Female Higher Education in Afghanistan: Opportunities and Challenges

Selsela Reha and Rahela Sidiqi

"I Won't be a Doctor, and One Day You'll be Sick"

The above quote derived from the Human Rights Watch 2017 report, perfectly depicts the state of female participation in post-secondary education. The struggle for gender equity and equal access for women in Afghanistan has been a particularly difficult one. This ongoing challenge cannot be viewed in isolation from the circumstances that the country experienced during the past decades of conflict and instability, which have impacted the current position of girls and women in both the private and public sphere.

The successes and failures of gender equity in higher education in Afghanistan provide some important lessons for other developing countries. This includes the recognition of the importance of re-establishing policies; rules and regulations through strategic planning tailored for both faculty and students, in order to higher the educational standards available (Hayward, 2015). However, how can this be implemented and what have we achieved so far? These are questions we aim to explore and highlight in the following paper.

1. Policy Initiatives Since 2001

The goal of working towards gender equity for the Ministry of Higher Education was emphasised in 2009 in the *National Higher Education Strategic Plan (NHESP): 2010-2014* (MoHE, 2009), in the government's *National Action Plan for Women of Afghanistan (NAPWA) (*MoWA, 2007), and the *Higher Education Gender Strategy* (MoHE, 2015). Yet, the issue of gender equity turned out to be more complicated than any of the other goals outlined in the NHESP. At the planning stage this matter produced some strong opposition, when it was first included in the NHESP: 2010-2014. One of the requirements specified in the *Afghanistan National Development Strategy (ANDS)* is gender equity. However, the strategy itself makes little mention of the concept, which hints at prioritization issues as well as inadequate acknowledgment and allocated expertise within the government systems. Nonetheless, this did not change the MoHE's continuing effort to improve the situation for female students and female faculty members (Hayward, 2015). The MoHE proposed the *Gender Strategy for 2012-2014*, aiming to ensure gender equity, to increase the number of women in higher education and to devise strategies to overcome existing inequalities.

The higher education gender strategy is based on the *National Gender Policy* and relates to the Interim-ANDS prepared in 2001, as a result of the 'Bonn Agreement'. A specified requirement within the agreement is that policies are structured in way that facilitate achievement of the best possible results for the Millennium Development Goals, in which gender equity is a cross-cutting theme.

In terms of Higher education, the *National Gender policy* has been concentrated on the following themes:

- To achieve gender equity, the MoHE seeks to create relevant conditions through the establishment of quality improvement and appropriate facilities for women and by fostering values such as equal rights, Islamic values, national unity, and a sense of responsibility and commitment to serve Afghanistan.
- The goal to be achieved is: To improve gender equity in institutions of higher education by

> increasing the number of female faculty members and students.

In addition, the higher education gender strategy is linked to the *National Action Plan for the Women of Afghanistan (NAPWA)*, which was developed as a 10-year (2008-2018) policy framework, aiming to guarantee, with the collaboration of the Afghan government, to protect, promote and secure women's rights. The NAPWA was formulated as a result of the Beijing 10 UN Women's Conference in New York in 2005.

Current gender policies, including both national gender policies and NAPWA, represent an example of transferred policy[1] through international conferences and US and global feminist movements (Larson, 2008; Wordsworth, 2008; Kandiyoti, 2005). Yet the process of gender policy formation was meant to be primarily managed by the Ministry of Women's Affairs (MoWA) and the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM). Such an approach, known as the bottom-up strategy, could aid in the materialization of national ownership surrounding newly developed policies. However, in reality the gender policy was framed by UNIFEM with minimal engagement from the MoWA (Wordsworth, 2008). In addition, as a policy document, the national gender policy and NAPWA, were seen as a political victory due to the issue of gender equity initially being of lower priority. In this sense, as part of the ANDS, the document was predicted to "prove a significant bargaining tool for those attempting to hold government accountable regarding its commitment to women" (Larson, 2008: 18).

Nevertheless, there is a considerable need for gender issues to be addressed more substantively in ministry policy and strategies. Effective policy change promoting women's empowerment is contingent on three factors: the nature of advocacy for gender equality within civil society, the political system and party organisation, and the way in which the state itself functions (Larson, 2009). Due to these deficiencies at the top levels of the government, the practical steps required for the implementation of such initiatives have proven to be moderate (Rahela Sidiqi, 2018). Bearing in mind these deficiencies, the following section will discuss how this affected the course of events for higher education.

2. Limitations of Gender Strategy for Higher Education

The *Gender strategy for Higher Education* has a number of limitations. One of these limitations is that Gender Strategy benchmarks are unclear and immeasurable. To explain further, attention is focused on women without precise and feasible strategies (Larson, 2008; Wordsworth, 2008) or action plans. For instance, one of the strategies to achiever gender equality is to "work with institutions to create an environment supportive of women and encouraging their promotion through the ranks" (p. 17). However, there is no mention of what kind of work needs to be implemented or its practicality, and which mechanisms would result in the promotion of women. It also states, "all faculty members must report cases of sexual harassment to the proper university authorities and to adopt a position of zero tolerance about sexism" (p. 18). Yet, there is no clarification of who the 'proper university authorities' are and how they can 'adopt a position of zero tolerance about sexism' in a society where such practices have been somewhat normalized (Wordsworth, 2008). Furthermore, while as a whole demand transformative social change, there is also no evidence of how attitudes towards women are expected to change in the future, nor is there a clear timeframe (Wordsworth, 2008). There is a lack of attention to detail as well as a lack of capacity in challenging the broader vision of gender equality, transforming it into strategic and operational benchmarks. If these ideas are prioritized, then there is a greater possibility of gender mainstreaming to be taken seriously as a policy (Larson, 2008).

One of the reasons for the aforementioned problems is that not many Afghans have expertise in gender issues, and thus the document has been developed by foreign technical experts, perhaps without a complete understanding of the social and historical aspects of

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[1] Gender mainstreaming is an example of policy transferred, by adding a mix of international prescriptions for rebuilding the Afghan state (Larson, 2008).

Afghan society. This issue is further challenged by the multiplicity of meanings and goals that this concept (gender) entails. To a large extent, what gender policy-makers mean by 'focus on gender issues' and what it means to their workers is often contested. This is due to the lack of clarity in the use of gender terminology, "which is compounded by an often simultaneous tacit assumption of commonality" (Warren, 2007, p. 189). Gender policy initiatives have not been effective in Afghanistan, causing gender segregation instead, highlighting the difference between men and women (Abirafeh, 2009, p. 50). In general, the term 'gender' is considered negative, in the sense that it means women's power over men, which is perceived as a challenge to men's institutionalised patriarchy and misrepresentation of women as victims in need of saving (Wordsworth, 2009). Nevertheless, these problems do not only exist in relation to the *Gender Strategy in Higher Education*, but also the *National Gender Policy*. Political issues and technical interventions, however, have unfortunately led to policy implementation failure, leading to little actual change being realized.

Another issue that adds to this complexity is an absence of accountability. There is a major concern regarding the issue of corruption within Afghanistan. This has therefore led to corruption being present within both national and international organizations. Corruption is documented to be the second largest problem after security and has encapsulated large proportions of the administrative system. As a domino effect, the political and the academic environment falls under its impact (Gardizi et al., 2010).

3. Higher Education Development Programmes

Since the fall of the Taliban, education has not only been an issue of focus within the Afghan Government, but also the international donor community. Despite this promising approach, most development aid has thus far been directed to primary education, with very few projects that focus on higher education. This has resulted in an approach that has been solely focused on increasing access to education for women in general.

The Higher Education Project (HEP) is one of the largest higher education development programs in the country. The prime focus of the program is capacity building of faculty members in the public universities of Afghanistan. The programme administration is of the view that their focus on building the capacity of both male and female faculty members will result in an increase in the number of qualified female professors, which in turn will create a better environment for female students to attend the university (EPD, 2011).

The "Strengthening Higher Education Program" (SHEP) is the second largest higher education program in Afghanistan. It is a $40 million USD project funded by the World Bank, in alignment with the Afghan National Development Strategy (ANDS) and in collaboration with the Ministry of Higher Education (MoHE). It centres on building the capacity of university professors and the construction and reconstruction of hostels, libraries, and other buildings at six universities in Afghanistan. Additionally, the programme has been working towards building a new strategic plan in partnership with the public universities that delegates importance to gender equity. The programme has collaborated with several universities around the world and provides scholarships for Afghan faculty to pursue higher degrees and to increase their skills. Recognizing the difficulties that women face in travelling abroad to pursue higher education, they have conducted evaluations about ways to address this challenge. Such evaluations may lead to increased opportunities for females in the public sphere (EDP, 2011).
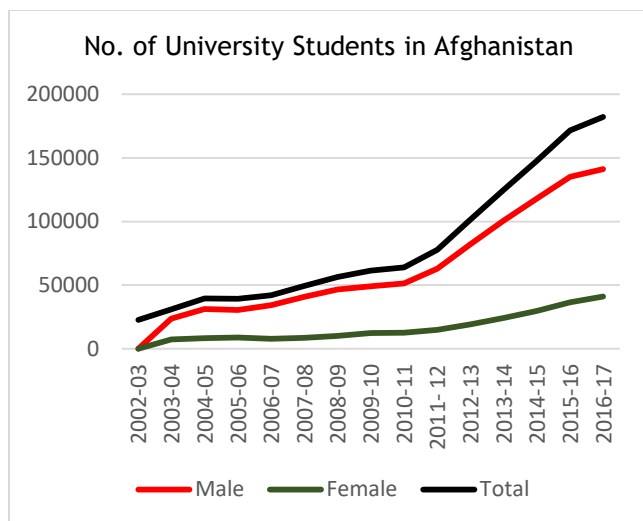
There are also small scholarship programs run by individuals, NGOs, and others stakeholders. For example, The Khaled Hosseini Foundation, founded by the author of a number of popular novels set in Afghanistan, provides scholarships for a limited number of girls to attend American Universities, as does the Farkhunda Trust founded by Rahela Sidiqi.

However, these programmes whether local or international are struggling to provide opportunities to females due to the lack of proper mechanisms at the MoHE and a simple lack of coordination amongst donors. Nevertheless, on the other hand, according to HEP, small steps have been taken to improve coordination at the MoHE. The various organizations that are focusing on higher education in Afghanistan collaborate regularly. The HEP and SHEP project work closely to maintain clear records of students, in terms

of registration, provide student services and offer career counselling. Another aspect that they are jointly working includes transition to a credit system, in a bid to assure quality. This refers to a set of parameters that assesses students through a comprehensive system, considering factors such as student workload, learning outcomes and contact hours (EDP, 2011).

4. The Current Status

Staying committed to gender equity - considering the fact it is an incessant issue - can bring about success one small step at a time (Hayward, 2015). As the results displayed in the graph below demonstrate on higher education participation.

Source: http://cso.gov.af/: number of Higher Education Universities and Access 2002-2016 According to more recent figures of the *Central statistics Office report quarter one (2018)*, women's higher education particpation has grown to 77000 in 2018, which is a stark increase of 18 percent.

President Ashraf Ghani along with other institutional leaders, faculty member, staff and students have directed great efforts towards the *Higher Education Gender Strategy*. Findings from recent focus groups show that young men demonstrated strong support for gender equity and equal employment opportunities for women (Hayward, 2017).

The difference between female and male participation is still noticeably large, as seen in the graph above. Yet, an interesting dynamic that may lead to change in gender equity is the fact, that more than half of the population is now under the age of 23 years old. This suggests that challenges to gender equity

should become less severe over the next few years (Hayward, 2017).

On the other hand, in a context in which Afghanistan has been identified as among the countries with high levels of discrimination against women in the OECD Gender Index, the challenges for full implementation remains real. Nonetheless, it is notable that higher education has moved rapidly from having no female faculty or students in 2001 to 22.4% female students and 14% female faculty (Hayward, 2017).

5. Current Challenges

Alongside the above mentioned challenges at the policy and government level, there are also challenges in terms of family, society and material resources, which if not adressed could lead to further impediments in regards to higher educational developments for female students.

Socio-Cultural Barriers: There exists a societal pressure to get married, which is usually correlated with girls not completing their education. Moreover, the underrecognition of the importance of education for females leads to a systematic neglect by the Afghan government. Such an impact results in Afghan women having to deal with the right to education, and safety and security issues such as sexual harrasment and violence themselves.

Economic Barriers: A lack of access to financial resources and labour markets. Together with lack of safety and security for women in working environment.

A more recent problem for the admission of young women into institutions of higher educations is their lower results when compared to men in admissions examination, formally known as *Kankor*. This problem appears to be related to families financially supporting male members to take pre-*Kankor* classes, resulting in a disproportionately high percentage of men having an advantage in terms of gaining admission (Hayward, 2017).

Family Problems: Patriarchical decision-making power held in the family, especially regarding girl's education.

Security and Social Problems: Insecurity in the country. The misconception towards pursuing higher education. Benefits of studying beyond working and earning money are not understood or fully appreciated.

Individual Hopelessness: Girls believe entrance to university or getting a job is unlikely. Therefore, hopelessnes about their future puts many females off entering higher education. The issue is not only access, but also retention and graduation.

Institutional Barriers: Facilities are not sufficiently developed to provide a functional environment. Long distance from home to university. Shortage of washrooms, dormitories and prayer rooms for female students.[2]

6. Recommendations

The following recommendations are offered to address the issue of gender equity in higher education discussed above:

1) Challenges to gender equity in higher education are not only related to issues of access, but also continuation and graduation. Even when female students enter universities, they require tailored support to overcome gender-specific risks, which help them complete higher education. We need to learn more about the barriers to entering higher education, as well as those that may affect successful graduation. Equally important is the need to understand what strengths, opportunities and resources could potentially help young girls and women consider, access, and acquire a quality higher education. These challenges need to be understood and responses implemented with effective investment, in order for

women to contribute to the on-going development of their families, society and the country.

2) Collaboration of both teachers and family members is vital to educational policies and programmes in regard to female student participation. Without such cooperation and provision of adequate services and facilities, the issue of safety and security will serve as a bottleneck to female access in higher education.

3) The need for long-term investment and prioritisation in women's education. Investment in credible education program needs focused multilateral and bilateral support of donor communities.

4) The need for religious and communal support to highlights the value of educations at the local level, for instance, through the Mosques and Community Development Councils of National Solidarity Programme at all village levels. Such actions are needed in order to create and push forward a gradual and sustainable shift in women's position in the family and society.

5) The urgent need to invest in a mentoring pastoral programme (networking and presentation, moral, confident and leadership capacity building) Women's empowerment programmes should become part of university duties and responsibilities. Measurable indicators for output and outcome of their mentoring programme could help monitor progress and contribute to improving quality.

6) A societal shift needs to take place in terms of educating men on the importance of female participation in the society. As almost half of the population is under the age of 23, indicates that their advocacies could act as the engine of change. Having active women within a society would lead to a significant change in the perception the roles both men and women uptake in family settings.

7) There needs to be an increase in the number of scholarships and mentoring programs available within rural areas of Afghanistan. While this is true, the provision of scholarships would not simply indicate that girls will go to university. This would have to be supported by awareness raising and outreach to communities. This is

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[2] For additional information on the challenges and opportunities of women's higher education in Afghanistan, see the report by World Bank, Resilience in Education Settings - Research Studies Series (2014), *The Resilience of Women in Higher Education in Afghanistan. Study No 1: Obstacles and Opportunities in Women's Enrollment and Graduation.*

much needed due to the fact that most families do not allow for their daughters to travel in order to pursue education. Such programs will aid them in learning about their rights and how to develop themselves intrinsically.

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