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Farkhunda Trust
For Afghan Women's Education

Afghan Diaspora (UK): Education for girls and women empowerment (Afghanistan)

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Date: 1st September 2019

Armed conflicts and ethnic tensions have dominated the situation in Afghanistan for more than 30 years, destroying the livelihoods of many men, women and children which have resulted to a large scale migration. Whilst Afghanistan is rich in terms of resources, the country still is one of the world's poorest nations where international community has also failed to do something sustainably since the Bonn Agreement in 2001; they have engaged simultaneously in military and humanitarian projects since the fall of the Taliban regime in 2001 where democratic transition has indeed witnessed some success, however, with severe ongoing challenges. These Afghans who are settled in the Western world have formed diasporas but not a cohesive one and quite often it is a fragmented one. But their role is always important and could contribute to empower women and promote education for girls in Afghanistan specially through their voices, economic means and other recourses.

This report is about Afghan diaspora in the UK and explores whether their role could help education for girls and women empowerment in Afghanistan whilst also reflecting on the socioeconomic and political challenges of the country. It brings insights from academic resources (secondary), as well as primary data collected from both the public and officials from the UK and Afghanistan which would provide crucial views on how best to help women and educate girls at large.

The research works on the following key themes:

Part (A) focuses on the complexity of diaspora and asks to what extent it is feasible to claim that there is essentially an Afghan Diaspora in the UK. Evidence suggests that the matter is a complicated one with certain evolving challenges among Afghans in the UK although an attractive destination after Germany due to UK’s liberal labour market and peoples’ personal networks.

Part (B) emphasises onto the notion of ethnicity as the link between diaspora and ethnicity is vital. This is crucial as Afghans are comprised of different languages and ethnicities.

Part (C) is the analysis of the notes on the fieldwork findings about Afghan diaspora and their positive contribution towards women empowerment and girls education in Afghanistan, before concluding the paper.

Methods, data and note on fieldwork

Methodologically, the research rests on a qualitative method of data analysis, data collection and fieldwork (interviews) and a discussion of the findings. The structure is based around two major types of research techniques: i) secondary data analysis, and ii) primary face-to-face semi-structured interviews with people. Through a paper-based interview guide for contextual understanding, all interviews discussions have been audio-recorded for transcription and analysis purposes.

In Afghanistan, primarily, in Kabul a mini field work was conduct with Afghan officials between January and July 2019. The focus on these people evolved from personal connections since 2015. However, as Afghan's everyday lives are embedded with ongoing conflicts, divisions, and elections nowadays, women empowerment and education for girls are probably not very much prioritised.

In the UK, based on a qualitative case study among Afghans from different socioeconomic, ethnic and political backgrounds, covering age ranges from mid-20s to the mid-60s, the research has involved 6 interviews between March and August 2019. Additional data is collected from 3 informal interviews who are involved in the wider Afghan diaspora in the UK. Some of the interviewees are actively engaged in religious associations and initiatives that aim to contribute to the development of Afghanistan. However, their life trajectories and experiences of war and migration differ.

Introduction

Contemporary diasporas are studied from many different perspectives. One widely acknowledged aspect is their capacity to illustrate dual homeness, and their challenging national cultures' aspiration to sociocultural unity. So the literature on diasporas is burgeoning and increasingly marked by controversy. 'Diaspora' according to (Cohen, 2001; Dufoix, 2008), is a word of Greek origin, designates the dispersal throughout the world of a people with the same origin. Ideal types of diasporas are defined by their experiences of forced mobility, traumatic dispersal and a shared attachment to the ancestral homelands (Anderson 1983; Cohen 2008). The historical experiences of populations such as the Jews or the Armenians are widely accepted as paradigmatic examples of diaspora as a transnational social form, and diaspora as a type of social consciousness.

It is, however, inherently dispersed, heterogeneous and fragmented, with uncertain contours and incommensurable meanings. At the same time it necessitates an engagement with both "roots" and "routes", with the places where movement ceases and where identities and explanations cohere – however momentarily as Brubaker provides such a moment – mapping the "roots" and "routes" of the concept. For Brubaker, the multiple and various definitions of diaspora cohere around three key features: dispersion, homeland orientation and boundary maintenance, although each can be and are problematised, capturing the central ambivalence at diaspora's core. How far, for example, must one travel to constitute a diaspora? Must state borders be crossed? Is homeland a necessary point of reference or is the process of making home in diverse places the crucial attribute? One of the key paradoxes of diaspora centres on the issue of place – on whether the focus should be the point of departure or the site (or sites) of arrival and settlement which provide the descriptive parameters, or the site (or sites) of arrival and settlement.

This raises the question of what diaspora is, and why it matters: about the difference that diaspora as a concept makes, and how this marks it out as distinct from the other theorisations of migration and mobility. As Brah notes, *"while at the heart of the notion of diaspora is the image of a journey ... . not every journey can be understood as diaspora"* (1996, 182). Key to classic formulations of diaspora is the notion of violence and trauma – of flight and enforced scattering. Gilroy, for example, defines diaspora as, "*A network of people, scattered in a process of non-voluntary displacement, usually created by violence or under threat of violence or death"* (1997, p. 328).

There is little doubt that local and global transformations prompted instances of voluntary and forced mobility at different scales (Lubkemann 2008; Castles et al. 2014) and sometimes led to the emergence and dissolution of diasporic groups (Van Hear 1998). Experiences of displacement, dispersal and life away from the country of origin leave profound imprints on people's lives (Lacroix and Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2013), and ethnicity.

Ethnicity

The link between diaspora and race or ethnicity is a complex one, which Brubaker (intriguingly, since the article is published in Ethnic and Racial Studies) never directly confronts. In its original formulation, the term is linked to a (highly masculinist) biological notion of descent and continuity, seeds and sperm, blood and soil (Anthias, 2001). These provide a close link to ideas of race or ethnicity – most obviously, of course, in its "classic" Jewish, African/black, Greek or Armenian incarnations – though Brubaker recodes this as homeland or nation. It must not be accidental that diaspora theory has been so richly suggestive for scholars of colour, both in its essentialising and non-essentialised formulations, particularly those located in, and focused on, the multicultural and global cities of the west and north.

Since late 1980s onwards, the encounter of diaspora theory with cultural studies in Britain has resulted in the complex interplay between race, ethnicity and diaspora, which has levered open both diaspora and racial and ethnic studies, which has also laid claim to the political potential of diaspora identities as a mode of unsettling taken for granted notions of nation, citizenship and belonging (Gilroy 1993; Brah 1996). This is why Brubaker shares his radical scepticism with questions of origin, privileging the "here" and "now" over the "there" and "then" of earlier accounts (Dufoix, 2008).

With regard to the UK, although ethnicity emerges as a powerful determinant of mutual perceptions among Afghans in the UK, it is also believed to be an essentialist framework. I do not draw on ethnic descent as a theoretical explanation. Instead I refer to ethnicity as one aspect that affects how some people of Afghan origin frame co-nationals they encounter in the diaspora (Wimmer, 2008). Often such perceptions are based on certain characteristics that people ascribe to members of specific ethnic groups. The transactions at heart of such ascriptions tend to be informed by the structure of Afghan society as well as war- induced events and changes as well. For instance, some informants stated that there are certain perceived differences between Pashtuns, Tajiks, Hazaras etc…with different languages, values and with even certain tendency of social supremacy. One interviewee, has confidentially raised his concern by saying: *"There are some people in and outside*

Afghanistan that not only promote devisions but also claim supremacy and fascism. Others are in favour of their own languages such as Farsi/Dari. In fact, no one is above another and no one would agree to be controlled by others and you can see what a hot antagonistic politics is going on in our country. If there isn't stability and unity in Afghanistan, education or women equality cannot be fixed". Ethnicity, thus raises a lot of questions depending on peoples' language, ideology and many more and therefor the term can be a complex identity category which may be further disaggregated according to regional origin and tribal affiliations (Khan, 2013).

However, the perceptions of majority of the young generation differ from their older generation (Alinia and Eliassi 2014). For example, Rashed Shalizy (early 30s) illustrates: *"Afghans must change for good. Living in the UK for nearly 20 years, have thought me the very essentials of diversity and mutual respect. I go to Afghan community centre and I see all as one Afghan. We cannot hold or afford ethnic tensions anymore the country is torn apart because of this".*

Afghan diaspora in the UK

Since the late 1970s Afghanistan has been in constant turmoil. A Communist coup 'd'état' was followed by the intervention of Soviet troops in 1979. From the mid-1980s, the Soviet- backed regime encountered fierce resistance from various militia groups and collapsed in the early 1990s. During the subsequent period of civil war, the fundamentalist Taliban rose to power. Following an extended period of repressive governance, an international intervention toppled the Taliban regime in 2001 and sought to enhance stability and democratic modes of governance, but with limited success (Coburn and Larson 2014, Centlivres-Demont 2015).

Within Europe, the UK has been the most important destinations for Afghan migrants after Germany. It was not until the mid-1990s that Afghans came to the UK in greater numbers, which have been continuously rising since then. According to my informants this is because of the UK's liberal labour market and peoples' personal networks.Whilst it is difficult to find an accurate number of Afghan diaspora in the UK, an estimated 56,000 plus Afghans lived in the UK by year 2000 (Oeppen, 2010, p.143) where forty-five thousand reside in London. It could have been helpful if we were to be able to find the number of Afghans particularly those who are involved in higher education and those who have businesses and properties so that these economically and financially stable people would help education and women empowerment in Afghanistan. This issue to some extent has

affected the way Afghans in the UK establish social relations (see Morawska 2011). Of course certain neighbourhoods and Afghan-run shops and businesses, as well as sport centres, religious centres could provide spaces for casual encounters in everyday settings such as supermarkets.

Afghan migration and settlement outside Afghanistan is usually framed as forced migration and displacement (Koser, 2014). This is unsurprising, because the country has been shaken by conflict and violence for the last four decades. It is crucial to acknowledge that an extended history of migration to various places across the world, (see contributions to Green and Arbabzadah, 2013) precedes recent decades of conflict. Conflict-induced mobility further exacerbated large-scale dispersal and re-grouping of Afghans at different places across the globe. The fact, however, that there are groups of Afghans living in different locations does not automatically imply that there is an Afghan diaspora (Brubaker, 2005). This raises the question how we can grasp dynamics of convergence, group formation and the emergence of imagined communities (Anderson, 1983) without slipping into essentialist reasoning. Subsequent phases of war in Afghanistan and rising levels of violence and insecurity increased the vulnerability of social relationships. Declining levels of trust changed the meaning of family and ethnic backgrounds as a substance of interpersonal ties and determinant of mutual perceptions. Similar instances of solidarity or a sense of responsibility for Afghan co-nationals are observable in the UK. For example, some interviewees are willing to promote girls education within and beyond Afghanistan.

An Afghan engineer M. Raof (early 50s), runs a small shop next to the Afghan Cultural Centre, living in London since 1998, states that there is a large number of Afghan inhabitants that are concerned with girls education and women empowerment in Afghanistan. He described *"... I can recall a number of individuals/families who have the financial means to support education in Afghanistan. There are mutual understanding of different social and political views comparing to the past."* When interviewed Ms Manila Akbary (yearly 28), the conversation led to raising voice and funds for books/stationaries and probably help girls and women to get involve in higher education in the Western world. Afghan diaspora could help this process in the longer term. Manila stated: *"In this way there'll be people who could possibly create a practical network that would in turn help women get empowered and become educated as apparently most of Afghan girls and women in Afghanistan are marginalised and their positions are just as house wives rather than being a great 50 percent of the Afghan society."*

The role of diaspora is further emphasised in Kabul by the Deputy of Upper House of Parliament Afghanistan, Mohammad Alam Azadyar who told me that first of all *"Mature democracy, established law and order, as well as trade and capital play a major role in*

building a prosperous society and better life, which certainly, require stability and security; secondly, in our society poverty and lack of education that are hugely associated with corruption have enabled women to suffer the most. Women's education and empowerment could save a widespread discrimination including sexual assault. But these issues cannot be solved from grassroots during war and conflicts. Peace is critical and the government has a big role in this and at the same time the Afghan communities/diasporas in the UK must do their job from outside in helping their fellow Afghan citizens." During this time, the issue of peace talk and the role of the Taliban grasped my attention. I interviewed the security director of the government of Afghanistan, General Sebghatullah Saiiq, and when I asked him about the US -Taliban peace talk, he explained *"Taliban's role in negotiating with the US and possibly with the government of Afghanistan in the future might be a challenging one…. but it is too early to comment specifically about the issue now and I hope Taliban, if joined the peace process do not object girls education and women empowerment….. Islamic principles have given women a great place and status throughout the history and we the Afghans do respect that."* In this regard, I had the opportunity to interview a senior of Taliban, Mulah Mujahid apparently lives in Kabul who is guarded by the government. When, I mentioned of woman's place in Afghanistan in the 21st century, he reluctantly supported education, freedom, and their role in the government, however, within "the spectrum of Sharia Law". He emphasised on the role of women in areas of health particularly when he stated*"Very need of women to treat women."* He has also conveyed a message to the Afghan diaspora in the UK to build schools for Afghan girls in Afghanistan. In addition to this, Professor Hamidullah Farooqi, Advisor to the President Ghani and the Chancellor of Kabul University, has provided great essential thoughts about UK Afghan diaspora's contribution towards women empowerment and girls education by stating *"The West have high, developed societies; they have embraced human rights principles and that they have great sense of urban/city living and this is our contemporary need; thus Afghan diaspora could transfer these values to Afghanistan".*

Whilst all these underline that there are mutual, concrete position in girls education and women empowerment, however, with some challenges and obstacles from both socio-economic and political perspectives. Affordability is a crucial mater as the notion of poverty is a great obstacle for many families to educate their daughters specially in poor villages. An important social issue the notion of patriarchy in Afghanistan still a problem for many girls and women to find themselves in Afghanistan society. The political problem is that Afghans for decades failed to establish a meaningful system that could promote an inclusive society for all. The conflict between moderates and fundamentalists is always a great issue of Afghans which may remain for many more years in the future.

Note and findings: diaspora and women empowerment

As diaspora certainly is a complex phenomenon, the Afghans have equally different views on it. On the one hand, certain elder people mid-50-60s views diaspora merely as history, identity and sense of place or attachment to where they belong with some tendency in their minds to enhance Afghan diaspora in the UK and support education and women empowerment in Afghanistan with some paradox thinking nevertheless. On the other, young generation have adopted the culture of inclusiveness and diversity however with some minor disagreements.

The issue of family ties, ethnicity and politics are crucial organising principles of social and political relations among people of Afghan origin in the UK. Each of these categories inform mutual perceptions and people's attitudes towards each other and fosters dynamics of inclusion and exclusion. Whilst greater understanding of national unity and the sense of help is perceived by Afghans in the UK for promoting girls education and women empowerment, an important issue is that there are also divergent thinking about the role and status of women in Afghanistan which is critical for Afghan diaspora in the context of equality, equity and democracy. There are still thinking towards women and girls education as well as their identity in the context of traditional belief system and probably there are many people against an open inclusive democracy that might enable us to think whether Afghanistan is ready for democratic transition. In addition, it is important to acknowledge that Afghan populations in the UK are to some extent fractured and cannot be seen as a united diaspora. A unified Afghan platform or diaspora is clearly absent in the UK. There are families who do not need to be in contact with other Afghans. And there are others who wish to be in touch with their ethnic background. Hence, in a manner Afghans might not act as a cohesive diaspora in the UK. This is partly, people tend to coalesce in narrowly defined subgroups rather than under a shared national identity. One sad case was in the Afghan Community Centre in Brent where a good number of Afghans moved to Hounslow possibly within ethnicised disputes and leadership.

Overall, there are, however, a great sense of support for a democratic and inclusive Afghanistan particularly and they are quite concerned about girls education and women empowerment in Afghanistan. Whilst still Afghan diaspora is a fragmented and probably lack an appropriate mechanism of help in order to promote girls education and women empowerment, familiar ways that are discussed, are to voice for their freedom, to regularly campaign and raise funds for books/recourses or encourage them to involve in higher education in Afghanistan as well as in the Western world. Indeed, Afghans are becoming successful in many countries in the Western democracies ranges from Ministerial position (CANADA) to Member of Parliament (FINLAND) and Councillors (UNITED

KINGDOM). But for the longer term the solution to a fragmented diaspora is potentially a matter of time so that Afghans create a unified diaspora in the UK. This requires mutual respect and of course efforts too. Therefore, the Afghans from London to Birmingham to Leeds and Briton from every areas of life, could possibly build networks and community cohesion by embracing unity, diversity, and understanding; to paraphrase Albert Einstein, from understanding comes everything; thus greater understanding which is supported with a collective effective mechanism in light of Afghan culture and tradition will certainly form a unified cohesive Afghan diaspora that would sustainably contribute to the realm of girls education and women empowerment in Afghanistan.

Conclusion

This paper engages with the complexity of diaspora by focusing on the role and the issues among Afghan diaspora in Britain. Afghan migration is often framed as forced migration and displacement (Koser 2014). This is due to the issue of war and violence for nearly four decades in Afghanistan. And to assess the very notion of Afghan displacement, in fact, each renewed episode of conflict and violence led to large-scale out-migration and displacement (Centlivres 2010; Koser 2011). Based on a qualitative case study and empirical evidence collected in the form of interviews, the research demonstrates whilst there is Afghan diaspora in the UK, it is however, a fragmented one; ethnic or political groups may be conflict-laden and living in different locations might not mean a stablished Afghan diaspora, specially, when a nation is consists of many ethnicities, like a kind of mosaic nation. Whilst significant changes have happened specially among the younger generation in embracing inclusivity and equality, family ties, class backgrounds, ethnicity and political affiliations still inform certain peoples' attitudes towards each other which foster dynamics of inclusion and exclusion and group formations. These are certainly due to decades of war and violence that have torn the people apart and caused divisions. Trust is broken among many and the issue of identity politics has become the buzz word of the modern day which has to some extent affected social relationships between Afghans in the country and beyond. We can see such a nonsense discussion among many newly elected MPs in the House of Parliament in Afghanistan. But overall, the general perception of Afghans in the UK for the promotion of women empowerment and girls education is a positive one based on the findings presented in this paper that underlines the importance of gender equality and development which can be also a part of wider socioeconomic, political and sometime future processes.

Notes

Afghanistan's population resembles a mosaic of different ethnic groups. Over centuries they have settled in the area which became the State of Afghanistan in the mid-eighteenth century. Pashtuns claim to be the largest section of the population at over 40 per cent. With an estimated 27 per cent of the population, Tajiks form the second-largest group. Uzbeks and Turkmen are the main Turkic ethnic groups in north Afghanistan. Their size is estimated at 9 and 3 per cent respectively. Hazaras make up about 9 per cent of the Afghan population. Further small ethnic groups include the Aimak (4 per cent), Baloch (2 per cent) and others (Vogel- sang 2008).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Acknowledgements

I thank the Furkhunda Trust for providing me the opportunity to research the Afghan diaspora topic. I am grateful of the interviewees for their invaluable thoughts and comments and among the Afghan governmental officials who participated, especial thanks to the Deputy of Upper House of Parliament Mohammad Alam Azadyar, Professor Hamidullah Farouqi, General Sebghatullah Saiiq and Mullah Mujahid. I am also indebted to Professor Althea-Maria Rivas whose invaluable suggestions ensured the efficient running of this paper and provided the mapping. Special thanks to Rahila Sidiqi the Co Founder and the Director of Furkhunda Trust who has contributed to my thinking through our discussions. The responsibility for any errors or omissions is mine alone.

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