Education as an Empowerment Tool for Afghan Women

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Abstract

This thesis explored how highly educated women in Afghanistan relate to the multiple challenges affronting women's education, and what they see as possible pathways forward. It raised questions about the women's lived experiences, their motivations and positionings, as well as their readings of the situation and perspectives on the cause. The study is based on ten in-depth interviews with women in Central, Northern, and Northwest metropolitan areas. These women are highly educated, politically inclined, often obstinately feminist women, and are active in Afghanistan. The analysis draws upon feminist ethnographic theory and debates, especially concerning women's agency and empowerment in highly patriarchal contexts. Earlier research on the various challenges to women's education in Afghanistan has tended to focus on the oppressive character of the socio-cultural sphere, with emphasis on religion. My thesis offered new evidence and insights by introducing the understudied perspective of the insiders and drew attention to the importance of some micro spaces of emancipation for women, which in some cases can be family and peer support networks. These spaces were crucial to the women's agency and empowerment, and their ability to complete their higher education.

Keywords- gender equality, women's agency, women's rights to education, women's empowerment, cultural value, Afghanistan, feminism and family.

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1.Introduction

1.1Background

Gender issues have always been tense in Afghanistan. The situation has been worsened by decades of war which affected women's rights as the most vulnerable part of society. Women's exploitation as housewives is the main dark part of Afghan culture, which affects women's progress toward their empowerment process. Decades of civil war excluded women from taking part in social life, which worsened their economic and social position. An archaic Afghan culture grew out of Islamic fundamentalism which intensified the cultural misogynic view against women and placed them as a subordinate gender in the society (Gures, 2013:p.120).

In Afghan society, men's privileged status as the family breadwinner is an undeniable fact within a war-torn economy which further placed strains on the social justice and social order. These instabilities have caused more a fragile stature for women who already had a culturally agonized position through history. Promoting gender equality will not be easy because culturally, Afghanistan has a very pessimistic point of view against women's progress and their social position. Beside efforts from civil societies' activists, the society also had many counter struggles from different groups who do not tolerate women's voice and their empowerment (Heath *et al.*, 2011).

Globally, Afghanistan has the lowest literacy rate. According to the Afghan Minister of Education (AME), the population aged 15 scores 26 percent, and females score lower than 12 percent. This percentage is even lower in rural than urban areas where female's participation is increasing. Hence, within the country the literacy programs have been developed based on state and international civil society's efforts. From 2009 to 2012, the number of educated females has been increasing[1]. But as the figure shows, female enrolment in higher education had been decreasing. For instance, in 2008, only 26 percent of grade 12 graduates were female, compared to males who scored 39 percent. When moving from the primary to tertiary level, the female enrollment was also decreasing. This is because of boundaries to female's education, like

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[1] From 2001, 9000 schools out of 12,500 existing today have been built. Number of teachers increased from 20,700 in 2002 to 174,400 in 2011 where 50,000 of them are women. Students' enrolment from 200,000 in 2002 amplified to 8,4million students in 2012 and 39% are female (Gures, 2013:pp.126–127).

limited mobility for the girl, early marriage, and so on. In addition, worsened security also affects the process. That is why female's schools' allocation has decreased from 39.1 at the primary level to 33.2 in secondary level, as well as at high school to 28.1 percent (Gures, 2013:pp.126–127).

There is a lot of literature on the challenges for women's empowerment process and women's rights to education in Afghanistan. The literature deals with different sets of concerns such as security issues, state efforts, and misogynic cultural and religious values (Alvi-Aziz, 2008; Zulfacar, 2006; Kabeer & Khan, 2014). My aim therefore is to contribute to this literature by introducing the so far understudied topic of women's lived experiences of being educated and becoming active for social reform and gender equality in Afghanistan.

As my pre-study and literature review (Ahmadi, 2016; Zulfacar, 2006; Heath *et al.*, 2011; Alvi-Aziz, 2008) show, some women in Afghanistan have been involved in the struggle for women's rights.

1.2 Research question

The highly educated women are key actors in the struggle for social reform and gender equality in Afghanistan. This thesis will explore how some highly educated women in Afghanistan relate to the multiple challenges affronting women's education, and what they see as possible pathways forward. My research question is:

 What are these women's lived experiences, their motivations and positionings, their readings of the situation, and perspectives on the cause of women's empowerment and education in Afghanistan?

Sub-questions:

What are their views on the main challenges and constraints involved?

What kind of partnerships must be formed to sustain the cause?

These questions will be answered through a study based on in-depth interviews with urban educated women in Central, Northern, and Northwest metropolitan areas in Afghanistan. The primary data has been supplemented with secondary sources dealing with gender issues in Afghanistan. The analysis draws upon feminist ethnographic theory, with emphasis on agency (women's struggle toward equal rights), and especially, the development of women's agency in highly gender discriminatory contexts.

1.3 Study contribution

Earlier research on the various challenges to women's education in Afghanistan has tended to focus on the oppressive character of the socio-cultural sphere, with emphasis on religion. This body of literature will be reviewed in chapter two. My contribution will be to study the multiple challenges and concerns from women's insider perspective. This insider perspective has been understudied, and the thesis therefore will offer new evidence and insights to this body of literature. More broadly, the thesis also may offer some insights of relevance to the discussion on how to study and practically approach issues of women's agency and empowerment in highly gender discriminatory contexts.

1.4 Situational context of the study

Gender inequality has been one of the main international concerns for decades, and generally many efforts have been established for achieving a global strategy for gender equality. Hence, gender equality and gender mainstreaming have been transformed in diverse processes concerning how the women's empowerment process should be recognized and achieved differently in different contexts. It is a fact that to achieve gender equality, we need effective governance which further requires a global consensus for promotion of these efforts (Olivius, 2016:p.271).

How this errand looks like in Afghanistan depends on its conflict-filled, culturally patriarchal and religious values-based society. The main upheavals of the past decades, as well as recent efforts to bring about change, worsened the Afghan women's situation which was re-

established after 9/11 by an international effort[2]; hence, September 2001[3]was a new chapter for women's rights. This chapter was internationally referred to as a crucial step towards human rights and women rights (Sehin, Coryell & Stewart, 2017).

Decades of civil war[4] in Afghanistan unfortunately, raised organized crime like drug and arms smuggling, kidnapping, political violence which undoubtedly affected security issues. Crime and security are two opposite parts of one project and counter each other, which also affect women's security and even international stability (Bewley-Taylor, 2013:p.6). Most of these conflicts were continuously based on people's ideological understanding and their beliefs in Islam[5]. These beliefs are connected to many restrictions against women's personal, family and social affairs that placed them in the middle of these conflicts[6] (Kabeer & Khan, 2014). Activists like (AIHRC) the Afghan Human Rights Commission, report that violations against women's rights is alarming (Hasrat & Pfefferle, 2012:pp.3–4).

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[2] Contemporary Afghan government endeavored to improve the political and cultural positions for female citizens. The New Constitution in 2004 is based mostly on gender equality and mandated 25% of parliament should be comprised of females. MoWA/ Ministry of Women's affairs was established in 2001 to promote gender equality and role of law in women's life. In 2011 Afghanistan joined by state effort to the GPE, Global Partnership for Education which is a consortium of world governments working to promote education systems throughout the world (Sehin, Coryell & Stewart, 2017a:p.93).

[3] When Twin Tower in the USA was targeted by Taliban, United States with its allies in form of Bush Administration with the message of 'war on terror' just walked in and outset the regime. It was the time for celebration of liberty for women and deep breath after long suffocated period (Heath *et al.*, 2011:pp.1–2). Under this Islamic fundamentalists group's power (Taliban 1996-2001), "gender apartheid" women were isolated completely from the public sphere, which legitimized religiously some traditional perceptions like, women cannot appear in public alone, go to school, speak loudly, appear in television or speak on radio and so on, which made it untenable that what is seen as a delineation between Taliban's principles and traditional and local beliefs (Sehin, Coryell & Stewart, 2017:p.97).

[4] After the Soviet Union withdrew from Afghanistan in 1989, security worsened and human rights and women's rights were being violated to a high degree, and the communist regime continued for some more years to rule the country by President Najibullah. In 1992 Mujahedin created the Interim Government by overthrowing Najibullah's regime, where the civil war continued between these groups, which had the same Islamic ideology, who could not come to an agreement about the power's partition. Albeit, these groups as united allies followed the same strategy against Communist regime, but to unite and fulfill the power vacuum within themselves became a challenging solution (Kissane, 2012), when the next group 'Taliban' stepped in and overthrew the regime. They were also encouraged to attack Afghanistan from Pakistan in 1996 who ruled the country with their own interpretation of Sharia 'Islamic law' until 2001(Heath *et al.*, 2011).

[5] Religion is a key issue that guides social behavior. In Afghanistan within a population of 30 million, the main religion is Islam, and majorities depend on the Sunni branch with only 15 percent shite Muslims. But Hindus and Sikhs also live there for decades mainly settled in the center and south of Afghanistan (Hutter, 2012).

[6] Furthermore, the characteristic behavior of social ethnic groups' representation is affected from closely bordered countries. Pashtuns are settled more in the south; culturally coherent and cohesive with Pakistan and India because of the closed border. Tajiks, Uzbeks, Hazera, and Turkmens have more familiarity with Iran at the west and Tajikistan and Uzbekistan at the north of the country. Ethnic pragmatic functions are also intensive since they were politicized as multidimensional truth when Soviet Union left the country after 1996 (Brasher, 2011:pp.111–114; Sehin, Coryell & Stewart, 2017).

That undoubtedly led to crimes against humanity as well as women's rights which was criticized globally. Feminists outlined that women should be empowered by substituting, improving and institutionalizing[7] the basic social structure in favor of gender equality in such contexts (Cornwall, 2016). The question is what empowers Afghan women, and how? Could it be education?

Deprivation from education is one common form of women's rights' violations; forced marriage, forced divorce, lack of freedom to choose their spouse, high dowry and expulsion from home are other types of violations (Hasrat & Pfefferle, 2012:pp.3–4). Since the latest decades of conflict caused men's high migration rates, women, who constitute 60% of the population, have to carry all the burden on their shoulders concerning their rights, and unequal allocation of national resources making this struggle harsh (Huma, 2004:p.28).

The new Afghan government generated reconciliation between Islamic norms and the Western perception-based women right's when it came to constitutional issues. But some conservatives also see it as betrayal of Islamic norms (Huma, 2004:p.27; Ahmadi, 2016:p.366).

Forced marriage is also regarded as one of main reasons to prevent girls' enrollment to higher education. Afghanistan prohibits marriage under fifteen, and violation of it causes two years of imprisonment (Gures, 2013:p.126).The state effort to prevent forced marriage and early marriage has been visible, even in the constitution[8] (Ahmadi, 2016:p.367). The Bill on Elimination of Violence Against Women (EVAW) was adopted in 2009 in Afghanistan. EVAW provides punishment in terms of fines and prison. Article 2 of EVAW prohibits forced isolation, forced marriage which counts as a violation against women and is contrary to Islam (Gures,

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[7] RAWA (Revolutionary Association the Woman of Afghanistan) RAWA also generated to struggle against fundamentalism, to establish freedom, women's rights and democracy in Afghanistan, based on international values, struggle against traitors, disintegrate Afghanistan by tribal and religious war, and promote education and so on, but caused assassination of its leader at first place then had to move to Pakistan for more operational work inside Afghan refugees (Zulfacar, 2006:pp.25–27) . AWN (Afghan Women's Network) founded in 1995 as an NGO promote gender equality. As well, AWSDC Afghan Women's Skills Development Center 1999, WHP Women of Hope Project was also established for the same task. Povey (2003) is convinced at these organizations playing a critical role to endorse gender equality (Sehin, Coryell & Stewart, 2017a:p.93).

[8] My participants see this effort of the state as minimum. They argue the minimum age should be elder than it is decided in the constitution, it should be like other modern countries in the world, but the problem here is conservative people see this as un-Islamic effort. Amir Amanullah khan ruled between (1919-1926) to forbid child marriage as first formal decision (Kolhatkar, 2002:pp.14–15).

2013:pp.119–121), however, its implementation is weak.

1.5 Disposition

After the introduction, chapter two will provide an overview of existing literature on the Afghan women's rights and their empowering process. Chapter three presents the methodology part which includes the method used in this thesis and the ethical considerations related to the theme and my participants. Chapter four will elaborate the theoretical framework of this thesis, and chapter five further deal with the analysis of the provided materials. Finally, chapter six will consist of the outcomes of my thesis.

2. Literature Review

In this chapter I will review the body of literature to which I want to contribute, namely the literature that addresses the multiple challenges to women's empowerment and education in Afghanistan. This body of literature mainly deals with three areas of challenges and concerns, political policy, security, and cultural and religious values.

2.1 What literature?

From many books and articles that are written about women's education in Afghanistan, some authors have focused on how far women's education has been successful in Afghan society (Burridge, Payne & Rahmani, 2016; Tripathi, 2003; Yacoobi, 2011; Afzali, 2017; Gures, 2013). There are many other articles which consist of other practical issues about women's rights (Zulfacar, 2006; Farhoumand-Sims, 2009; Kabeer & Khan, 2014; Kolhatkar, 2002; Hasrat & Pfefferle, 2012).

As feminists point out, the basic structure in the society should be changed in the favor of gender equality, alongside women's struggle for being educated as their own empowerment tool. It is women themselves that can mobilize their stature, due to their own achievements (McCarthy, 2017; Mills & Kitch, 2006).

The literature that I have reviewed so far regarding my interest theme in this thesis, can be divided into three main categories considering its focus on specific themes. The first category deals with how women's education has been promoted by the state in different periods in Afghanistan (Ahmadi, 2016; Gures, 2013; Kissane, 2012; Heath *et al.*, 2011). The second category is more about security and the political instability which prevent women from completing their education (Burridge, Payne & Rahmani, 2016; Mills & Kitch, 2006; Heath *et al.*, 2011). The third category is about cultural and religious values which can promote women's education or prevent them from being educated (G. Nourya, 2016; Tripathi, 2003; Heath *et al.*, 2011). I should acknowledge that there is not a sharp distinction among these themes; all these categories overlap into each other. Hence, some literature contains all three subjects (Heath *et al.*, 2011). My thesis will address all three themes, although with different emphasis through the perspective of the citizens concerned (i.e. women).

2.2 The literature concerning states' efforts

The book, Land of Unconquerable, focused on all three themes comprehensively and how women's progress and their right to education was being reinforced/prohibited by the state in the formal arena. How this process was being designed over history by individual governments differently, and how women's education as dependent variable, is vulnerable regarding different constitutions in different periods of political systems. This book also depicts an extended picture of women's rights throughout history (Heath *et al.*, 2011). The only thing that I consider missing here is a discussion about Afghan's new constitution which did not fully consider women's rights. For example, there is no discussion about how women's heritage rights should be established considering equal gender rights. Because the subject is controversial and sensitive, nobody has mentioned it so far.

The article written by Kosha et al (2014) concentrates more on how education was promoted in the Afghan formal system after 2001, when the Taliban fell out of power. The statistics show that 2,4 million girls went to school in 2009, and 29 percent of them could go to higher education in high school. Of this figure, 120,000 girls could graduate from high school, and only 15,000 girls could be enrolled in the universities. These reports are supported by both human rights activist and governmental reports.

According to Gures, after 2001 Afghanistan witnessed an improvement in women's rights. Initiation of the Afghan Ministry of Women's Affairs (MoWA) itself is a crucial step toward the improvement of women's rights; the promotion of women's right to education and their right to participate in the decision-making system and governance with their high educational abilities (Gures, 2013:pp.23–24). Also, in the political and social arenas, women's numbers have been increasing. According to the new Constitution, Afghan women held 25 percent of the seats in the Parliament since 2006, where the electoral law's adoption led to an increase from 68 women in the election in 2005, to 69 in the 2010 elections. The women participated in Wolesi Jirga (Parliament- The House of the People) where 65 seats had already been reserved for females which is 27.7 percent of all seats. In *Meshrano Jirga* (Senate/upper house), only11 females entered in 2010, but in January 2011, the President assigned 17 women members, increasing the number of females to 28. Thus, women constituted 27.45 percent of the whole[9]. These rates are above the world average; in addition, the number of female candidates in *Wolesi Jirga* increased from 12 in 2005 to 16 percent in 2010. But, female candidates for parliamentary elections face severe challenges due to women's limitations to campaign in public (Gures, 2013:pp.28–29).

Kissane (2012) talks about women's rights and their access to education in Afghanistan from a broader perspective and how this problem is getting solved by political attempts of the Afghan state after 2001. She also talks about how education expressed in Islam and how leaders in the shadow of religion manipulate people's beliefs to sustain the cultural patriarchal sense.

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[9] Adaption of National Action Plan for the Women of Afghanistan (NAPWA) in 2008 by the state is another big step for the policy framework in order to carry on and coordinate the state effort of protecting women's right as citizen which is also one part of International Millennium Development Goal IMDG and CEDAW. As national political and international commitments in these treaties are high, even some achievements are also remarkable, but still the implementation process are critical specially at the fields of education, political participation and economic activities (Gures, 2013:p.127). Afghan interim administration and MoWA is committed to Afghan women's security issues in all 34 province and furthermore MoWA established (IMC-EVAW)the Inter-ministerial Commission on the elimination of Violence against Women in 2005 in order to launch an harmonized action plan within the actual stakeholder who can promote the gender equality (Gures, 2013:p.123).

It is also said that Islam should be respected in Afghanistan because religious beliefs are most delicate and sensitive and, the most respected criterion; hence, it could be used as a catalyst to promote women's rights and their access to education (Kissane, 2012).

Furthermore, the New Constitution contains obvious requirements regarding education. Afghan citizens (men and women) are guaranteed the right to free education up to the bachelors' degree. Specifically, it depends on the state to develop and implement effective programs to generate balanced education for women (Ahmadi, 2016:p.366). Alongside the constitutional supportive feature of women's legal rights, there have been fruitful steps taken and outcomes toward gender equality. In 2001, only 5,000 girls enrolled in school, but the number significantly increased to 2.4 million in 2010. In addition, women have been working in every kind of position, like members of parliament, civil society activists, defense attorneys, prosecutors, civil servants, and soldiers[10] (Ahmadi, 2016:p.364).

According to Afzali (2017), gender inequality exists in the sphere of higher education in Afghanistan[11]. But the existing complexity of the gender-based paradigm is being normalized by the state's efforts. The implementation of affirmative action is being designed to increase women's accessibility to the educational arena; this will present opportunities to reach this goal (Burridge, Payne & Rahmani, 2016:p.146).

2.3 The literature regarding security as the main issue

Heath et al and Burridge et al. discuss security as one of the crucial criteria for the promotion of education for girls and women. They add that only 5 percent of the Afghan population attend higher education at the university level where only 20 percent of that figure were females (Burridge, Payne & Rahmani, 2016; Heath *et al.*, 2011).

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[10] Habiba Sarobi as first female governor, was elected in the Province of Bamiyan in 2005. Additionally, in 2011, approximately 1195 women were trained as police officers (Ahmadi, 2016:p.364).

[11] As recent report from World Bank identified these inequalities in form of lower enrolment of girls in secondary education which reduce the eligible pool of applicants. We also have lack of appropriate transport, residential facilities for female students and also inadequate child care provision is one another effective fact to women's education (Burridge, Payne & Rahmani, 2016:p.146).

Alvi-Aziz (2008) points out how women's education became an important phenomenon within Afghan society after the Taliban, but security is one serious prevention to fulfill this responsibility. He has no proposed solution on how the security can be improved but notes the existing problems.

Mills and Kitch point out that recent development of women's positions in social and political arena can lead to the reduction of the misogynic cultural view which will further address the roots of gender inequality. This article also has suggestions about how women's rights could be established in this society. It also points out more about the fundamental issues for achieving women's rights. Furthermore, the article discusses how NGOs and human rights activists are promoting women's rights, and it provides more practical issues like security and stability which women are involved with daily (Mills & Kitch, 2006).

An interview by Royesh and Ashraf Nemat shows that education is an important tool for the women's empowerment process; to achieve this goal, they point out that security is important (Royesh and Ashraf Nemat, 2011).

2.4 Literature dealing with cultural and religious aspects

Kabeer and Khan (2014) discuss how an ideological tug-of-war over women's place in Afghanistan has been going on for decades between the modernized tendencies of the urban elites and the conservative represented groups by the Islamic religious leaders. The study is based on women's observations and interviews and depicts precious material on the subject which is more relevant for this thesis' interest.

G. Nourya (2016) writes that women's religious and domestic roles within households are considered a crucial fact and how they were exposed from the social life when the Taliban ruled the country. Education for women was limited to learning the Quran within their homes.

The period of their rule 1996-2001 was considered the most barbaric towards women in Afghan history. Kissane 2012) reflects that gender equality has been rising as a crucial factor in Afghanistan. This viewpoint has been supported by the Islamic feminists and Quranic scholars and could be seen as an important step toward women's rights to education (Qarizadah, 2015:p.23).

Choudhury talks about gender apartheid in Afghanistan and compares this situation with other Islamic countries like Indonesia, however, he did not argue for the constitution (Choudhury, 2007). The article by Tripathi (2003) also talks about the time of suppression when the Taliban was in power. The interesting argument in this article is that women should learn to counter whoever violates their rights. They should learn to have a voice as a victim is not a sin. Otherwise unreasonable tolerance and forbearance will destroy their fortune.

More articles also concentrate on the quantity of studies concerning girls' education higher levels. In all these articles, however, there is lack of discussion about when women attend schools or higher levels in education, how can they finish their studies when most of them have already started married life and have children, another basic hindrance towards women's higher education[12].

2.5 Education as an empowerment tool for women

I am not going in-depth to analyze whether education is empowering women globally or not, but I will briefly touch on the debate of what empowering women is, according to feminists and many other scholars, because it is needed to shed some light on my thesis.

There is a significant body of literature examining how women's empowerment has been or might be conceptualized and evaluated (Kissane, 2012; Afzali, 2017; Ahmadi, 2016; Huma, 2004). According to the literature I reviewed, women's empowerment is a complex

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[12] Traditionally girls after 25-29 years old cannot find a proper man to marry them, that is why girls entirely prefer married life when they start to go to universities(self-reflection).

issue; there is no consensus on where, what, and why empower women? Because through the numerous cultural interpretations, women's empowerment has a different outlook across the globe (McCarthy, 2017; Gupta, 2017; Mitroi *et al.*, 2016; Kes *et al.*, 2005; Sehin, Coryell & Stewart, 2017).

Since conception 80s and 90s, women's empowerment has been defined differently by different feminists in relation to their diversification discourses, such as power, control over resources (intellectual material), different ideologies, and so on (Cornwall, 2016). The study itself which brought together scholars from more than 60 countries (Afghanistan included), was founded through the generosity of the British, Swedish and Norwegian countries to study and examine different cultural, economic and political restrictions on women's empowerment that caused inequality in gender issues. Feminists also assert that empowerment cannot be granted by others; instead, the basic structure of the societies should be changed in favor of equality. Feminists see empowerment as creating the ability to have the capacity and the right to act and influence things that involve women. As woman, we want to be free of dependency that has locked us into situations of subordinate and restrictive positions, cultural and social norms. Empowerment is neither a fixed nor an independent concept; it is relational and must embrace the essential social factors. Its process is changeable, in that institutions[13]can help for an effective result (Cornwall, 2016:pp.343–346). There should be a notion to foster women's empowerment even by apolitical agencies which engage with power structure. It should be keenly considered to design in favor of gender equality, otherwise there is a risk that powerful dominant groups misuse it (Mosedale, 2014).

According to (Kes *et al.*, 2005; Sehin, Coryell & Stewart, 2017a; McCarthy, 2017), many factors (e.g. equal opportunity for employment, equal heritage system, and so on) can empower women, and education[14] can be one of these. No one can say which criteria can be better than the other, because it is also a context specific factor.

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[13] Women's international non-governmental organizations WINGO have been established and achieved many task through institutionalization of women's rights in many contexts, and establishment of UN-Women itself is one accepted fact for mobilization of women's new position through last century in the world as well in the global south (Russell, 2015:pp.28–29, 61–63) .

[14] Good income and education is two main factors for empowering women (Gupta, 2017). According to Robinson P. literacy is better option for this reason. Women constitute 2/3 of the world population, paralyzing such huge number lead to depth gender gap which further causes a negative affection on development (Robinson-Pant, 2014).

But still women's rights are globally, not effusively, attained. Even in most liberal-democratic societies, women rights do not seem to be completely achieved. It also depends on how the concept is being defined by different stockholders. The World Health Organization (WHO) argues that we do not have any complete achievement to women's empowerment in an ideal level around the world (Mitroi *et al.*, 2016).

As women empowerment has been analyzed from a number of perspectives like economic, finance, education and so on, we have scrutinized each of them alongside with other procedures. Activists have often fallen under cultural and social environmental pressures (Mitroi *et al.*, 2016; Mosedale, 2014; Julian, 2014; Cornwall, 2016).

These authors propose the comprehensive definition of empowerment as a concept, and that it will be achieved if we limit its meaning. There is one common sense about this concept's definition: having the sense of stability in combination with an absence of feeling of powerlessness. Mitroi *et al.* (2016:pp.273–274) further counter argue that this sense also differs from context to context. For instance, Afghan women's potential empowerment will bring economic stability that should be coupled with social and physical security.

Kabasakal Arat. (2011:pp.462–463) argues that having higher financial and social power enhances a woman's decision-making power. Different criteria which seem as empowering factors can be seen differently in different areas.

But the clear point is that nations with more gender equality have greater economic growth with more competitive opportunity and grow faster than where women do not have such opportunity, and their development will not be sustainable. Because women cannot participate fully in economic, social and political life, it is a crucial fact that if women who make more that half of the nation are paralyzed, this will undoubtedly affect the outcome (Julian, 2014:p.25).

Reviewing literature also looks in depth at the literacy and education rate. Education can be seen as one strong factor of empowering women in Afghanistan. Hence, I aimed to search about it empirically and want to see how women themselves think, measure and struggle

for achieving this criterion. The next chapter I will highlight methods and why they are used in my thesis: also, I will discuss my ethical and moral disposition due to my participants giving their data and identities.

3. Methodology

In this chapter I will clarify my research method and how I collected and used the data in this thesis.

3.1 Field and primary sources

Concerning my research ethical considerations, I sought to capture the accounts of struggle and life experiences through the Afghan women's interviews and discussions. Three focus group discussions were conducted in three different areas: one focus group in the Center, one focus group in the North of Afghanistan, and one in the Southwest. Researching on women, particularly in the Afghan society given its security issues, make the researcher more aware of ethical considerations. In principle this means not making any harm and demanding more caution during fieldwork.

Thereby my primary data was collected via interviewing ten highly educated metropolitan women who have their agency as socially active women in the Afghan society, I used the semi-structure method as the most proper one. My participants were chosen from the most modern cities of Afghanistan and some of them already have high social-political stature to have their agencies in the environmental where they live. They requested me not to mention the cities where they are living because of security issues[15].

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[15] Because there are not many high positioned women in every part, so probably they were known if the cities were named so, I ethically respect their wish and considered it (author's reflection).

With the semi-structure interview in-depth method, I could direct my interviewees from one question to the next (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015; Bryman, 2012). I asked all my participants a set of relatively fixed questions divided into ten; as I anticipated, every interview required around one and half to two hours; their experiences, opinions on the topic, and questions were tailor-made slightly to suit their previous responses.

My epistemological position is largely indebted to feminist, women's agency and empowerment ethnography theory which mostly posits the perceptions of femininity and its complex relationship with women (because of their position mostly in the conservative societies) that every researcher should consider as ethical considerations toward their vulnerable participants (Skeggs, 2002; Zulfacar, 2006; Huma, 2004; Kissane, 2012; Skeggs, 2004).

As the interviews are key data in my research, data was keenly recorded with the needed parts written (Walford, 2007:p.145). An open-ended discursive type of interview opens up to an iterative process of research which will lead to a convincing outcome. The interview program was not based upon a set of relatively rigid pre-determined questions and prompts. The open-ended, discursive nature of the interviews permitted me to an interactive method of refinement lines of reflections and thoughts identified in earlier interviews, and could be used in following interviews (Bryman, 2012:p.473) from which I highly benefited. Hence, I did not follow a notion of a structured interview schedule because it would have created limitations when talking to my interviewees. I did not set a limited time-frame as well for my interview because of my interviewee's tendency to talk about things in general. First of all, they wanted to talk about our personal lives, both on the ground experiences from two completely different cultures and places and what we both achieved since I was now living abroad.

According to Yang, using comprehensive and relevant language with the interviewee will be beneficial to receive fruitful data, so I used their native language mostly Dari, sometimes even Uzbek and Pashtu. The aim was to generate comfortable conversation with my participants. I wrote down the information like (name, age) and their specific kind of employment position, and important given data because it relates to their power relationship toward society and it determines how long they can influence the society. I did not use full

video calls, but still used a short period of our interview as a video chat to see each other's face (Yang, 2015:pp.454–455), because of interests on both sides based on our similar origin and connectivity.

Following Yang's suggestion, indepth narrative interviews are the obvious option. My interviewees also had their own interpretations and explanations about events, and they also evaluated on their own terms and their own expressions (Yang, 2015:pp.454–455).

3.2 Secondary data

My secondary data is all the written articles and books related to the subject that I used throughout this research. I strictly considered to put equal weight between primary and secondary data as Bryman (2012:pp.129–143) suggests because then can one researcher have a rational outcome, where my objectiveness and honest discussion about challenges are being also considered.

As Sultana (2007:pp.375–380) argues, while collecting data I considered three aspects: 1) practical and pragmatic, 2) the personal and ethical, and 3) the epistemological and ontological aspects. Ethical issues during data collection for my secondary data were reliability and replicability. I was keen about whether the used data had base as a legitimate document for using as academic data (Bryman, 2012:pp.389–390).

3.3. Sampling

My interviewees are from different parts of Afghanistan. Starting from the Center, an important area which has more tendency for 'Westernization and democratization' and can make differences toward gender equality. Then to the North and South-West which will have different results and different kinds of promotion/prevention on this topic. Because that majorities in this

district belong to different ethnic groups that their social behavior can have positive/negative effects on gender equality[16].

All participants are chosen through the so-called steered snowballing method via my friends. They have many things in common and a lot of differences. I can obviously make no claims to depicting a full picture of these women as socially or politically active women who can make differences, but I tried to make sure to assemble women that would fit the subject in my research.

All my participants are aged more than 25, highly educated, having degrees in medicine, chemistry, mathematic and social science from universities in Afghanistan. Some of them have further degrees from Iran or Pakistan. They occupy higher positions (socially and politically). They self-identify as highly educated, politically engaged, and feminists, working as lecturers in universities and activists of NGO connected to women's rights' activities. Traditionally, all live with their families, and the married participants live with their husband and children or other family members like mother-, father-, sister- and brother-in-law's.

As my interview is focused on a specific group (i.e. highly educated metropolitan women) (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015:pp.61–76) who believe in their own influence on the society for women's rights, sampling my participants 'as a group' for the purpose of this thesis has mainly the same characteristic, conveying the message of gender equality.

I also acknowledge that they all do not know each other personally or even they do not agree on many issues with each other, but still I can place them as a group for my research's specific purpose because of their agency toward one goal. As Bryman points out, sampling social collectivity is the result of our own perception out of our understanding of self-classification which refers to our own socially constructed understanding. People's behavior is

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[16] Different linguistic groups like Pashtuns, settled more in south, culturally coherent and cohesive that share more in common with closed bordered Pakistan as well Tajiks, Uzbeks, Hazera, Turkmens, have more familiarity with Iran at the south-west and Tajikistan and Uzbekistan at the north of the country.

influenced by their own lived contextual realities. My participants meet the requirements of my chosen theme, so their consciousness and experiences are relevant to my research topic (Bryman, 2012:pp.418–428).

3.4 The interview process

My interview process started by contacting some old friends who live and work in high positions in different parts of Afghanistan. I began to contact my closest friend who lives and works in a high position in one of the universities. She would also provide me two more women in the same position. We talked about all ethical considerations and confidentiality of their identities and given data. We agreed that I would by interviewing her then after one week proceed to interview her friends. When the time came, however, she did not reply to my messages and phone calls. I was worried about her because living as an educated woman and being politically active is very risky in Afghanistan. Eventually, she replied and apologized for this inconvenience giving me some ordinary reason. Of course, I asked her if the interview with me would affect her life and told her she could quit if she wanted to, but she refused.

For the next group from the North of Afghanistan, I asked one of my friends again and my former professor who now works with NGOs to find me such women and they provided me two women. Two other participants are also my friends and work as medical doctors with high positions on women's rights' activities. For the Center part participants, I also contacted one friend who works as a women's rights' activist and could provide two more well educated women. One works as a medical doctor, another is a university lecturer, and both are women's rights' activists. Every interview was conducted in more than two phone calls on different days, according to their given time, which took 1,5 to 2 hours for each interview. The interviews were conducted via Skype, Viber, WhatsApp, and Facebook.

The challenges and limitations (Sultana, 2007) I faced were related to gender issues. Access to my participants without guidance of any male figure was in the first place as I anticipated, my main challenge, because most women in Afghanistan consider permission of their male relatives[17] (fathers, brothers and husbands). The important point for me was that I

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[17] Depending this society in my back ground, I know the fact.

wanted their reply to my questionnaire without any male's influence. So, I tried to interview women without any male input. I believe that I succeeded. One other challenge was to interpret their points of view because the interview was conducted in their native languages which have different narrative aspects depending on the specific culture. It required being keen to convey the exact message which can be hidden in sighs, tone of voice, and joking moods which can be different for different cultures and also extremely time-consuming. This too was a successful experience for me.

3.5 How data was codified and analyzed

After I collected all data, it was time to organize and codify my research data and analyze them. As Bryman (2012:p.569) suggests, I used the tactic of 'open coding' where I broke down the collected data, examined them, compared, conceptualized, and categorized them. I read my data of interviews, highlighted the repetitive parts, noticed and marked relevant parts with sections to discuss. I re-read and double-checked to ensure I did not miss any granted information. Thereafter, I categorized the data regarding its importance and started to detect patterns.

First, I interpreted the data in English. Every category was highlighted in one special color to which I provided a name. For example, data regarding family support was highlighted in a green color which can symbolize more extended research. I was keen to notice if there was any contradictory narrated story while my participants talked, to double check their story with them, but as they were very aware of the subject and purpose of my interview, the process all went well, giving me no reason to raise such doubt (Gambs & Kim, 2015).

As most researchers believe, qualitative methods in social science in the form of in-depth interviews, with a narrative life story could offer the rich detail of information, feeling and experiences. I found my data very rich and detailed and that made it difficult to place in this thesis' limited space (Gambs & Kim, 2015:p.22), considering the conceptions like gender role and agency, family support, empowerment, security and patriarchy.

Having finished codifying and categorizing all data, the next initiative was to refer to the right literature to analyze my collected data. Interpreting the data and certain findings pushed me to dig alternative relevant topics and angles relevant to women's agency, made me strengthen my previous written theory section and literature review chapter. This made the analysis of my collected data fruitful.

3.6 Limitations and Demarcation

I do not claim that the group of my participants in this thesis represents all other highly educated women in Afghanistan. However, this provides a comprehensive analysis of educated women and their agency for forwarding their goal to cause changes toward equality from my participants' own prospective. Due to the sampling method used and the small size of the sample the findings of this study cannot be generalized (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015; Bryman, 2012). Hence my participants cannot be seen as representative of all highly educated women in Afghanistan. This is more of an explorative study that seeks to uncover the lived experiences and perceptions among some key actors in the struggle for gender equality, and therefore, it seeks to illustrate some of the insiders' views that can be found.

Qualitative research aims not for a representative sampling of a group, so my targeted groups in this study does not represent the larger or the whole society.

3.7 Ethical concerns

As researchers we will contribute our fieldwork for minorities' rights and those people who are living and who can generate social change. When we as researchers deal with our fieldwork, it becomes very important that our priority becomes the security of our interviewees and not expose anybody to harm. Our trustworthiness and honesty can make a difference. We know the

brutality and cruelty against their rights; therefore, we should ethically and morally be dedicated to conduct ethical fieldwork (Sultana, 2007).

Considering ethics as a master's student in Lund university, I was well aware of carrying out the research in line with the Swedish Research Council guidelines. These include all angles of my research process, namely how data collection should be transparent, assuring the anonymity and confidentiality of data and that of participants, and even making a provision of volunteer consent by informing respondents. I followed the council's advice step by step. (Hermerén, 2011).

Confidentiality was an ongoing process between my participants and I; I guaranteed them that their data and identity would remain confidential (Bryman, 2012:pp.123–140; Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). The research process is steered by the nature of my research question (Bryman, 2012:p.9). Information and consent document were established by me, informing all participants about my purpose. I got their consent at the beginning, regarding my research topic, purpose, who I am and what I do. In addition, I verbally informed them that the collected data will be used for the Master's thesis which will be published at a public website managed by the Lund University Library (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015:pp.61–76; Bryman, 2012:pp.123–140).

Ethically, I was also conscious of different power relationships and different goal perspectives of both parts as two parts of one project which I was navigating. It is my thesis, and they will only contribute to my endeavor (Sultana, 2007:pp.375–376). Therefore, I told them that whenever they want, they can withdraw from my research.

If issues are judged as taboo (like sexual or anti-religious reflections), I needed to know about them. I tried to carefully use words that delicately got my points across without hurting or humiliating anybody. And I was aware of scholars' points about conducting fieldwork: to consider that danger is unpredictable (Sultana, 2007:pp.374–375; Crawford, Kruckenberg & Loubere, 2017:pp.157–158). It strengthened my duty as a researcher, for building mutual respect and recognition with my participants.

3.8 Self-reflexivity

The researcher's identity and power relationship are other crucial factors that affect the research process. I am aware of who I am as a researcher and whom I am researching, what I am researching, and what my research means. Every part of this criteria will be substantial and effective; like the researcher's gender, ethnicity, attire, age, abilities, outsider/insider, and so on (Sultana, 2007:pp.377–383).

For me as a female researcher who depends on the Afghan society as my background, I will take advantage of being as an insider; my participants will trust me more. At the same time, I have lived outside of Afghanistan for a long time accepting more norms from new societies, which makes me also an outsider and not a pure insider. It made me more conscious that my questions should not touch any sensitive feelings of my participants. So, I have my potential and dynamic identity which provides both an advantage and a disadvantage. My being an outsider privileges me more as a researcher, thus giving me a better position in Afghan society as both an insider/outsider. As a student at Lund University that status affects my research outcomes in a fruitful way.

I conducted interviews with women who work in higher positions (elite[18] in different levels) to explore the challenges being faced by them as important stakeholders.

I should add, taking this into consideration, I will place my position in the third category, as outlined in the section of literature review as author of this thesis. Coming from the same background, I think the main challenges for the promotion of high education are the cultural and religious values, beside all other challenges. As a result, to draw my own standards according to these three sub-fields, the third sub-field stands as a base element to create or

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[18]. Elites are seen mostly as authorities, intelligent with positive aspects, and they can also be as incompetence, self-interested, with many negative aspects that can be also victims or criminals, even elites do not always consider themselves powerful working with them means sometimes challenging (likewise my participants as women have limited space to forward their goal in the Afghan traditional society (Crawford, Kruckenberg & Loubere, 2017:pp.124–140).

establish the other criteria for promotion/prevention of women's education or at least high-level education.

I am not claiming my research is completely free from bias, because our background and values can be reflected in our writing and chosen theme, but I claim to try and keep my objectiveness very serious, while using the given data from my participants and the literature[19]. I am ethically convinced that I avoided mostly any bias and judged my participants or their given data. I tried to make the research outcome honest, transparent, and objective. As self-reflection and representativeness are crucial criteria for the research process, I tried to critically examine my power relations toward my participants. I acknowledge that my relationship with the subject "gender equality" places me in a biased position, which I am aware of. Therefore, I strived to keep my distance and objectiveness while writing this thesis.

I am not here to represent my interviewees; they are able to represent themselves through their given data. Also, I am not claiming to solve any 'existing' problem; but I am claiming to depict the existing reality toward gender equality in the context I researched.

I also really care about people whom I worked with in this project. I know them well, and I admire them for their braveness. They made it possible for me to finish this project.

4. Theoretical framework

In this chapter, I will outline the feminist theoretical discussions and approaches that have guided my analysis of the empirical findings. My tendency to use feminism as the theoretical framework is because of its relational theoretical connection with gender mainstreaming, which is a concern of this thesis.

4.1 Feminism, conceptualizing gender and women's education

Womanhood has always been counted as a subordinate gender and as a second-class human

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[19] My life is affected in many ways in term of gender inequality through my lived experience in Afghanistan.

being according to Bourdieu, he sees class and gender as an intimate and inseparable criterion. He did not consider gender as a form of capital, because he did not pay attention to gender and capital. Instead, he merely tended to use gender to examine class advantage. He saw women as a player of a role that accumulates capital for men, because according to him, women are not interested in any accumulated capital for themselves, which places them in a lower position (Huppatz, 2009:pp.46–48).

But Wollstonecraft sees women's low position as the main reason in their lack of education. She further goes on to say, "Women are told from their infancy, and taught by the example of their mothers, that a little knowledge of human weakness, justly termed cunning, softness of temper", and she criticizes it (Huppatz, 2009:p.192).

Wollstonecraft points out that women should have education for their own better prestige and well-being. She has a more thoughtful and fruitful impact about women's education in contemporary societies. She thinks that women can gain better positions in their lives by achieving higher education (Huppatz, 2009:p.193). We find more arguments from many feminists that education is one criterion that empowers women.

According to Gambs & Kim (2015:p.19), high education empowers women. They write that feminist scholar's backgrounds depict how the experiences of such scholars inspire others and how high education improved their lifestyle. Most importantly, educated women have their voice to demand social justice.

We have also countered standpoints from feminists which can be seen sharing vague positions in contemporary societies. For example: Cotterill, Jackson & Letherby (2007:p.1) in their article assess and argue that academia should be free from bias and the worldly struggles of power and wealth. We should have freedom to choose what we want to study in an environment of openness and tolerance where everyone can focus on the open exploration of ideas. They see education as a last assessment which can be counted for 'women's worth' (Cotterill, Jackson & Letherby, 2007:p.1).

Navarro's standpoint (2016) shows all societies less or more have patriarchal positions when it comes to gender equality, that is why she asks if we can generate a monotheistic religion for achieving liberty. Or even can we create one single feminist movement which takes into account all the basic wishes, needs and oppressions of women in diversify societies? (Navarro, 2016).

It shows we have complex strategies on gender equality, that means differences in individual societies, that make even the task of reaching an equal opportunity for all women complicated.

4.2 Women's agency and empowerment

In this sub-section I will discuss the conceptualizations of agency and empowerment that are central to my analysis. The concept of agency is crucial for feminist research, particularly for women who live in socio-cultural areas suppressed with strict religious values. With the focus on the women's agency in such societies, scholars perceive such women as actors rather than taking them as simply acted upon by male-dominated social institutions. By studying the women's resistance agency approach, they focused on women's challenges for changing some aspect of religious values. By the empowerment agency's approach they focused on how women interpret religious doctrine which further make them feel empowered in their everyday life (Burke, 2012).

Amartya Sen articulated that the agency shows the ability that a person can do to chase the value and achieve her/his goal. This ability encourages women to overcome every kind of barrier, stand against oppression individually or in groups, and make themselves heard in the society. The agency is seen for its intrinsic value (Hanmer & Klugman, 2016:p.237). It is seen as a tool that leads the women toward their empowerment, particularly when they stand for changing the regressive norms, institutions and even the perpetual positions of the subordinate role of women (Hanmer & Klugman, 2016:p.138; Ortiz-Rodríguez, K. Pillai & Manuel Ribeiro, 2017).

According to Hanmer and Klugman (2016), it is important although complex to measure

the key dimensions of the women's agency and empowerment in different societies. Following this notion in academic literature around agency, there has been magnificent progress on the empirical front and increased availability of data; the result shows diversity of its pattern across different societies. Their study is seen as the first and biggest investigation which represents 58 developing countries around the world, representing 80 percent of each country's female population. Regarding women's agency, they found different factors affecting this phenomenon. First of all, health, education, economic factors are seen as important variables to women's agency, but still there is no consensus about specific variants where the multidimensionality of it makes its interpretation complicated (Hanmer & Klugman, 2016).

As agency and empowerment are key issues to the gender equality agenda, agency has intrinsic value and it carries significant implications for empowerment. It allows us to exercise other dimensions like well-being, better economic opportunities, engagement in the decision-making process, and so on (Hanmer & Klugman, 2016:p.257).

As women's agency became an important goal in developing countries in the recent years, there are a few social progressions that count as desirable criteria in the women's agency. This agency is not only influential for social well-being but also for creating a better community. It also functions as a catalyst to promote education, postpone some social suppression and early marriages, and even to create a small family size (Ortiz-Rodríguez, K. Pillai & Manuel Ribeiro, 2017:p.206).

The gender agency and self-identity are interpreted and internalized by people themselves, which is also influenced by the persons' knowledge and in the kind of cultural value where he/she lived, and how values are perceived individually regarding your own knowledge. Mostly, these perceptions are shaped in a patriarchal heterosexual relational body of the society, embedded in people's cognitive and emotional infrastructure where your judgement, choice and reflection internalized many of these socio-culture suppressions which will not only affect the individual's self-knowledge, but also the clustery understanding of groups of people (Meyers, 2002).

4.3 Women's agency and empowerment in patriarchal settings

Finally, I will briefly outline the discussion on the analysis of women's agency and empowerment in highly patriarchal and conservative socio-cultural settings. This theoretical discussion is especially relevant to my study and will inform my analysis of the findings. The women's agency is not an easy task under strict patriarchy according to the feminists' geography lens. The male representative in social affairs normally can allow for the universal presumption to challenge gender inequality, where the female can have their agency as a decisive reality in spite of exposure to the oppressive behavior of the society (Schütte, 2014:pp.1187–1189).

As my thesis deals with women's agency, empowerment and their self-identity towards gender equality, I would analytically discuss how this agency in this particular context is seen by scholars. Women's agency as said should be considered as specific norms based agency differently in different societies (Burridge, Payne & Rahmani, 2016).

Afghan women's behavior is shaped by specific context-based norms, which further causes continuous suppression on women. The women's agency is also based on uncertainty as L. Abu- Lughod argues. She further sees this kind of agency as incomplete.

Furthermore, women in such contexts rely more in family kinship which cause them the failure to some extent of their agencies as feminist scholars Sultan Barakat and Gareth Wardell's articulate. Such practices according to Valentine M. Moghadam also undermine forwarding their agencies (Kabeer & Khan, 2014:p.2,3).

This family kinship and women's dependency cause women to internalize injustice and reality of their context and pretend and take it somehow as justice realities. For example to have family's older and men's permission to do anything as a mature person will be seen as un-necessary attitude in many liberal contexts of the world which really creates limitations in women's mobility forwarding their agency (Kabeer & Khan, 2014:p.20). Zulfacar (2006) also offers a critique about normalizing the practice which undermines women's agency. Such normalization and internalization have further led to the cultural silence in which women suppress themselves and do not raise their voice. This further causes more violation of their rights to which social scholar Freire strictly critiques about (Sehin, Coryell & Stewart, 2017).

How women should be encouraged and how their abilities should be heightened in such contexts, is one way to empower women. But women's ability is also seen as an inter-relating variable that depends on context specific norms. Hanmer & Klugman (2016) see it in three factors namely agency, resources and achievements, which can be considered as individual facts when it comes to different societies. First and formost, women should be empowered and encouraged to raise their voices, and encouraged to forward their agencies. For a strong belief and agency as my participants argue, we require strong ambitious and logical consistency to mobilize it. The capability for a desire change might need such dedicated agents in the form of individuals which further initiate groups which can further modify the structural inconsistencies.

5. My finding and Analysis

5.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I move on to my empirical material to answer my sub-questions in this research. To analyze these materials, I would benefit the gender agency and empowerment perspective and how my participants' agency is seen by the feminist theory. Using the conceptualization of gender equality in the form of women's rights to education as my previous chapters mentioned, this chapter will highlight and analyze my participants' descriptions about their own experiences and struggles toward their successful goals. I want to start by showing how my participants considered their upbringing in terms of being encouraged to achieve higher education, and what kind of difficulties they faced. Also, I would try to depict which kind of connectivity with the social work they could generate relating to their involvement in spatial politics (some of them) and how the existing fear (because of the pessimistic view against women's voice and unstable situation) was handled.

All my participants stressed three main bodies (family support, security, and state promoting programs),[20] as stimulating/preventing high education to girls; I will discuss every crucial issue according to my participants' narrated stories. After interviewing my participants from a distance, I want to highlight my participants' meaningful points about their achievements. As I also discuss their opinions on whether their families and their attitudes towards women's rights to education have been different from other families around them. Their reflections offer their individual micro perspectives as urban elite women, and I do not claim any macro-level study in my tiny limited research.

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[20] The governmental economical support was one of the issues that all my interviewees talked about. Burridge, Payne & Ramani (2016:p.146) also point out the same argumentation, according to them financially support by the state will increase women's enrolment to the high schools and universities. According Habiba Sorabi the Minister for Women's Affairs also women right will not be improved without economic empowerment of women. She further claims that women's poverty constraining their abilities to participate in social and political arena, her ministry is trying to higher up this ability (Huma, 2004:p.27).

5.2 Family support

In this section I look at the role of my participants' families, who have magnificent influence on their daughters' progressive path and their agencies. 'Family' of course means different things in diversified societies with different cultures. All my participants grew up in nuclear families and then moved to other families upon marriage[21], then to extended family members by surrounding themselves with in-laws and having children. Of course, the people who surrounded them have influenced their lives. Only one of my participants is grown up and lived in a stable family with her only brother and mother, and never married. All these differences reflected in my participants' attitude, behavior, and their self-determination. Moreover, these families have been seen as fruitful families within the Afghan society.

In the previous parts of this thesis, we saw how this society is fragmented by decades of civil war and military conflicts. As a result, the children, mainly daughters, could not go to school and remained mainly illiterate. Highly educated women are not so visible in Afghan society; fortunately, the situation is changing slowly.

Parental support

Parental support is one main part of my participants' argument for promoting girl's education. Remembering Zulfacar's (2006) statement, Afghanistan is a socio-cultural conservative society. Every decision of family members, especially daughters, should be corresponded with parental desire. Respect to parents, particularly to fathers, and their decision is a core family value.

As Dr. Hanifa's expression: *"[I] remember my father was saying; if you were a boy*

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[21] In Afghan society, married girl should move to husband's family.

with this talent, you could achieve more success in your life… [Y]ou still have the chance to progress. You are my pride… [I]n my opinion there is always an anxiety of there being gender differences, which is effectual on your decision and even on your progress in the society…". She added that at times she hated being a female, and sometimes when she looked around and compared her own situation with others, particularly when she could help other women using her position to influence their lives toward gender equality, she would then be satisfied. Albeit, she grew up in a family that did not discriminate against the female position, she still could feel it from within in the society. According to Sehin, Coryell & Stewart (2017a:p.97), girls' existence is seen as a burden and shame to many families in Afghanistan, so the whole society somehow looks at this gender not as a human being, and it is internalized and accepted by many.

Eight of my participants stressed their father's role as a core member who had entire power in the family's decisions and encouraged them toward women's agency. We can obviously feel gender hierarchies to which father as a man was privileged to the highest positions, which most of my participants did not even complain about. It is functioning as an accepted norm. The daughters seem to be happy to have their father with a supportive behavior. They even feel blessed.

As Sehin, Coryell & Stewart (2017b:p.95) articulate, in most families the women should have the permission and support of men or older women in the family for forwarding their agency. They can not make any decision by themselves as a cultural practice in most families, because according to the families, they don't know what they want to do or to study in the first place (Sehin, Coryell & Stewart, 2017b:p.95).

Tahera, a women rights' activist, thinks that having a supportive father is God's gift. And she feels blessed to have such a father. *"……. [M]y mother is also supportive, but she cannot decide if there is a counter point from my dad; fortunately, my mother works outside home as a high school teacher because my dad is an enlightened man…".* She also hopes her future husband behaves like her father with a supportive attitude toward gender equality. And she thinks it will also be chosen by her parents because they know better than herself what is

best for her.

There can be emanated a notion of uncertainty about these women's agencies. L. Abu-Lughod's (Kabeer & Khan, 2014:p.2) also sees it as an ambiguous endeavor for forwarding their complete agency. She asks, "can even these women succeed to promote universal norms-based values with their agency? Because they have limited their mobility based on their own cultures".

While a father tried to promote the daughter's progress, making it feasible that other family members support the daughter's decision further creates new opportunity with her future husband, who should also respect the already taken steps of her agency.

 Overstepping of boundaries is not an easy task in Afghan conservative society. Confronting these conservative norms from my participants' families' side is not acceptable in many other families, who call such men 'womanized male'. This concept is seen as a disgrace to any man. But with a conscious notion to accept liberal norms in many enlightened liberal families, they mostly do not care about these kinds of dissertations. The only thing according to my participants they want to keep themselves away is "social taboos"; likewise, they do not go too much into liberal norms. Connecting all realities to religious doctrine is carefully being considered, for avoiding any serious social confrontation. On other hand, they do not want to do anything which is seen as a social taboo.

In contrast to this, when it comes to most of my participants' family relations, their 'male relatives' initiated changes within their own families. As Dr. Parwin expressed: "*[M]y father and brothers were supportive to encourage me to be successful in my all educational process, without them I could not manage to struggle…".* She thinks it is not easy to continue the high education as a lonely woman. *"…[Y]ou see prejudice everywhere around you and it is so challenging that without support from my family, it was not possible… [T]hanks to God for granting me such a supportive family…".*

Binding themselves in such boundaries is initiated by the social difficulties around them. They are not in the position of coping by themselves, which limits their agency. This argumentation is approved by feminist scholars Sultan Barakat and Gareth Wardell's dissertation, about families' empathy. According to them, family kinship means a lot to women. The consequence is their failure to forward their entire agency which leads to further damage their full participation in the decision-making process in the family, as well as in the society, which additionally assists the durability of the patriarchal society. While women themselves claim that their role and their considerable power in domestic issues in societies like Afghanistan, their values could be connected to their mother-ness figure. Valentine M. Moghadam also sees it as a practice which undermines the women's agency (Kabeer & Khan, 2014:p.2,3).

Dr. Shoesta, whose family was extremely observant about gender equality, was the only daughter within four of her brothers. Her parents kept strict rule between their children, considering gender equality. Dr. Shoesta comments, *"[M]y mother is an illiterate woman who never told me that I must behave as a girl, as other of my friends' mothers used to say ... "[M]y father was an enlightened man and supported me in every step; otherwise, I could not have succeeded so long .... "[N]ow my husband does the same".* She is happy that her husband is cooking, taking care of their children and so on, while she is busy with her studies and works outside the home. With that, she feels very emancipated in her own private life, both physically and spiritually. She feels blessed and happy to have both of her families' support, particularly the male family members' support provides the basic element for women's prosperity.

The gender relations of my interviewees are complicated by the fact that all these women live in a relational dependency on their families, parents in the first place and husbands in the second place, as well as other family members. Some of them are independent financially, while others are independently-dependent and are under strict control, which depicts the deeply conservative social structure which has been consciously accepted, even by such intellectual women.

Hesitation on fathers' authoritarian role

While most of my participants think it is logical that the father core actor in the family, supports his daughter's progress, some of my participants think that the patriarchy still creeps into our every decision in the society despite our best efforts. It is men who should decide when it comes to important issues in the families. Some of my participants pointed out that mothers have sometimes serious conflicts to defend their daughters' interests. They also indicated/detected the internalization of this process as accepted reality by women as mothers (three of my participants) and they have completely taken it as a normal path through their lives.

But being a woman means subordinate gender, according to many people, is wrong as stated by my participants. As an illiterate woman, you will normally think that higher education and working in high positions are only men's rights. And they think God has given this talent to men as they are privileged being upper family members and key social actors, in which my participants counter and think it is unjust to think so. Karishma, advocate and women rights activist says: *"[M]y mother never complains about things that my father decides, and she as a woman was compelled to leave her school at a very early age and could not continue her education. She accepted it as normal ..."*.

She thinks this acceptance is wrong. Her mother was prevented from going to school because she was married and had children. Her mother is not upset or frustrated, because it was the decision of her mother- and father-in-law. Karishma's mother also wanted her daughter to quit her school because of her in-law's decision, and even her own father. However, Karishma's sister resisted and helped her not to quit.

While most of my participants were satisfied with their father's being around to encourage and support them, some of them also mentioned patriarchal attitude of social structure with a mild humor that contradicted it. Some were explicitly upset that their manly relatives (father, brothers or husband/in-laws) decide over everything with which they did not agree. Gender equality perceives differently in different families. All my participants' families cogitate the gender equality issue established an almost equal position with their daughters and

promoted it to their agency as being highly educated metropolitan women who could work outside the home. It enables the participants the possibility to avoid daily confrontation in their intimate relational network at home and within their acquaintances.

To create changes slowly in the social structure will be constructive. Achieving this task, families should be considered as basic and creative elements according my participants. Because the family is valued as a high element of society, living with families was also esteemed highly for generating a reputation of respectable teenage and adult men and women.

Participants' reflections about existing social norms

Afghanistan as a conservative socio-cultural society has always been limited for the women's movement. Having a voice as a woman itself is unsafe. That is why we see women are bounded to a traditional silence about their suppression which further caused their position as the subordinate gender (Sehin, Coryell & Stewart, 2017:p.92).

As my participants' hyphen narrated stories depict, people look at Islamic doctrine as very justice principled. Hence, all of them reflected to be pleased to have Islam as their religion. All participants were correspondingly keen on stressing their privileged and honored position as a dominant group in the society to narrate the excellence of their humbleness. They live with high stature within the society. Even for having your voice heard, you should connect your discussions to Islam and Quran they express. Connecting to Huma's words (2004:p.27), many Afghans really believe that the Quran has offered women enough rights. They think it is fundamentalist interpretations of the Quran which prevents them from claiming their rights. Huma further goes on, human and women's rights' discourses have different connotations from those who debate on political and intellectual grounds. Afghan educated [22]women see it as

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[22] Sorabi, Women's Affair Minister also expressed, Islam is here to cover women's right as human being. She supplementary adds, Islam has given the same right to woman as a man to be educated, she says her ministry works within Islamic framework, which is a justice scaffold (Huma, 2004:p.27).

having a secure political and economic freedom as individuals to have the abilities of practicing their cultural and religious rights within their community without any suppression or fear.

Remember Sultan Barakat and Gareth Wardell's argument which is based on the 'Western feminist prism' which sees women's continuous suppressed position is their own internalized values which place them as subordinates (Kabeer & Khan, 2014:p.3).

My interviewees were highly aware of their social position and the 'morale' of highly educated women. Some of my participants self-described as highly positioned women within their surrounded society. They know that their suggestions, recommendations, and advice will be measured in the society when they raise an issue. People usually accept their advice. But three of my participants (all worked as women's rights activists) suggested that they should carefully reflect on things when it is needed for their suggestion, that also could be a contribution or even can be the opposite.

Albeit, participants were stressing their influence on the new development which was started after 2001 and seems to be more open to accept more progress toward equality. Karishma, advocate, human and women's rights activist, believes that the Quran has given women equal rights; the only thing women need is some support from their surrounding society. *"[T]he only thing that we (women/girls) need is the supportive behavior of our families in the first place and the governmental opportunities and subsidies to promote women's education and the rest we can handle; we are going to achieve the goal with happiness…."* was expressed by her and the seven other participants.

I thought even this dependency itself caused prevention to the women's agency. It is the reality behind the locking women within a limited area as house-wives. Family relationships and specific social norms function as basic substances which legitimize injustice realities (have

permission from father, husbands, or elder women in the family to do anything) and call it 'justice discourses' in contexts like this. Even women on the progressive path are forwarding their agencies to the outcome of this particular family relationship (Kabeer & Khan, 2014:p.20).

5.3 Self-resistance for their agencies

In this section I will look at my participants' tolerance and struggles, as well as the problems being confronted. As they are seen as a bridge between the past and the future with their agencies, creating a new path for new generational expectations, some of them were involved in women's rights activities already from their school age, (e.g. how their agency was being shaped). They have a voice and the ability of expressing the things which seemed unjust, where they ought to have received appreciation, but instead were met with counter struggles, harsh words, or even threats.

Women support women

According to my participants, there is an tendency of feeling supportive toward other women. If a female is in a higher position, she always wants to be helpful to the other disparate. All my participants' discourses confirm this dissertation. For instance, when Maria, was going to school, she saw girls her age having problems doing their homework without any help. Some of these girls did not have a literate mother at home and, fathers obviously did not want to help their daughters. According to my participants, most of these fathers think it is enough when girls can read and write: more than that is not the business of a female.

Maria was upset upon hearing it, as her mother was a teacher. She talked with her mother and generated a class after their school time, so she could help these girls. *"[I]t seemed so wrong, as a little girl you are worrying about how to solve your problems with your little hands …[I] was very upset …[I] thought for many days about that, till I talked with my mother, then her help was a solution that calmed me down …".*

Likewise, Maria and all my other participants articulated that they should help other women when there is a need. All had inspiring stories about how they could assist others when there was need. Their help is based on their education. And according to their articulation, the requirement for women's education is always and everywhere. It stimulated my participants to be educated and to forward their agency to encourage and help others. According to them, education is one basic way to solve many social and cultural problems. All my participants think that all these problems we have in our society are based on our high illiteracy rate. The same argumentation is shared by Gures (2013:p.129) who even sees one of the basic consequences of the conflict and the civil war in Afghanistan because of the widespread illiteracy, especially among women.

Dr. Hanifa is another woman, who helped school girls in her first career as a teacher when she saw there was need for her assistance. She was a chemistry teacher in a female high school before becoming a doctor. She saw many had the problem of understanding her subject and many were sitting upset in the classroom and could not express their problem when, she decided to open a class after school hours and teach them. She even helped with some students' family problems by contacting their families. *"[I] talked with our chief at the school and gathered a circle of girls that could help each other if it was within our abilities. We could not do much, but still we had a center for gathering and talking. Sometimes, it had fruitful outcomes if we could contact families, when the families were not more resilient ...". -Dr. Hanifa.*

Albeit my participants mostly came from educated family backgrounds. They did not have big problems within the family, but in their network where they studied and worked, they have faced many girls/women and were helpful towards them. My participants have respectful positions as elite families; people hear their voices and respect their opinions. As Sehin, Coryell & Stewart (2017:p.95) also articulate, it is a fact that educated urban women's families in their own dependent society, women are treated more with respect and equality. In these families women can have their voices and their agency.

My youngest participant, Tahera, is working with an NGO that helps women and girls

to find jobs. She is upset about these women who have been exploited doing different kinds of work, as there is not a transparent system between employer and employees. She thinks the system is very corrupt, and women are the most exploited because they are more vulnerable. In addition, there is less opportunity to find a job as a woman. She believes in institutionalization of this problem in the whole country, and not just a few cities. "*... [O]ne or some few people cannot cope with all these existing problems ... [M]y heart aches when every time I face such coincidences ... [W]e should have more comprehensive programs within the whole country regarding this issue ...*"- Tahera

Of course, their assistance makes a difference in the micro-level around them. "*...[A]s women we should help each other, and we should understand each other better ... [I]t is my duty as an educated woman, if I see women facing problems, I should step in first, because women can trust a woman more than an activist male...[A]s a woman, I understand better the problem of another woman ...*"- Karima.

Karima's reflection was articulated by all participants, having sympathy toward other women, and it is seen as a moral obligation by these women. A social capital (relational network) has been shaped within women settled in the same area, and they are accommodating others if there is a need for their assistance and support.

5.4 Security

According to my participants' narrated stories, promoting their agency and participation in the social sphere, security is also one main requirement on which Burridge, Payne & Rahmani (2016:p.145) and many other scholars stress in their written articles. Women's physical and psychological security is being intensified when they start a career, as highly educated females, and participate in the social and political arena. According to my participants, beside physical security, mental and psychological security is also essential.

As my participants discussed, a psychological propaganda is going on based on Islamic extremist beliefs in these last decades, especially after 1996. But in counter struggles, educated women with the accommodation of related intellectual people are working to antagonize it. According to my participants, working on the elimination of psychological fear is important because it is one factor that mentally prevents women's enrollment in higher education. Physical threats are a reality that can be coped with by the state effort and religious institutions in the first place, then with the help of families.

Stubborn women forwarding their agency

With a feeling of appreciation, my participants are being so obstinate by forwarding their agencies. I asked my participants if they sometimes felt like giving up when it seemed like an intolerable situation. *"[I] think everyone here would at many times in her/his life be in a position of feeling like giving up when she/he feels lonely and desperate. Yes, sometimes when I was exhausted by different issues and felt lonely, I did feel like giving up, but I never did ..."*– Mina's expressions which I hardly heard from my other participants.

Dr. Parwin thinks one will never feel desperate if she/he has a supportive family around them, so in her coping with any problem, she had her father and her family around, so she never felt like giving up. *"....[I] faced many threatening situations while I was a student and when I am working as a lecturer and as a doctor, but I have my male relatives around me to encourage and support me .....[M]y husband is really supportive when it comes to my job outside the home, and he often gives me a lift to my work as safe transportation .... "*- Dr. Parwin.

All participants' resistance to forwarding their agency is the result of their network support which surrounded them. Karishma says: When she started work as a women's rights' activist in an NGO, it was after a long suffocating time for women to work outside the home in Afghanistan in 2001. By then, it was so unsafe to be a women's rights' activist. Nobody can predict when and where the danger will threaten you. Then, while being threatened in many forms, she felt exhausted and wanted to give up. Her family resisted her working outside

because they cared about her, but only her sister wanted her to continue and helped her towards it.

Closeness to the family and the family's supportive behaviour are always seen as central elements for the women's progressive path toward their agency in Afghanistan. These helped them to be obstinate to achieve their goal. But some scholars perceive women's dependency on their families pessimistic. For instance, social scholar and feminist, Lila Abu- Lughod, is doubtful that women will fully achieve goals in such societies like Afghanistan and be emancipated from all limitations. Because, according to her, in such communities these restrictions generate limitations toward their path to agency. She argues that reaching gender equality and justice is not simple, because in societies like Afghanistan women might prioritize other values such as closeness to family and the cultivation of virtue. She calls it personhood that societies bounded themselves to limitations which are a result of their diverse traditions (Kabeer & Khan, 2014:p.2).

Another participant had experienced a quite dangerous situation but was determined not to give up. Maria narrated her dangerous experience when she was a master's student in Kabul, the Capital city. *"[O]ne day in the classroom I heard a loud thundering sound, then I was unconscious. When I woke up, there was fog and smoke everywhere, and blood surrounded me; my leg and hand were completely broken. There were many glasses all over me. People around me were just collecting the dead bodies. I did not have any voice, could not move, and was in panic. I did not know what happened. Again, I went unconscious. When I woke up again, I was in the hospital…".* -Maria

The explosion was done in the form of suicide bombing which is more usual in these recent years in Afghanistan[23]. She articulated that her family already was against her higher education because of security issues, and this case intensified their resistance. When she recovered and could continue her education, her relatives and family did not want her to continue. *"…[I]I did not want to leave my study. I Just struggled as a lonely person then. Too*

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[23] Suicide bombing is a recent religious ideological war from extremists like Taliban toward those who are westernized or claim to forward democracy.

hard to overcome, but I succeeded, and I am proud of myself ...". -Maria.

These statements correspond with what has been previously said and what the reality of the situation is for women. She was hurt and had the problem of her family's confrontation because of her agency, which she wanted to go on. A hypothesis can also arise of an existing gruesome hidden reality behind the depicted element. Separating real and ideological fear is obviously important here. Talking about existing fear as gender-based threats, my participants made a clear, linguistic separation as they quoted the social and political activities, but their families' attitude and even their older generational family members, such as mother- and father in-laws, showed more resistance, which my participants saw as an irrational behavior toward their agency.

In such cases the actual hurt (feeling loneliness) from their regressive family attitude made the situation even worse; such hierarchies visibly upset my participants. According to them, this kind of acceptance of the social norms over the younger generation's desire depicts irrational arrogance and injustice. They argue: who can predict unknown future danger? It is many decades that Afghanistan has been involved in these conflicts. We cannot wait until the conflicts are over, since no one can say when the conflict will end. They do not blame any socio-political system that caused such chaos. They just want to advance their goal and live in this situation as a perpetual reality. So, they are distressed about some family attitudes. Obviously, they want it to be changed. They want no hindrance to promote their agency at least within their families. No matter how the situation and reality of the society looks, they should have the same position as a male.

Hanmer & Klugman's (2016:p.239) discussion also cofirms how material factors influence women's agency like norms, and the practice of relational kinship and family. Everyones' capacity for making choices has three dimensions: agency, resources and achievements. These factors are interrelated and altogether they can empower individuals and groups.

Another of my participants who experienced the extreme danger caused by a suicide bombing by the Taliban close to her university, reasoned that if a man can continue to study/work after such a dangerous accident, women should also. Tahmina, a lecturer, also did not give up when it happened. She was teaching while the explosion happened. She was not injured, but she experienced mental anxiety for some months; she recovered with her family and husband's efforts. She also articulated that the situation should be considered the same way for man and woman. *"... [L]ike a man, when he has to continue to live/ work in extreme situations, we should be considered in the same way. If we cannot change the reality of the unstable situation of our country for a man, it should be perceived the same way for a woman too".* - Tahmina.

She thinks it is not a matter of who gives up or not. The important thing is we should achieve this goal of forwarding our agency, and the hindrance should be somehow abolished, to which reality they need to come over and have their own authoritarian role. She thinks the best way for preventing such an incident is for the government and NGOs to try to find ways to prevent such events. Using religious perception by these leaders and conveying publicity can help mobilize peoples' understanding, to which most of my participants agree. Kolhatkar (2002:p.29) also confirms their statement: he also sees it as the best possible way to stimulate religious secularism, then we can generate noteworthy progress toward gender equality. The RAWA Afghan feminist unit also agrees with this assessment (Kolhatkar, 2002:p.28).

As Burridge, Payne & Rahmani (2016:p.146) point out, when working on women's agency and women's empowerment, we should consider the specific contexts of the women's life experiences and the existing challenges/hindrances, and should take their suggestions for how it could be managed in the best way. Beyond all the previously taken steps for the war-torn Afghan society, the situation for women is bleak and dangerous. For instance, these progressive steps often caused negative reactions to women and girls. Those who stepped into public life, they have often been faced with physical attacks, harassment, threats, and even murders[24] (Ahmadi, 2016:p.364).

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[24] Farkhunda's murder as 27 years old girl highly educated female is an evidence in this claim, who was falsely accused of burning Quran. She was killed by a mob of men who stoned and beat her till she died, then set her body on fire and then thrown into the Kabul river. It is not only the constitutional support that these women need instead, the state also should have the ability of guarantee and secure them in such incidences. Afghan constitution unfortunately has been rendered ineffective in

All my participants who experienced extreme danger in some part of their life feel their self-resistance is another reality which stimulated their agency toward success beside family support. Their stubborn behaviour is one undeniable truth toward their achievements. This is confirmed by Sehin, Coryell & Stewart (2017:p.92) who appreciate the braveness of Afghan women who will take any risk to help their communities and their country by forwarding their intelligent agency.

5.5 Possible change toward gender equality

According to my participants, the political system and social norms are being changed with new developments after 2001. My participants personally think that beyond any recent conflicts, the situation is being changed toward a positive development to gender equality.

Breaking boundaries

As my participants see themselves as part of an enlightened community in the Afghan society, their discussion and expression show how they try to overcome boundaries which limit their movement toward their agency. Of course, their activities and agencies are at a micro-level. I do not claim any overall result in discussing their experiences. My interviews depict these women are against conservative socio-cultural realities and want to overcome these boundaries.

Tahera, my youngest participant, reflected that she cannot tolerate any discriminatory word against women. She would stand against it if she heard any such discourses. In the Afghan society, you will daily face some discriminatory expressions against women like referring 'womanly attitude as less humanly character'. *"[M]y relatives' expression (wow, look at your father and brothers, working as real women) …"*. - Tahera.

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guaranteeing women's rights, because of its weak implementation process (Ahmadi, 2016:p.364).

According to my participants, the above words are seen as an attack on the Afghan cultural values, norms that functioned for centuries, and are fortunately, being slowly considered as wrong, at least by enlightened people and the new generation. Similarly, all my participants had criticized the practice of using discriminatory words on women's humanly prestige in daily conversations, especially if the conversation is delivered by a woman, according to them these women are mostly illiterate or have a low education.

Zulfacar (2006:p.33) also criticizes women who take it as normal conversation and internalize the patriarchal attitude of the society. According to her, women should stand against such mistreatment by society in the favor of their own equality. According to Sehin, Coryell & Stewart (2017), however, the desire for immutability is weakening in the Afghan conservative society. The more illiterate women or lower-educated women have had a limited role to mobilize or forward their agencies by keeping themselves only within existing strict boundaries.

Satisfied/unsatisfied family manner

The discussion of evolutionary changes within the society after 2001 and the families as a result of international efforts against the Taliban echoed throughout my participants' interviews. Albeit, the changes are not seen as clear cut that could function only toward prosperity; instead they are seen as slow and layered procedures which are going backward and forward. Hence, my participants could practice forwarding their agency starting from their home toward the society.

Most of my interviewees were satisfied with their own family manner and have a willingness of extending this manner to more families within the whole society. Besides, they are aware of not forcing their own desire on others since it can cause problems to the daughters instead of being helpful because many conservative families are not ready to accept changes. According to all my participants; it is painful to see girls' rights violated and not be able to do

anything which generates more anxiety. While explaining it to me, their voices turned to a disparate tune.

Sometimes, my participants expressed a desire not to cause trouble to other females by interfering, even if they see it as wrong treatment. While condemning girls' rights violations within the families, some of them feel themselves as not being in the position of judging these girls who tolerate the situation, because their condition differs from other families.

Network-shared agencies

I wanted to know whether my participants felt if women are encouraged to share difficulties with friends or would they safely share their problems with this network, talk and look for suggestions, help or offers in any comforting manner? And whether the girls, who were constrained by the violation of their rights in families, can talk with somebody within or outside their families?

My participants' opinion was that the treatment was varied, particularly based on the girl's age, 'between teenage and adults' and the family situation. Younger generation is more frustrated against cruelty. Then, they will be more demanding when the girl is educated at a higher level because their information has been increased.

Tahera, women's rights activist, reflects that teenagers are more ambitious and braver to stand against cruelty than adults. Mostly they can share their difficulties and sometimes even demand governmental force to change such violent behave of their families. Tahera's work is to find jobs for uneducated women or women with lower merit. She thinks the families prevent most of them from joining us. Sometimes, even educated women's in-laws create restrictions against their working outside the home, so she tries to find jobs to suite them as part-time workers and closer to their house, because then they could have more time to deal with family

work and also have a job outside their home. Such women can have an income and opportunity to work inside and outside the home; gradually; they can create more independence.

Tahera believes in networking with shared agencies because then, women can have an opportunity to break the silence. She had a dark experience of silence even within her family, a very horrible story which annoyed her talking about it. She narrates this as one part of the reality of a girl's life in Afghanistan which is distinct from the political arena but originates only from the family.

Tahera's sister Huma, was married by a man who could not say anything against his family. Huma's mother- and father-in-law were illiterate, but other family members were educated. Somehow, Huma looked upset and did not talk about the reason, but while coming to her mother's house, she seemed very disappointed and silent. Her nuclear family knew something was wrong. One day, Huma with her sister, Tahera, and her mother were walking home from school when her father-in-law suddenly appeared with a knife in his hand threatening Huma. Their mother placed herself between these two and shouted, "*don't touch my daughter, you are not allowed to do anything.*" By then, many people who knew them well surrounded them, and supported them. When their father arrived, the conflict ended without any harm.

"…[I]t was the time we got to know about my sister's silence and the reason why she could not talk. She was threatened many times as well, if she talked about things. They will kill her… [N]ow she studies computer-science in the university and enjoys independent life. She does not want to be married anymore at least for now….". - Tahera

This statement was confirmed by social scholar Freire, who sees that the cultural silence of women affects their agency in Afghanistan, so you never know their real situation. This causes the dearth of their awareness of their rights and assists the durability of patriarchal character of the society. The outcome will be that they see themselves thoughtless, powerless,

and incompetent. He believes encouraging and engaging them to dialogue, share their voice, and learn to struggle for emancipation will further lead to solving collective problems and traditional and socio-cultural/religious suppression in these communities (Sehin, Coryell & Stewart, 2017a:p.97).

Tahera sees herself as part of a set of like-minded girls struggling towards changing the situation of gender equality in which many of her own friends are scared and cannot support her. She is young and frustrated against the settled norms which undermine women's rights. " ….. *[W]e should move on and free ourselves from the given stereotypes of patriarchal principles ....*". Her expression, also echoed by Zulfacar, (2006:p.33) sees Afghan women as struggling human beings toward achievement and recognition of their own being as a person rather than stereotypes and symbols of females. According to her, even more than centuries of struggling for liberalization, the women's situation is still taking initial steps toward equality.

Karishma, another women's rights activist: "*[I]n my opinion, higher education makes us brave, makes us talk, act and struggle… [C]omparing myself to them who just finished school and did not study more, I feel more encouraged and braver. Sometimes and in some cases that I stood out as advocate defending women's rights, most of my friends become scared…*".

My participants see themselves as part of a bigger setting that can bring changes, which can act as a catalyst for international efforts which were started after 2001. In forwarding this agency, they are being faced with physical attacks, harassment, threats and even murders for attempting to changes and being blamed for conveying Western and foreigners' values.

Democratic/undemocratic forces

In contradiction with an ideological war, being shaped and conveyed by Islamic extremist

forces of the Taliban, these forces cause clashes within the society between the modernized tendency and conservative's representative by religious leaders/Islamic Ulema (Heath *et al.*, 2011; Qarizadah, 2015); obviously, these forces have an effect on my participants as part of the society.

As four of my participants, also women's rights activists (Tahera, Karima, Karishma and Marzia) point out, it is extremely hard to change the individual's ideas as a whole body in the Afghan context. Even though the desire for change is increasing, we should be aware of the other side of the current reality which resists this fact. This opposition is fueled by different extremist politicized religious groups that assist in making the situation tense for women.

They think what constituted 'supportive manly figure in the family' was measured in specific things, such as letting the girls/women think about their future career, not to care much about work at home like 'cooking, cleaning and so on' letting them meet outside with friends when they have time. *"... [M]y parents have never treated me unfairly. I was seen as my brothers...."* was the expression of seven of my participants, which shows a mobility within enlightened families.

Controversial debates have been going on between universal values-based rights and cultural values, in which the highly educated women should carefully reflect as a very sensitive issue, that their reflection is not interpreted as an anti-Islamic effort[25] (Kabeer & Khan, 2014:p.1). But as (Kabeer & Khan, 2014; Zulfacar, 2006; Kolhatkar, 2002) and my participants argue, beyond all this resistance against gender equality we still have significant progress to make toward our goal. My participants are looking forward to achieving more results.

To confirm my study on Afghan women, Sehin, Coryell & Stewart (2017b:p.96) point out that a collective help of institutions of hope can mobilize the existing sets of norms,

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[25] Farkhunda's killing is one clear example of this claim which I described before.

behaviors, and rules to guide their path toward emancipation from suppression and make effective changes toward total gender equality.

Pro-feminist man

Fortunately, the desire and expectation for modernization within educated enlightened men is also being shaped as my interviewees expressed. My participants are one part of them. Their daughters in the families at least, if not in the whole society, are enjoying pro-feminist men's attitudes, by fathers, brothers, and husbands. Modernized, highly educated women are privileged and being respected in the families and by the society. It can be perceived as a promising change toward gender equality.

I wanted to know if my participants feel it is ideologically 'okay' to continue to have manly figures over family decisions. This is of course a crucial question to shed some light on how these practices and ideologies are being shaped toward the claimed new changes by my participants. Their behavior morally[26] is to forward their agencies toward gender equality. Conveying this point, my participants can be divided into three categories.

The first group are those who felt okay if some figures, like father and husband and not brothers and other in-laws, have this power since they are liberalized and helpful toward gender equality. The second group are those who think it can be considered as positive/negative depending on how the power is being used, and the third group who categorically counter the practice (two of my participants) think that even if these figures are educated, they have some conservative patriarchal principle in their thoughts. In fact, the two first categories interlinked with each other throughout my interview, and the third category was entirely contrary to these two: one grew up without a father's existence while the other, her father was against her agency.

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[26] Personally, I have no doubt in the sincerity of my interviewees who acknowledge both condemns some practices and still have to live it.

"...[I]t is [okay] if their decision promotes our progress; besides, we have the advantage of their help throughout our aim, we cannot struggle alone if they are not with us", said –Dr. Parwin who is the most optimistic person on having the support of male relatives. Karishma and Marzia disagreed, *"...[I]t is [wrong], of course, to give the whole scenario of decision making to men, women should be part of it."*

These participants think if men are liberalized and can judge and decide things fairly, they become part of their struggle to assist the process. It is seen as a completely normal value in the Afghan society. Adding men with enlightened behavior should be respected if they really want to forward our message.

"...[I]t is [wrong], to always have men over our decision, why can we not overcome this practice"? - Marzia who grew up with his mother and only brother.

Three participants who worked as women's rights activists are kind of oscillating between the view that having men as the decision-making figure in the family is sometimes a good thing and sometimes seeing it as not good. They are concerned that if the men overly support women, the men may treat women as weak figures.

Two out of ten participants who are currently unmarried have the same pessimistic idea about a husband's positive role, and they have a deep sense of moral confusion and conflict, which makes them seem genuinely saddened and confused about married life. They see it as utopian to think husbands have a supportive behavior, while the rest of the women had less clear views although they expected the husbands' support is really required. They are already married, have children and careers, and are mostly satisfied with married life. Some women were more concerned than others. Prominently and obviously, there was no 'feminist' thing to do. Some of their reflections hinted a liberation behavior from the patriarchal manner but accepting the power of the father and husband is a dependency which limits their agency.

Thus, Karishma stands on both sides of the nobleness obligation. She thinks the society is not ready to change fast. She hinted about King Amir Amanullah Khans' reform[27] from history which failed to modernize the society. She thinks it is better to go slowly and bring the changes on gradually.

In general, all interviewees emphasized the requirement of manly support for promoting women's rights to education. While discussing that older generational resistance is being weakened and there is clear progress at least in the enlightened families, my interviewees articulated their own desire in terms of a better life toward gender equality and forwarding their agencies.

 In the case of whether women should live completely on their own, they hardly think it is possible in the near future. Freedom from a dependent life is not a desire for my participants; at least for now they need family and manly figures' support. This partly agrees with what was written in (Kabeer & Khan, 2014; Kolhatkar, 2002; Navarro, 2016) about women's relational and contractual relationship in the society, as accepted norms which even now are seen ethically okay. These women in exchange paid attention to housework beside their work outside the home and the burden costs in the expense of women's exploitation with unequal relationship within home which is termed 'fairness' that masks this exploitation. Men's support costs more work for women because now women have work outside their home and have obligation within home, they should manage both in the best way to have their manly relatives' support.

According to my participants who worked as women's rights activists, political accommodation in the close future for a better framework to support changes within the families is not predictable.

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[27] I stated about his reform in previous parts, which is famous among enlightened people.

Fake pro-feminist men

Dr. Hanifa is not very optimistic about any changes in the near future. She is one of those who do not believe in any real pro-feminist men. *"…[I] I recognize such kind of men with specific behavior…[W]orking as pro-feminist men and hiding the real substance of their manner. They only boast to treat women with respect which is simply not true…"*. This expression was another reality which most of my participants pointed out. I seldom came along any existing literature. Such kind of expression was precious to hear, because even within pro-feminist men's circles, according to my participants there is a kind of hidden behavior to resist women's full emancipation from inequality.

I asked about younger men's contribution: is their attitude improving? Yes, of course! According to seven of my participants, the mobility is forming slowly and gradually. The three activist participants were also equally optimistic. *"[T]hanks to God for world connectivity and acceleration of the internet. Boys are being connected to the entire world more than girls, based on their entire mobility which is based on our social norms. Boys can use social media and internet freely based on their economics whereas girls are in a stricter position even if the parents' income is high. That is why we can look forward to a fast mobility to younger men's attitude toward gender equality in the future"* Tahmina.

It is the older generations that still convey norms which affect this mobility. *"My brothers and brother-in law are different, much more ' i.e. non practical' than my parents and mother- and father-in-law. They are more supportive toward my job as an activist woman,"* Karishma.

Marzia is pessimistic: she thinks these pro-feminist men just boast to forward women's equality. She is skeptical on why they would accept to change the conservative behavior of the society which is in fact in their favor. *"…[W] omen in their family should behave according to*

conservative and traditional hierarchies ... [I]t is very hard to express the hidden reality. We are somehow entangled in these unwanted norms. Men do not want to see them changed. They would sacrifice a lot if it gets changed ...", Marzia. I recall (Kabeer & Khan, 2014; Zulfacar, 2006) who think male relationships are authorized in the scrutiny of the family and community with limited space which makes women constrained to recreate more traditional gender relations.

Participating as my interviewees

Finally, I asked them how they felt about participating. All said it was a happy experience to talk with me, as I belong to the same background, share the same experiences, and dressed in new knowledge and norms. Some explicitly said they felt it was a challenging experience at the beginning, but the annoyance turned to enjoyable moments, talking about things that they could also learn and experience. As collecting data is a relational process, according to Crawford, Kruckenberg & Loubere (2017), it comes out of a relationship between people, like engaging with others, interviewing others, at the same time getting information, creating enjoyable moments for both sides of the researcher and participants.

My participants were conscious about the things they discussed. Their discussion often was critically analytic and dressed in a divided relationship 'disillusionment' to misfortune and disparate reality of their position, but still they were satisfied with their own state compared to the others who cannot have such satisfaction. They were well-versed in the anxieties, humiliations from underestimating women that were acknowledged in previous studies as stereotypical women. They also exposed their own criticism and expressed throughout the interview sincere misery for not being capable to live up to their ideals. Gender division of roles and the responsibilities within the families in Afghan society were discussed by highly educated metropolitan women in this study. Findings confirm the role of the implicit patriarchic manner which demands reciprocal claims and obligations from both gender within families and the society as a highly asymmetric community. However, there is a hope for future change with the efforts of such women.

6. conclusion

I have in this thesis argued for both continuity and change in my interviewees in relation to gender equality and women's rights to education. My participants' points depicted some crucial elements to promote women's education. I discussed it through the thesis work in literature reviews or in my findings.

Judging by the participants' answers, women are in the middle of that struggle and battleground as the most vulnerable group in this conservative socio-cultural environment where their freedom comes in the center of political issues. It is a key site of the struggle where democratic and non-democratic forces played their own part in affecting their lives. While a real change started in 2001, today differs from the previous environment with the same aim.

It says, normalize girls' enrollment in schools as well as universities, the promotion is happening with family support as one of the basic stakeholders. My participants were aware of speaking about their own struggle and their own role toward this goal. The interviewees expressed an ability to form their own private and social relationships to promote their own agency. Despite the expressed criticism throughout my interviews, nine out of ten interviewees still felt and were happy that their families treated them relatively well.

While opting out of many anxieties, my participants are tackling more in family-based norms and relying more on parents; discourses of loyalty toward their parents were very prevalent, and largely reconciled to. But still, they could criticize and laugh (as a ridiculous practice) at some existent norms within families during the interview. A strong emphasis on generational change is forming, through family support; my participants exemplify this claim.

Replying to my sub-questions, I classified a number of further themes raised by my participants. Mothers could be considered both, sometimes as agents of patriarchy or sometimes as symbols of struggle against cruelty to support their daughter's fortune. At the same time, they can be seen as potential facilitators of gender equality. Males could be seen in my participants' family as pro-feminist who facilitate the process for rather a smooth struggle to their agencies. Sometimes these pro-feminist men are seen by my participants in their work-place or social arena as symbols of a strong disillusionment, as they boast about taking part in gender equality, yet the counter reality is seen in their manner within their own families.

From my participants' reflections, we can imagine the reality of the women's situation in Afghanistan in the private, social and political arena. If we can see any feminist solution in these stated discourses, as (Sehin, Coryell & Stewart, 2017; Zulfacar, 2006; Kabeer & Khan, 2014; Kolhatkar, 2002) represent, my participants as a group can expose the progressive path toward it. Looking at my participants positions, I can claim trustworthiness, I have no real reason to doubt their sincerity. The notion of responsibility toward gender equality as a socially prevalent ambition was part of their argument, and they expressed having a moral imperative toward change. A desire for change or at least hope for an opening up of new space is high. At the same time, grief arising from hindrance of not being able to overcome these boundaries creates annoyance anxiety. It is crucial not to overstress that changes are happening, and also to distinguish that my research only looks at the participants' personal points of view, which also can be further formed by our reciprocal relationship (power structure).

My participants rarely expressed the 'common horror' of the current unstable situation discussed in theory and literature reviews in my thesis. Most participants cogitate the security issue as secondary and a less important issue that can continue in liminal stability at least for promoting women's education. The most crucial and basic element to promote the female right to high education was seen in family support that I rarely came across in the reviewed literature. These are various situations experienced in diversified daily insecure positions which are seen as secondary matters where both men and women approximately have to face it at the same level. Family support is seen by my participants as a cultural key element which enhances with political awakening, that might have contributed their feasibility of stimulating of female's high

education as a main stakeholder and basic promoter.

I would say that some women's capability and competence will 'play' their promotion toward equality as a whole. It was obvious that my participants recognize themselves as highly educated metropolitan women, who have played their entire role to promote this right at least around themselves where they lived. Moreover, these women are part of a big group that has benefitted from a newly given situation after a long-suffocated period in 2001. The connectivity with the world has also had its effect as a catalyst on the process. This thesis, of course, can provide only a tiny sample of this extended reality. As a feminist exercise, this study also might describe the women's elaborating role certainly not presented to inertly structural confinement instead within the cultural discourses, adjusting elements of the discourses to generate their own self-identity that is obtainable via their own narrative of themselves. As well as, they could also accept and challenge existing social pressures.

For a strong belief and agency as my participants argue, we require strong ambitious and logical consistency to mobilize it. The capability for a desired change might need such dedicated agents in the form of individuals who will initiate groups which can further modify the structural inconsistencies. Using my participants' actual argument based on their experiences, I argue for a modification. For a logical and moral coherence in reality toward these achievements to a real change, as confirmed by Sehin, Coryell & Stewart's (2017a:p.97), we need an analytical study by hope theory. They also concluded and suggested as a requirement an environment to mobilize women's agency, with all related organizations and the government.

While earlier research has focused on the oppressive character of the socio-cultural sphere, and put an emphasis on religion, I draw attention to some micro spaces of emancipation for women within this sphere, which in some cases can be family or support networks. For future research, I recommend more research in such spaces, including the existence of pro-feminist men in Afghan society, who can help this process toward gender equality.

APPENDIX: profiles of my participants

Some of my participants asked me not to mention their age and some other personal information, I respect their choice and take it in consideration.

Maria- 38 years old, has MA in chemistry from Kabul the Capital city. She is the Voice president and associated professor in one of Northwest provinces' universities. Old friend. She lives currently with her husband and her four children. Self identified as feminist, and metropolitan woman from an educated family. She sees her parents as supportive but not during her studies at master's level, because they thought it was dangerous especially when horrible accident as suicides bombing in their university which left her injured her. Her husband was always against her studies but still she could struggle and continue to study. She sees many practices about gender inequality as unfair treatment and has always worked against it.

Marzia- professor and President of public policy management in one of Northwest provinces' universities. New friend, aged 35, unmarried, lives with her mother and her only brother. Talked only about her mother's supportive attitude toward her education. Lived long time in Iran and got her master and PhD in mathematics from Iran. Talks about her refugee life in Iran as very hard time, she felt all the systems were against her goal to be educated as an Afghan woman. The struggle was so hard but at last she could manage. She is satisfied with the new development in the contemporary Afghan society. She is critical of the practice of women's inequality and has always tried to counteract it. She is against pro-feminist men and she does not want men to interfere in women's decision-making process.

Mina- works as professor in the one of Northwest provinces' universities. Got her Master's in social science from Iran. New friend. She is 36 years old and lives with her husband and three of her children. Sees herself as feminist who always counter struggled against cruelty and gender inequality. She is optimistic about pro-feminist men who can function as catalyst to promote gender equality and thinks men can contribute to having successful counteractions against inequality. She loves helping other women.

Dr. Shaista- specialist in Medical service who studied the whole process in the Capital City Kabul. She is from Northern part of Afghanistan and also lives and works there. Grew up in nuclear family with her four brothers, she is very satisfied with the way she was treated by her parents. There was no prejudice as girl or boys in her family, equality felt in every single moment she thinks of. She is much thankful of her father. Lives now with her four children and husband who also helps her through her success. She sees herself as a feminist and struggles for gender equality around herself.

Karima, human rights and women rights activist. She is new acquaintance and 29 years old. Bachelor's in law from one of universities in the North of Afghanistan. She lives with her child, husband, mother -in and father in-law. As a feminist, she agrees that men can also help them to promote gender equality but thinks women should think of their own authoritarian role when it comes to the decision-making process. She thinks women cannot watch only men's decision, they should also have their own direct role. She is positive about development and women's better   situation   in   future.

Karishma- 26 years old and new friend. She is women's and children's rights activist. Has bachelor's in law from one of Northern universities. Lives in a hybrid family with three children and father, mother in-laws and her husband. Along her study her sister supported her for completing her bachelor's. She always has struggled against cruelty and inequality. She thinks women can influence only as highly educated people toward gender equality and thinks local NGOs, INGOs can have better effect on this matter. There should be a harmony with different organisations and state's effort to abolish inequality, afterward can they create a better position for women's emancipation according to her.

Dr. Hanifa- specialist and Manager of Medical center of one of the biggest hospitals in the North of Afghanistan. Feminist and stands always against inequality. She grew up in a nuclear family and lives now with her husband and children. She is one of my old friends. She was treated the same way as her brothers and loves to talk about her father. He supported her in every step and she is very grateful to him. Her husband also helps her, and she is optimistic about pro-feminist men who can coordinate the process of gender equality. Without men's assistance, she thinks it is impossible to continue to higher education as a female, because the only way to promote your way forward is having family, specially father's support.

Tahera- 25 years old. Bachelor from Kabul university and works as trainer for women on how to find job as low educated or illiterate women in one of the NGO's. Self identifies as vocal feminist and always stands against words and acts that are seen as unequal treatment to women. New friend. Grew up in nuclear family and have pessimistic view against pro-feminist men, although she sees her family as exceptionally supportive. But as her sister was treated unfair by her in-law's family and separated from her husband as a result, mad her think negative against pro-feminist men. She is strictly critical about conservative norms which undermines gender equality. She is against any practice that upholds patriarchy. She thinks women can help each other better than men. She is even against men's interference on women's affair when it comes to the decision-making part.

Tahmina- Master's in English literature, Lecturer at Kabul university. Lives with husband and five children. She is grateful for her husband, and she is optimistic about pro-feminist man. Thinks with help of men women can forward their goal, otherwise it is impossible in such contexts to struggle alone and has strong beliefs in family kinship. She is one of those who believes that using religious perception by these leaders and conveying publicity can help mobilize peoples' understanding, to which most of my participants agree.

Dr. Parwin- recent friend. Senior teaching assistant, and medical doctor. Lives with husband and they have five children. She is feminist and is grateful of her husband's help and support toward her. She is optimistic of pro-feminist men's help. She grew up in a nuclear family, got her father's and brother's help throughout her study process. According to her, men can decide about the important things, it is okay so long they support gender equality and if their decision promote the process. She further thinks that without men's help, forwarding and achieving gender equality is impossible in Afghanistan.

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