Cultural norms are not necessarily harmful to girls' wellbeing and development – for example, they can enable girls to develop specific skills and knowledge that will be useful to them, during adolescence and in adult life. But because cultural norms particularly gender norms reflect and contribute to inequalities in the distribution of power and resources that often disadvantage women and girls, and limit girls' development opportunities and undermine their wellbeing.

4. METHODOLOGY:

In Afghanistan, girls and women endure worse forms of violations of human rights than their male counterparts. This ranges from cultural, psychological, physical and gender exclusion from power and opportunities within and outside the family. Given that, the present study has been designed to examine the impacts of cultural norms and beliefs on girl's education in Afghanistan. For conducting this research, I have used a qualitative method. The data for the current study is collected from reliable sources such as UNICEF, UNESCO, World Bank reports, OXFAM, Ministry of Education, Ministry of Higher Education Afghanistan, Afghanistan Millennium Development Goal Report, Afghanistan National Education for All reports, Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women, peer-reviewed articles, leading national news agencies in Afghanistan, and numerous other genuine sources.

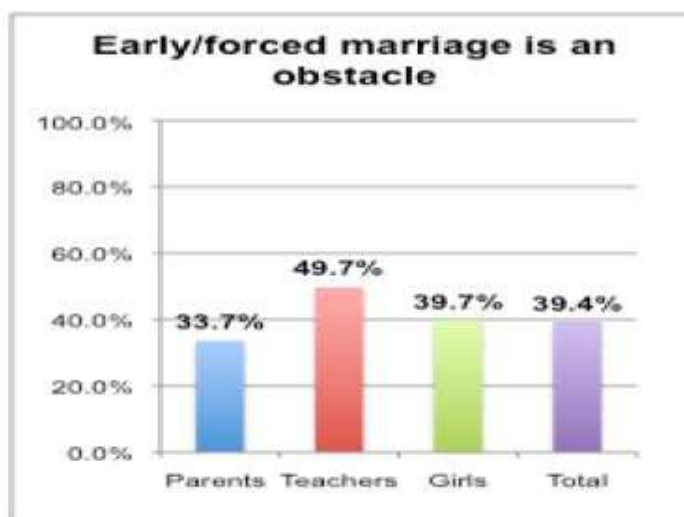
5. DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS:

5.1 Early and Child Marriage

More than half of the girls in Afghanistan are getting married before reaching the age of 19, of which 40% are between the ages of 10 and 13, 32% at age 14 and 27% at the age of 15. The United Nations holds that seven million and 300,000 girls are getting married before reaching the legal age around the world every year, of which 12 percent are Afghan girls [26]. According to the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission, the main reasons for the rise of forced and underage marriages in Afghanistan are poverty, unfair socialization, insecurity, and the continuing impunity culture. But researchers argue that illiteracy is the main reason for child marriage in Afghanistan [18]. So, as girls get married, they do not continue their education. When they are kept illtreated as their parents, their daughters encounter the same fate as they faced after getting married.

In a country where a third of the girls marry before age 18, the marriage of children leaves many girls out of education. The minimum age for marriage for girls is in accordance with Afghanistan's Constitutional Law is 16. In practice, the law is less enforced, which is why most girls are married before the age stipulated in the law. The consequences of marriage for children are very detrimental and lead to the exclusion from education. Other losses due to child marriage include serious health hazards, including the deaths of girls and their children due to early pregnancy. Girls who are married at an early age may also be more likely to be victims of domestic violence than girls who are married at a later age [1].

Chart 2: Early/forced marriage is a key factor in girls' drop out from school



Source: High Stakes' Girls' Education in Afghanistan

The above chart (2) indicates that 49.9 % of the teachers who have been interviewed by the author articulated that forced marriage is an obstacle to girl's education. The author adds that 39.4% of interviewees stated that early or forced marriage is a major obstacle to girls' education [17].

5.2 Resistance anti-Teaching Girls by Male Instructors

In Afghanistan, many families are not willing to accept male teachers for their daughters. When the first girl school in Kabul was established in the early twentieth century, it was faced with a shortage of female teachers, and the government inevitably appointed male teachers to teach at girl schools, and this is still a problem for girl's education in Afghanistan. With increasing female students, girls encountered more problems. In Afghanistan, in the remote areas still, families disagree with the presence of male teachers in girl schools. Despite this traditional belief, in many regions of Afghanistan, male teachers teach at girl schools. But, generally, a shortage of female teachers prohibits girls from going to schools. This problem gets more serious and severe, when girls grow older because traditional families in Afghanistan don't let their daughters continue their education in presence of male teachers [1]-[27].

Unfortunately, there are not enough schools for girls in Afghanistan. Girls have two options either go to boy schools which are far away from their vicinity or leave education. Hence, some families prevent their daughters from traveling to another area for long periods of time. On the other hand, in some provinces of Afghanistan due to lack of facilities, girls and boys are allowed to study in the co-ed classroom, which is not acceptable for many families due to the dominant traditions and the culture governing in Afghanistan. Thus, many Afghan girls are left out of school in areas where the government cannot provide separate classrooms for boys and girls and schools don't have adequate educational resources such as instructors, classrooms, and other supporting materials for teaching. And, families are not allowing their daughters to study together with boys in the one class [28].

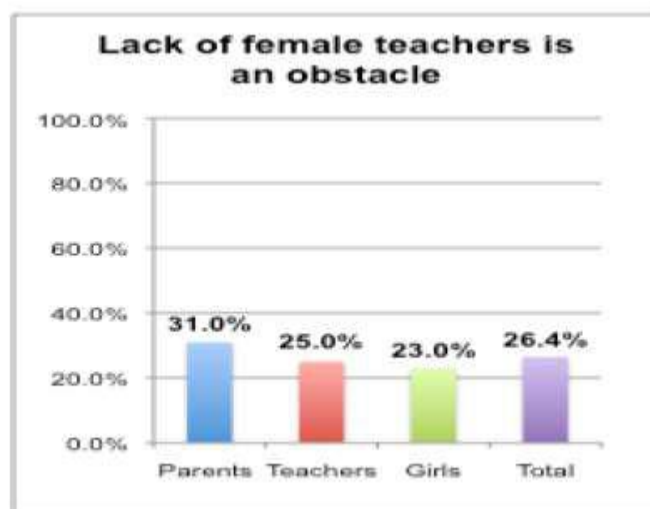


Chart 3: Lack of female teachers is a key factor in girl's deprivation of education in Afghanistan

Source: High Stakes' Girls' Education in Afghanistan

The above chart (3) demonstrates that the lack of female teachers is a significant obstacle to girls attending school in Afghanistan. The author argues that this matter becomes important for families as their daughters get older. More than a quarter (26.4%) of the individuals interviewed by the author stated that the shortage of a female teacher is a major obstacle to girls' access to education [17].

Resistance against girls being taught by male instructors is not the same in every province of Afghanistan. This problem has been solved in the areas where the cultural barriers to girls' education have been reduced, where households, school administrators and community elders have supported girls to complete their schooling even with male teachers. Those girls who are completing their schooling either with female teachers or male ones can enter higher education institutions and will be hired as teachers in girl schools after graduation. This has led to a minimization of female teachers in girl schools in some regions of Afghanistan particularly in the central provinces of Afghanistan. This achievement has strengthened both the presence of women in the community and the cultural sensitivity of preventing girls from entering school and university. This cultural and public awareness provides the ground for a new tradition in which families try to encourage their daughters to complete their education to become teachers to support other girls in their communities [29].

This change in attitudes towards the education of girls is more rampant in the central regions of Afghanistan such Ghazni, Bamiyan, and Daykundi provinces. Also, this attitude to helping girls go to school as boys have been developed in some ways in Badakhshan Province and some northern provinces of the country. But in other provinces, with the exception of the cities of the country, girls continue to be educated with serious cultural limitations. Even with educational facilities, families do not allow their daughters to go to school and families that allow their girls to go to primary school but ban them from going to secondary school [29].

5.3 Exclusion of Sexual Abused Girls from School

Besides war and conflicts that lead to girls' exclusion from education, girls on their way to school also face unwanted crimes and abusive practices, including abduction and sexual harassment in Afghanistan. There are many reports of kidnapping of girls on the ways to schools by criminal gangs. Abduction is similar to acid attacks that have widespread effects on girls' deprivation of gaining education. Kidnapping and sexual harassment cause many Afghan families in their communities to keep their children, especially girls, at home because sexual harassment and kidnapping can harm the honor of a family. So, it can have devastating consequences for girls' reputation and personality in their communities. That is why it is difficult for parents to bear it. Therefore, sexual harassment and kidnapping is also a key obstacle toward girls' education [1].

The stigmatization and social taboos related to rape lead to many girls being abandoned by their families. Victims are penalized doubly over: they become social outcasts, whereas their violators go free. Several of these victims are schoolgirls. The weakening effects of sexual violence among the communities and families inevitably spill over into education systems. Girls subjected to rape typically experience grave physical injury – with long consequences for school attendance. The psychological effects, together with depression, trauma, shame, and withdrawal, have devastating consequences for girls' education. Many girls drop out of school after rape pregnancy. Moreover, concern and terror of sexual attacks will lead families to prevent their daughters from going to schools. Fear of social stigmatization from sexual abuses is an important factor in household decisions on whether to send their children to school or not [30].

The question is here that Afghan families instead of fighting with stigmatization sexual harassment and kidnapping, they succumb to it. And most importantly, girls who been sexually abused are both the victim of sexual harassment and social stigmatization that it carries thereafter. Again, this social stigmatization depends that how families and communities interpret the consequences of sexual harassment and abuses. Since many families and communities still are in this believe that girls who have been abused sexually should be kept at home, and leave pursuing their education, hundreds and thousands of Afghan girls are deprived of education, as a result. This approach of families toward sexually abused girls that they should not go to school is rooted in the rigid cultural norms among communities. While studies indicate that one of the best ways to help the victims of child sexual abuse is providing education [31].

5.4 Gender Stereotype and Cultural Discrimination Against Girls' Education

Gender stereotyping is the practice of ascribing to an individual woman or man specific attributes, characteristics, or roles by reason only of her or his membership in the social group of women or men. A gender stereotype is, at its core, that belief may cause its holder to make assumptions about members of the subject group, women and/or men [32]. But a large body of literature demonstrates that stereotyping often results in violations of human rights and fundamental freedoms of individuals [33]-[34]-[35]-[36]-[37]. An example of this can be the incapability of the justice system to hold perpetrator of sexual violence accountable on the basis of stereotypical views about women's appropriate sexual behavior.

Cultural discrimination against women includes those differences of treatment that exist because of stereotypical expectations, attitudes, and behaviors towards women. The findings of the Special Rapporteur demonstrate that

stereotype about women's role within the family leads to a division of labor within households that often result in poverty for women and lower levels of education. A stereotype is harmful when it limits women's capacity to enhance their personal abilities, pursue their professional careers and make decisions about their lives. The view that rearing children is women's responsibility, is a negative gender stereotypes among the families and communities [33]-[34]-[35]. Likewise, in Afghanistan, because of the predominant cultural and gender norms among the families and communities, boys' education in the majority of families is given priority to girls' education, or girls' education is not generally of interest or is acceptable merely for a limited period [17].

Women in Afghanistan are discriminated because of dominant beliefs of patriarchy from childhood, even before birth. And part of the reason that Afghan girls are experiencing severe gender discrimination is pertaining to the dominant discriminatory cultural norms among the communities in Afghanistan. They are born with discrimination and die with discrimination. Lack of public awareness of human rights standards, low levels of literacy, poverty, incorrect traditions, lack of laws that support the presence and participation of women in society are among the factors that increase discrimination and, as a result, deprive women of their rights and freedoms [38]. According to Kristensen (2016), 70 % of the women whom the author interviewed said that they experienced discrimination in different manners from whom to marry to going school. Many of the women whom the author interviewed had unique stories about their lives – how their brother was free to choose the education he wanted, while they were not permitted, either for economic reasons or because they had to get married instead [39]. One of the stories that Kristensen cites from her interviewees is extremely shocking – “When I was little my parents had a bad financial situation. So, they just sent my brother to school, said you're a girl. Girls do not need to go to school, because, finally they do marry, and they don't need to learn” [39]. In a traditional country like Afghanistan, women and girls are suffering from gender discriminations against them that are mainly rooted in the cultural norms of their communities and the gender stereotypes of men toward women.

5.5 Girls' Education and the Dominated Patriarchal Codes

Social scientists define patriarchy as the power of man over women. They argue that patriarchy refers to males' ideology, privileges, and other principles are perceived for subjugating the females' roles and functions in the societies [40]-[39]-[41]. Patriarchal societies are known for marginalizing the feminine. They typically ignore or trivialize what is concerned with feminine characteristics [39].

Given the above definition, a country like Afghanistan that has a strong patriarchal attitude toward womanhood. In Afghanistan, because of the predominance of patriarchal attitudes and behaviour in families and communities, the power of patriarchy regulates all relationships by means of education, and it serves the interests of the patriarchal society. Therefore, equal opportunities for women and men are not provided in the social, political, economic, and educational spheres. Men can easily implement their projects in different areas, but women will face a lot of problems in the same arena. In the patriarchal society like Afghanistan, the cultural norms do not provide women with equal opportunities for gaining education and working outside the home. Thus, women are left marginalized [42].

Since education as an important tool in the relationship of power, it can be the root stone of gender inequality in traditional society, and women are the main victims of this gender inequality. Afghanistan, as the country with the most patriotic power in the political, economic and social spheres, some prevents and communities either by cultural means or on the basis of the patriarchal principles deprive girls from their basic human right – gaining education. Additionally, women are not counted as members of society as their men counterparts, and it has been embodied in some communities due to the control of education by patriarchal society. So, as education is an important tool that can question the values and norms of patriarchal society over the long term, communities' elders and family's decision makers (males) knowingly ignore girl's education [42].

6. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS:

Cultural barriers are one of the main obstacles to the growth and spread of girls' education in Afghanistan. A large part of these cultural norms is learned through the process of socialization that shapes our lives. In this context, one of the most important ways of development and transformation in each society is to challenge and ignore the norms that for various reasons are no longer responsive and meaningful for a group or stratum. Without breaking the norms of the old, the divine, the one-sided, the unequal and the incompatible with the style and the modern conditions of life in the contemporary world, the society is dying and ruining. The key to the dynamism and transformation of a society and culture is based on the critical and challenging approach toward the value systems and norms of that society. This process starts with the breakdown of the norm and ends with the transformation of values.

Studies and researches demonstrate that educating people can play a significant role in the transformation of cultural norms and rigid cultural values [42]-[43]. Since in Afghanistan mostly girls are the victims of these rigid cultural norms, educating them can be one of the best and most effective ways to eliminate discrimination and gender inequalities. Because when girls gain education, skills, and, the capabilities required for their presence in the society, they can fight with the political, economic, social, gender, and educational inequalities in their living communities. The Afghan Ministry of Education as a responsible entity in providing education should pay close attention to the education

and training of girls and women and provide special programs in this regard. These actions require that certain mechanisms should be created by the Ministry of Education and other relevant entities for fighting with the predominant rigid cultural norms that impede girls from gaining education. In addition to government responsible entities, educating girls is one of the best investments that families and communities themselves can make it happen because educated girls, for example, marry later, will have healthier children, earn more money that they invest back into their families and communities, and play more active roles in leading their communities and families.

All in all, the findings of the current research indicate that preventing girls from going to school on the basis of cultural norms prevailing in communities, been a major cause of child marriage, violence against women, discrimination against women and girls, and gender inequality in Afghanistan. Therefore, I would argue that Afghan families instead of halting their girls from going to school and keeping them at home, should fight with the predominant cultural norms that underlie their interpretation of girl's education. They should help their daughters obtain education so that they can help the other girls who may encounter the same fate in the future. Escaping from the problems either social problems, cultural problems, or economic is not a rational solution, instead, facing and fighting with them can help the entire communities to secure their well-being and development in the societies. Therefore, families should help their daughters gain education and provide them with equal opportunities as their sons.

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