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Pioneering Uzbek Women in Educational Process in Afghanistan: An Intersectional Exploration of Uzbek Women's Historical Struggles

Report of the RWI Afghanistan Programme

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Abstract

This research delves into the historical and contemporary challenges encountered by Uzbek women in Afghanistan in their pursuit of advancing female education. Tracing back to the establishment of Afghanistan's modern educational system in 1921, it highlights key milestones, including the founding of *Masturat*, the nation's first girls' school. Notably, Bibi Mariam, a pioneering Uzbek woman, emerged as the first female educator at the institution, symbolizing a groundbreaking step in the educational empowerment of Afghan women.

The study is organized into two primary analytical components. The first component delves into the historical contributions of Uzbek women to female education, underscoring the lack of recognition and academic acknowledgment of their efforts. The second component explores the current obstacles they encounter under the Taliban regime, as they navigate the intersecting struggles of being both women and members of an ethnic minority.

This research employs a feminist framework, specifically Islamic feminism, to examine the agency and empowerment of Uzbek women. Grounded in the theories of Judith Butler and Saba Mahmood, the study focuses on the provinces of Faryab, Jawzjan, and Mazar-i-Sharif. It highlights participants who are politically minded, well-educated, and advocates for female education, despite the significant restrictions imposed by the Taliban.

The research underscores the importance of documenting the legacy of Uzbek women by exploring micro-spaces of recognition—such as community, family, and peer support networks—that have preserved their contributions in the face of socio-political challenges. While the biographies of historical participants, with their identities safeguarded, are included in the appendix, the identities of contemporary participants remain anonymized to protect them in present-day Afghanistan. This study offers valuable insights into the resilience and agency of Uzbek women in their quest for educational equity and empowerment within the complex and patriarchal socio-political landscape of Afghanistan.

Keywords: Uzbek women, Afghan minority, intersectional identity, gender equality, women's agency, right to education, women's empowerment, gendered resilience, Afghanistan, sustainable development.

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I am immensely thankful to my family, particularly Ghaniola Safi, the father of my children, for his unwavering support throughout the completion of this work. Drawing from his Pashtun heritage, his encouragement exemplifies the potential for harmony and collaboration among Afghanistan's diverse ethnic groups. I also deeply appreciate my sister, Fawzia Shir M., for always being there when I needed assistance in pursuing my goals. I would also like to extend my gratitude to Pakizea Anwar, my youngest niece, for providing invaluable assistance with software-related tasks, drawing on her expertise in Information Technology.

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Finally, I am profoundly grateful to my participants, many of whom are friends with their biographies included in the appendix, while others chose to remain anonymous and did not seek direct credit. Their insights, time, and contributions were crucial to the success of this research. I sincerely appreciate each of them for making this work possible.

Preface

This report examines the challenges faced by Uzbek women in Afghanistan, particularly their access to education and their fight for rights. It focuses on how systemic patriarchy and ethnic marginalization intensify the violations of women's rights.

It is crucial to clarify that this study does not seek to inflame ethnic tensions or contribute to divisions between groups. Rather, it aims to provide a nuanced understanding of how women's subjugation in Afghanistan is shaped not only by patriarchal norms but also by their ethnic identities within society. By bringing the experiences of Uzbek women to the forefront, this research seeks to illuminate an aspect of gender inequality that has predominantly been overlooked in both academic and policy discussions.

Given the historical and political complexities of Afghanistan, this study approaches the subject with a commitment to academic rigor and an acknowledgment of diverse perspectives. The goal is not to frame ethnicity as a source of conflict, but to critically examine how women's marginalization functions at various levels and how structural barriers disproportionately impact women from ethnic minority backgrounds. Through this analysis, the book aspires to contribute to broader conversations on gender justice, intersectionality, and the ways in which compounded discrimination restricts women's full participation in society.

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Abbreviations
I include abbreviations in this section as well, noting that additional abbreviations will be added after the proofreading process is complete.

(CBBISTS) Charter of Building Bridges between Islamic Schools of Thought and Sects, which is associated with the Muslim World League.
(CEDAW) the International Covenant on Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women
(CHA) Coordinating Humanitarian Assistance
(CSW) Commission on the Status of Women
(ICCPR) International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and
(ICESCR) the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights
(ICJ) International Court of Justice
(INGO) International Non-Governmental Organizations (INGOs
(GFFO) German Federal Foreign Office
(MDGs) Millennium Development Goals
(NGO) Non-Governmental Organizations (INGOs
(SDGs) Sustainable Development Goals
(UNSR) UN Special Rapporteur
(WRN) Women Regional Network

A Cry for Justice: Afghan Girls' Plea for the Right to Education

Adopting a gender-sensitive and survivor-centered approach, I include a poem by an 18-year-old participant who, despite immense adversity, secretly teaches young girls and advocates for resilience. Her words echo the struggles and determination of countless others in similar circumstances. Originally written in Dari and translated into English, the poem captures the collective pain of women living under Taliban rule, reflecting the lived realities and sentiments of my participants.

A Plea for Recognition

Dear Almighty Creator,
Why do you subject me to such anguish?
I am not the embodiment of Persian poetry, nor am I a renowned figure.
I do not indulge in wine, nor am I a devout follower on any path.
I am but a simple soul, yearning to **learn,**
Is my gender a crime? **Then why breathe life into me**,
If not to uplift or acknowledge my humanity?
Listen to my plea, guide me to the promised land.
I refuse to dwell in this desolation any longer,
Take this existence away from me.
Oh, God, **do recognize my identity**!
With tear-filled eyes and a heart heavy with dread,
Until I step foot in the halls of education,
My head rests on the pillow, my voice whispers, burdened with sorrow.
What sin have I committed?
To be solely judged for being an Afghan girl?

Do I not deserve relief from this torment?
Deprived of books and letters,
My pen merely a toy in our cosmic play,
My paper a canvas for our shared grief.
Take up the pen, my sisters, and write our truth!
The plight of Afghan girls denied education and guidance!
I am not a mythical figure, immune to suffering,
Let it burn, let it blaze, so they may witness our struggle.

I do not scorn my homeland, Though my body and soul ache,

My hair turns white with worry, My agony knows no break.

Guide me, God!

You are my Creator, Show me the way forward, For in Your light, I seek solace, In Your wisdom, I find my word.

“By an 18-year-old female”.

1. Introduction

Afghanistan boasts a rich cultural heritage, with a diverse ethnic makeup consisting of five main groups: Pashtuns, Tajiks, Uzbeks, Turkmens, and Hazaras, as well as others. While Pashtuns are the largest group and speak Pashto, the other groups are considered minorities, including Uzbeks, Turkmens, Hazaras, Aimaqs, Baloch, Nuristanis, Pashai, Brahui, Kyrgyz, Hindus, and Sikhs. Unfortunately, ethnic tensions have been exacerbated by years of conflict, presenting a significant obstacle to stability. Overcoming this challenge requires an effective government that values and embraces diversity. Addressing these issues is complex, mainly due to the lack of accountability of non-state actors. Therefore, fostering reconciliation and promoting harmony among Afghanistan's diverse communities remains a critical challenge for successive administrations (Thier, 1999).

Various ethnic groups have profoundly shaped the history of Afghanistan, making important contributions to its economy, culture, and education that deserve acknowledgment. However, since 2021, the Taliban, predominantly representing Pashtuns, has targeted a number of ethnic minorities, including Uzbeks, Turkmens, Hazaras, and others. There have been reports of forced evictions, particularly in the northern regions of the country. The Taliban asserts its authority through conquest, despite lacking recognition as Afghanistan's legitimate government (M. Şükrü, 2023).

M. Şükrü (2023) emphasizes the Taliban's lack of legitimacy, noting their failure to create an inclusive government. Their rule is defined by ethnic exclusion and the systematic persecution of minorities, which exacerbates societal divisions. The absence of accountability and international recognition further contributes to the instability of their governance, posing persistent threats to ethnic and religious minorities.

Despite ongoing conflicts and disharmony, Afghanistan is experiencing significant societal changes. One such change involves the Uzbek minority, who are increasing their interaction and exchange due to their linguistic ties to Uzbekistan and proximity to the border (Hewadmal, 2021). Cross-border movement can enhance the dissemination of knowledge and educational ideals; however, political discourse may impose obstacles to access. Despite these challenges, historically marginalized groups, such as Uzbek minorities, have been instrumental in advancing education. They have diligently worked to promote literacy and the transmission of knowledge, even in the face of sociopolitical constraints (Zhou, 2012). This study underscores how the contributions of Uzbek women to education are influenced by their ethnic and religious identities, shaping their attitudes toward learning and the wider societal context. Their efforts exemplify the natural processes of knowledge diffusion and cultural adaptation that arise through historical mobility and migration

As each ethnic group uniquely contributes to the richness of a diverse community, this study aims to explore the role of Uzbek women in promoting female education in Afghanistan.

1.2 Problem Formulation

The advancement of women's rights to education in Afghanistan has been an ongoing struggle, gaining significant momentum during the reign of King Amanullah Khan (1919–1929). Before this era, formal educational institutions for women were virtually nonexistent, with educational opportunities largely limited to Quranic studies or basic literacy within families (Noori, 2020). The establishment of the first female school in Kabul around 1921, initiated by Queen Suraya, who was the first female education minister, marked a transformative milestone. Notably, an Uzbek woman[1] from the royal household became the institution's first teacher, representing a significant moment in the history of education in Afghanistan (Amini, 2008; Shahrani, 2005).

Amir Amanullah's constitutional reforms sought to integrate women into all facets of society, thereby advancing women's education (Zulfacar, 2006; Heath and Zahedi, 2011). However, the politicization of female education has often been exploited to further radical ideologies, with the Taliban imposing regressive policies. Nonetheless, Islamic scholars and various nations have increasingly condemned such actions, affirming that contemporary Islam promotes girls' education (CBBISTS, 2024).

This research delves into the contributions and resilience of Afghan female educators, with a particular focus on Uzbek women, as they confront both historical and contemporary challenges. In the face of systemic violations of women's rights—including widespread gender-based discrimination and practices akin to gender apartheid, which have yet to be formally acknowledged by the international community—these women steadfastly uphold their roles, often risking their lives to promote education. Their unwavering dedication underscores their essential role in advocating for women's educational rights and fostering progress within Afghan society.

The study aims to explore the experiences of both pioneering and contemporary female teachers in Afghanistan, examining their motivations and the obstacles they encounterd and continue to encounter amid ongoing violations of women's human rights and the institutionalization of gender persecution. By investigating the reasons these women persist in their noble profession despite the risks involved, this research illuminates their lasting impact and the broader struggle for gender equity in education.

[1] Reflecting on my earliest memories: my mother shared narratives of the pioneering women in her family who fervently advocated for women's education in Kabul and Faryab, the northern province of Afghanistan. Their stories persistently underscore the significance of their contributions, which have often been overshadowed and disregarded. Nonetheless, thanks to RWI, I am privileged to explore this topic, facilitated by my role as a research fellow in RWI's Afghanistan program under the mandate of the UN Special Rapporteur, Richard Bennett.

1.3 Study Motivation

The hypothesis of this study posits that Uzbek women were instrumental in advocating for the education rights of Afghan women. Despite numerous anecdotes of the obstacles faced by Uzbek women in effecting social change, particularly in Kabul and northern Afghanistan where women's education was initially advanced, there is a dearth of documented academic evidence recognizing their contributions. At that time, attending school as a female was stigmatized, resulting in societal ostracism for women and their families; other ethnic groups, such as the Pashtuns, often disregarded this stigma.

Based on historical evidence, there is support for certain elements of this assertion. Specifically, during the reign of King Amanullah, educational programs for women were implemented—particularly within the royal family. King Amanullah was a tenacious leader who sought to modernize Afghanistan, moving it away from its religiously conservative roots through a series of sweeping reforms that included constitutional amendments and the advancement of women's rights. These changes opened up new avenues for female members of the royal dynasty to pursue their educational goals (Heath and Zahedi, 2011).

The tireless efforts of King Amanullah's mother were instrumental in establishing the first female school, known as Masturat (Education History, 2016). Bibi Mariam was one of many strong women from the Uzbek community who demonstrated remarkable resilience in assuming groundbreaking positions as educators and advocates for women's education. Despite facing daunting challenges, such as social stigma and lack of respect for women in such roles, they persevered. The families of these women often faced social ostracism as well, which only added to their difficulties. It is important to note that the progress made was not solely due to the individual efforts of these women, but was also supported by female members of the Pashtun-dominated royal family; it is instrumental that with the help of these women, Bibi Mariam could take this important step and serve as first teacher, which was, of course, an important goal not easily achieved (Amini, 2008; Shahrani, 2005).
To advance my research, it is crucial to narrow down the topic and formulate a precise research question to guide the investigation with accuracy.

1.4 Research questions

To refine the research focus, this study will be guided by the following research questions and sub-questions. The main research question is divided into four sub-questions to facilitate a more comprehensive response.

Main Research Question

How did Uzbek women pioneers contribute to the advancement of women's education and influence socio-cultural aspects of Afghanistan, considering the intersecting factors of gender, ethnicity, and historical context, and why have their contributions remained overlooked?

Sub Questions:

1. How did the intersection of gender and ethnicity intensify the vulnerability of pioneering Uzbek women in pursuing the advance of education in Afghanistan?

2. To what extent did Bibi Mariam's position as the first female teacher and her role within the king's family contribute to shaping the experiences of Afghan women, particularly in education and human rights?

3. What factors motivate Uzbek women to exhibit distinctiveness, compared to other ethnic groups, as pioneers in the advancement of female education in Afghanistan?

4. How have the contributions of Uzbek women in Afghan history been acknowledged or overlooked in scholarly discourse and societal narratives, and what underlying factors contribute to their continued lack of recognition?

The aim of this research is to explore the experiences of Uzbek women in Afghanistan with regards to their impact on education, societal recognition, and the broader socio-cultural context of Afghanistan. The study will focus on the Uzbek population residing where they are most concentrated: Faryab, Jawzjan, and Mazar-i Sharif, all in northern Afghanistan.

The primary goal is to examine the economic, social, and cultural experiences of this minority group. By evaluating the recognition they receive for their contributions and analyzing the distribution of social resources, this research aims to provide valuable insights into their distinct experiences. The researcher's Uzbek heritage will aid in establishing trust and ensuring the authenticity of responses.

1.5 Disposition

Following the introduction, the second chapter will examine the existing literature on women's right to education in Afghanistan. The third chapter will delve into the theoretical frameworks that support this research. In the fourth chapter, the research methodology will be detailed, including the methods used, participant information, and ethical considerations. The fifth chapter will present the findings of the study, while the sixth chapter will offer a conclusion that synthesizes the results and reflects on the broader implications of the research. The seventh chapter provides recommendations based on the insights shared by the participants.

The subsequent chapter will feature the literature review, organized into four subsections.

2. Literature review

The literature review is an important component of any research project, and my primary aim is to encompass all relevant sources related to this subject. However, I have encountered a significant scarcity of academic discourse on the history of female education in Afghanistan, particularly regarding the contributions of the Uzbek minority. Despite extensive searches in educational resources, it has become clear that there is a substantial gap in the existing literature. This emphasizes the necessity for a thorough exploration of available materials, including academic articles, news reports, various online resources, and existing books. My objective is to gather and critically analyze any relevant literature that addresses these themes, ultimately enhancing the understanding of the Uzbek community's role in promoting female education in Afghanistan.

2.1 Relevant literature

As stated earlier, after encountering limited literature on my research topic, I made the decision to conduct a comprehensive review of the literature written on educational experiences of women in Afghanistan.

I reached out to the British Library, anticipating that its archives might contain historical materials from former colonies. However, while some links were provided, they did not fully meet the research requirements. I aimed to utilize all these findings as supplementary resources. By combining primary and secondary sources, I aim to enhance the quality of my research and produce more robust results.

During my investigation into the establishment of the first female school in Afghanistan using scholarly materials, I encountered a significant dearth of information. Despite thorough searches on academic databases like LubSearch (Lund University’s database) and widely available platforms such as Google Search and Google Scholar, as well as different relevant webpages, the results yielded minimal details, with only superficial references on platforms like Wikipedia. This scarcity of accessible resources highlights the unfortunate oversight of a historically significant event.

Given the limited literature directly related to my research theme, it is important to broaden the focus by exploring four key areas. I have categorized the related literature into subthemes: the status of women and education in Afghanistan, Islamic perspectives on women’s education, the rights of women to education under Taliban rule, and Afghan cultural attitudes toward female education. I acknowledge

that the literature presented, even in subthemes, does not focus exclusively on women's education in Afghanistan as it ideally should. Instead, it includes sections from broader works that address aspects of women's education. This comprehensive approach is vital, as it emphasizes women's active roles in the educational landscape, particularly their resilience and agency in advocating for educational equity.

This review aims to synthesize the existing literature, identify gaps in knowledge, and enhance the process of knowledge production, emphasizing areas that warrant further exploration in connection with the research theme. Given the lack of scholarship on Uzbek women's contributions to female education in Afghanistan, this study seeks to address that gap by highlighting their role in promoting educational equity. It strives to deepen the understanding of gender dynamics and educational empowerment within the Uzbek ethnic minority and its broader significance for Afghan society. The review will be grounded in reliable evidence and rigorously referenced to uphold high academic standards.

The following section will provide an overview of the state of women's education in Afghanistan.

2.2 Women and Education in Afghanistan

When researching women's education in Afghanistan, it is challenging to find comprehensive literature beyond the periods of Taliban rule in 1996 and 2021. In this context, the history of female education needs more detailed written records, as it difficult to access the desired information. Most of the literature available online, especially that written after 2001, was written or became available following the expulsion of the Taliban from the country.

Heath et al. delve into the history of modern education for women, offering a detailed analysis of various political contexts and constitutions. However, their work overlooks information about the earliest schools and specific details about them, instead concentrating solely on the political struggles in this area. They emphasize the substantial vulnerability of women's education throughout history (Heath and Zahedi, 2011).

Gures' (2013) article examines the obstacles to women's education in Afghanistan, particularly the cultural, political, and religious challenges they face. It underscores the detrimental effects of conflict and oppressive regimes on educational access, and highlights the critical role of educational opportunities in advancing gender equality and empowering Afghan women (Gures, 2013).

Kabeer and Khan's article delves into how women in urban Afghanistan manage the complex interplay between cultural values and universal rights, particularly in the realm of education. It underscores that education is both a contested space and a means of empowerment, highlighting the broader challenges related to women's roles and rights within Afghan society (Kabeer and Khan, 2014).

The webpage entitled “Education History in Afghanistan” highlights that Mahmud Tarzi, the father-in-law of King Amanullah Khan, returned from exile in Turkey in 1901 and quickly rose to prominent positions within the government. As a notable Afghan statesman and advocate for modern, state-sponsored education, Tarzi is recognized for his role in championing educational reforms. Educated in India and Syria, he earned the distinction of being the father of Afghan journalism, acknowledging the importance of contemporary education (Education History, 2016). The webpage offers valuable insights into Tarzi's role as a Muslim leader who championed modernity and advocated for women's involvement in society through education. However, it lacks a comprehensive academic analysis of several key elements. Specifically, it overlooks the significant contributions of Uzbek women, who were instrumental in promoting female education in Afghanistan under his influence. This omission underscores a critical gap that merits further investigation in research on the early development of education in the country.

In the methodology section, I detailed my outreach to the British Library, an institution that, as a former colonial power, has collected important resources on the countries it once governed, Afghanistan included. Through our institute, I reached out to them, and they kindly provided several links to relevant materials. However, after a comprehensive review of the available documents, I was unable to find any substantial information regarding the first girls' school, Masturat.

The following section reviews literature where various authors discuss women's education from an Islamic perspective, considering their Islamic identity and traditional roles.

2.3 Islam and women’s education in Afghanistan

In this section, I will examine the literature focusing on the intersection of Islam and women's right to education in the context of Afghanistan. Scholars have critically analyzed how Islamic identity is often misused to restrict women's freedom and limit their participation beyond the domestic sphere, particularly in education. Radical Islamic political factions frequently use Islamic identity as a barrier to women's access to schooling. By exploring various scholarly perspectives, I aim to review the literature on how researchers interpret and respond to these challenges, ultimately shedding light on the complex relationship between Islamic identity and women's educational opportunities in Afghanistan.

Zulfacar (2006) provides a critical analysis of the evolving conditions surrounding Afghan women's education and public participation, underscoring their persistent struggle against restrictions rooted in Islamic identity. In the 1920s, under King Amanullah Khan, limited educational reforms enabled certain women to engage in public life and adopt modern attire. However, the 1930s witnessed a regression as veiling was reintroduced, reversing earlier advancements. In the mid-20th century, there were

significant strides made, allowing for co-education and a broader range of freedoms for women. This progress reached its zenith in the 1960s and 1970s when women could work and drive alongside men. Although the 1980s brought further improvements, the Taliban regime in the 1990s imposed severe restrictions on women's rights. After 2003, educational opportunities began to reemerge, although they were largely concentrated in Kabul and bigger cities, and often impeded by security challenges. Throughout these transitions, Afghan women have consistently resisted confinement and sought to preserve their Islamic identity, striving for varied interpretations of their roles amid ongoing political and cultural upheaval (Zulfacar, 2006).

Kissane (2012) also critically examined how Afghan women's education has faced discrimination for many years, especially since modern education was introduced during the reforms of Amir Amanullah Khan. In recent decades, women's right to education has been increasingly targeted by Islamist groups, with the Taliban taking an extreme stance. The Taliban have systematically excluded women from public life and closed girls' schools beyond the sixth grade. According to Kissane, between 2007 and 2009, the Taliban violently attacked 640 educational institutions, either bombing, burning, or shutting them down, even during the tenure of Afghanistan's elected government. During this period, women enjoyed new freedoms such as traveling abroad without a male guardian, and educational opportunities for women were expanding. However, the Taliban's actions significantly reversed these advancements. Kissane points out that 80% of the targeted schools were for girls, and between 2008 and 2010, 453 schools were damaged, depriving 300,000 children, mainly girls, of their right to education. These attacks resulted in the deaths of 290 children, teachers, and staff, illustrating the profound impact of Islamist opposition to women's education in Afghanistan (Kissane, 2012, pp. 17–18). Kissane emphasizes the significance of integrating Islamic studies led by Islamic feminists as a crucial, bottom-up strategy to advocate for equal educational opportunities for both genders. She believes this approach is efficient in Afghanistan's religiously conservative society, where both men and women are mindful of preserving their Islamic identity (Kissane, 2012).

Kissane posits terms like “narrow misinterpretation” of Islam by the Taliban, with which I disagree. While I strongly support her proposal to utilize Islamic studies and prominent Islamic figures to advance education rights for females, particularly in religious societies like Afghanistan, I believe we should be cautious when using the term “misinterpretation” in discussions about the Taliban's understanding of Islam. Instead, we might consider using the phrase “different interpretation.” The Taliban, like other radical Islamic groups, claim that their interpretation of the Quran and Islamic Sharia law is the most authentic. Therefore, it is important to be mindful of the terminology we use in this context. Islamic law allows for diverse understandings and interpretations, and no single interpretation can be definitively labeled as right or wrong. The societal structure at the time Islamic law was first

established—over 1,400 years ago—was different from today. The Taliban's attempt to recreate that historical context overlooks the evolution of societies and legal frameworks.

In the same vein, Alvi-Aziz regards female education as an important phenomenon that should not be violated. He argues that there should be no tolerance for such violations, but it is not clear how this would be effected (Alvi-Aziz, 2008). Amartya Sen (1999a, 1999b, 1995), an Islamic feminist, also agrees that educated women are better able to provide for themselves and their families, contributing to the overall health of their communities and the economic well-being and political stability of their countries. They are more likely to guarantee that their children—regardless of sex—attend school, thus perpetuating the positive cycle and benefits of education.

In her article, Hanifa Grewal, a research fellow at RWI, delves into the topic of female rights and touches on women's education, introducing two models that represent women's experiences with modernization and regression throughout history, which she labels "circular" and "vertical" viciousness. Girowal argues that various historical and political factors have led to violations of women's rights. This ongoing struggle involves reformists advocating for progress while religious and conservative actors impede or lead to reforms (Girowal, 2024, pp. 41–42). In the same vein, Ramizpoor, an expert in Islamic studies and a research fellow at RWI, asserts that co-education for girls and boys is permissible under Islamic law. As a recognized authority in the field, he contends that the Taliban's interpretation of Islamic law is distinctive and unsuitable for contemporary society. He critiques the various restrictions imposed by the Taliban, arguing that their actions are rooted in an illogical interpretation of Islamic law, which they manipulate to impose their own misogynistic views against women (Ramizpoor, 2024, pp. 24–46).

According to Nawabi, Islamic law and Quranic verses do not impose limitations on education. The discrepancies arise from interpretation, particularly when a misogynistic perspective is utilized to manipulate these interpretations. This manipulation is evident in the actions of the Taliban during both of their regimes, as they have employed such interpretations to marginalize women from all aspects of life (Nawabi, 2022, p. 25).

Qanee, an Afghan scholar and expert in national and international law who has extensively studied Sharia law and international law, argues that the violation of the right to education constitutes a criminal act under international law and should be recognized as such. As an Afghan lawyer with expertise in Islamic and international law, Qanee emphasizes the importance of acknowledging this violation in legal and humanitarian discourse (Qanee, 2024, p. 25).

I resonate with the perspectives of experts such as Alvi-Aziz and Amartya Sen (Alvi-Aziz, 2008; Kissane, 2012) regarding the interpretation of Islamic law. Nonetheless, I argue that Sharia law has

been historically interpreted and reinterpreted by various Islamic governments, influenced by their distinct cultural and political contexts.

In regions like the Arab states, Turkey, India, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Iran, the role of women in education has been shaped by the integration of Islamic principles with local cultural values. During more progressive periods, these regions have developed diverse interpretations of women's rights, particularly in education, reflecting their unique circumstances. By drawing on these progressive traditions, we can align Islamic values with contemporary human rights norms while honoring cultural diversity.

Furthermore, Girowal, Ramizpoor, Nawabi, and Qanee collectively critique the Taliban's extreme position on women's education. Their arguments emphasize the historic contributions of Afghan women to education and align with modern values of gender equity, which are not against Islamic principle. This point is confirmed by the Charter for Building Bridges between Islamic Schools of Thought and Sects (CBBISTS) regarding the Taliban's opposition to women's education in Afghanistan. Representatives from various parts of the Islamic world convened to reaffirm that Islam unequivocally endorses female education. The Charter (CBBISTS, 2024) emphasizes the importance of modern, inclusive education for societal development, highlighting the crucial role that educated girls play in strengthening families and the *Ummah*.[2] By advocating for educational programs that are free from gender bias, the Charter firmly opposes the Taliban's exclusion of women from both education and the workforce—practices that contradict both Islamic values and universal human rights. This position reflects a contemporary Muslim vision of education grounded in equity and progress.

In summary, these authors agree that there is no authoritative Islamic scholarship opposing women's right to education. Instead, the Taliban rely on a radical interpretation of Islam to justify their misogynistic views, which are clearly incompatible with the modern world.

In the following section, I will examine the literature on the Taliban's restrictive policies and their impact on women's right to education. I will emphasize that these policies, despite the Taliban's claims, are not grounded in Islamic principles.

2.4 Women's Right to Education Under the Taliban

[2] *Ummah* is an Arabic term meaning "community" or "nation." In the Islamic context, it refers to the global community of Muslims united by their shared faith and beliefs, transcending national, ethnic, and cultural differences.

This section includes both academic and non-academic sources due to their significant relevance to the issues explored in this research. These sources illuminate the systemic violations of Afghan women's rights, particularly their right to education beyond the sixth grade, which has been severely restricted by the Taliban since their return to power in August 2021. Afghan women have increasingly faced marginalization across nearly all aspects of society, experiencing profound limitations on their educational opportunities and fundamental rights. Although the existing literature on this topic is extensive, this section focuses on the most pertinent sources that align with the central themes of the study. Rather than providing an exhaustive review, the goal is to highlight key insights that contextualize the research, especially regarding how Afghan women demonstrate resilience by pursuing alternative avenues for education despite such restrictions.

Amiry (2024) highlights the troubling trend in madrassa-style schools, where girls are trained primarily for child-rearing to raise future Mujahideen. This approach marginalizes women under the Taliban and risks turning them into agents of extremist ideology. A report by Amu TV reveals that girls in these schools often accept Taliban ideology, with some focused solely on Islamic law and others seeking a balance with modern education. If madrassa-based education persists, it could severely restrict women's societal roles and promote extremism. The Taliban's curriculum emphasizes Islamic law and religious studies, covering subjects like Sarf Baha'i (Arabic grammar), Shurut al-Salah (rules of prayer), Zad al-Talibin (a religious text), Dars al-Balagha (rhetoric), and Usul al-Fiqh (Islamic jurisprudence) (Amiry, 2024).

Mona Chalabi's article, "Women in Afghanistan: From Almost Everywhere to Almost Nowhere," delves into the drastic reduction in Afghan women's freedom of movement and visibility following the Taliban takeover in August 2021. It highlights the historical struggle for women's rights in Afghanistan, illustrating how rapidly decades of progress in gender equality can be reversed. The article underscores that the fight for women's rights in Afghanistan is not only a local issue but a global concern that reflects the values of the international community. Furthermore, it presents statistics that demonstrate advancements in women's education and political representation prior to the Taliban's return, emphasizing the urgent need to support Afghan women's rights (Chalabi, 2023).

In the same vein, Reuters (2024) critically examines the recent directive from the Ministry of Morality regarding women's clothing choices further entrenches their oppressive regime. These restrictions, enforced in urban centers such as Kabul and Mazar-e-Sharif, significantly curtail women's autonomy by stripping them of the fundamental right to choose their attire. The mandate compelling educated women to wear the burqa is particularly troubling, as this garment has historically been worn by those who have been denied access to education and opportunities. Such impositions not only undermine women's agency but also reinforce the broader, systematic erasure of their roles within society (Reuters, 2024).

Latifi (2024) further explores the international response to the Taliban's morality law, which was introduced in August 2024. This legislation regulates public behavior, including dress standards, smartphone content, and interactions with non-Muslims, raising significant concerns about its implications for humanitarian efforts and gender relations. Nations such as the Netherlands, Australia, Canada, and Germany have condemned the law for its violations of women's rights.

Furthermore, local NGOs report that the morality police are actively enforcing these regulations, resulting in increased restrictions on women's roles in society. These developments highlight a troubling trend for Afghan society, which is under close observation by diplomats and aid organizations (Latifi, 2024).

In line with this, the article published by the Afghanistan International (2024) emphasizes the Taliban's manipulation of Islamic law to justify the infringement of women's fundamental rights, particularly their right to education. By imposing strict clothing mandates and restricting women's public participation, the Taliban reinforces a patriarchal system that curtails women's mobility, expression, and identity. This coercive approach not only obstructs women's contributions to society but also deepens their systemic disenfranchisement (Afg.International, 2024).

Barakat (2024) analyzes the profound impact of the Taliban's policies on female education, focusing on the ongoing denial of schooling for girls beyond grade six. Since the Taliban's return to power in August 2021, hopes for progress have been continually undermined, with initial promises to reopen schools never materializing. By March 2022, a brief period of school reopenings was abruptly reversed, and subsequent decrees have entirely prohibited women from pursuing higher education. These escalating restrictions illustrate the systematic dismantling of Afghan women's educational aspirations and opportunities (Barakat, 2024).

In the same vein, Rahimi and Din contend that under the Taliban regime, Afghan women and girls have few educational options other than attending madrassas, which they leverage as a platform to express their agency. Their article investigates how female madrassas in Afghanistan offer a space for women to resist oppressive policies and negotiate their roles within both sociocultural and Islamic frameworks. By drawing comparisons with similar institutions in South Asia and the Middle East, the authors underscore how madrassas enable women to attain religious authority, confront patriarchal constraints, and advocate for their rights. Empirical findings reveal a notable increase in female madrassa enrollment following the Taliban's closure of schools and universities for girls, thereby positioning these institutions as one of the few remaining avenues for education. Rahimi and Din stress that, while madrassas cannot substitute for formal education, they play a vital role in empowering women within Afghanistan's restrictive sociopolitical context. They perceive female madrassas as both a form of

resistance and a means of redefining traditional roles, with Afghan women emerging as agents of change with respect to religious and community norms (Rahimi and Din, 2024).

While I concur with Rahimi and Din's argument that madrassas have become the sole educational option available for women under the Taliban regime, I strongly oppose their assertion that Afghan women can genuinely exercise agency within these institutions. Unlike the examples of religious education in other Islamic countries highlighted in their article—where women have the freedom to choose to attend madrassas—Afghan women are compelled to enter these institutions due to a lack of alternatives. This absence of choice fundamentally undermines the concept of agency in the Afghan context.

In conclusion, the articles reviewed in this section convey mixed messages: on one hand, they suggest that attending madrassas might foster extremism, while on the other hand, they propose that such education could empower women to attain literacy in Islamic law and assert their agency. I contend that any form of education that reinforces traditional inequalities and discourages women's agency and resistance should be critically challenged. Instead, efforts should focus on creating inclusive and equitable educational opportunities that genuinely empower women and confront systemic oppression.

Scholars have frequently linked the Taliban's stance against women's education to what are claimed to be Afghan cultural norms, a connection that many experts contest. In the following section, I will explore the literature on Afghan cultural views regarding female education. This analysis is especially relevant in light of ongoing debates about whether Afghan culture has historically been opposed to women's educational endeavors.

2.5 Afghan Cultural Perspectives on Female Education

Afghan culture, like many others around the world, has gradually evolved toward greater equality and women's rights, particularly concerning the right to education. However, this advancement has often been disrupted by internal conflicts and the politicization of Islamic ideology. In this section, I seek to incorporate insights from researchers on how cultural attitudes have either facilitated or obstructed the movement toward gender equality and equal rights to education.

As noted above, Hanifa Girowal has developed two models to conceptualize violations of women's human rights: Circular Viciousness and Vertical Viciousness. Circular Viciousness refers to the cyclical escalation of power between different religious groups and modernizers, which is often used to violate women's rights at various stages. On the other hand, Vertical Viciousness represents power embedded

within societal norms, hindering progress toward modernity and the promotion of human rights, particularly by oppressing women. In this context, conflicts between religious groups and modernizers, as well as other actors and stakeholders, further complicate the situation. Girowal also highlights the fact that Afghanistan's neighboring countries, while facing their own struggles for women's rights, often claim that Afghanistan is hostile to women's education, a claim she disputes. She argues that conflicts have worsened the situation, but during brief periods of peace, many Afghan families actively sought to promote the education of their daughters, a perspective with which I concur (Girowal, 2024, pp. 41–43).

Zulfkar (2006) observes that under Taliban rule, access to education was drastically restricted, particularly for women and girls. The regime enforced stringent interpretations of Islamic law that prohibited female education, resulting in significant barriers and a marked decline in educational opportunities for half of the population (Zulfacar, 2006).

In the same vein, Kabeer and Khan (2014) highlight the violation of women's rights under the Taliban regime, with policies that banned girls from attending school and severely restricted women's access to educational institutions. They argue that these actions not only undermined women's rights but also impeded the broader socio-economic development in Afghanistan (Kabeer and Khan, 2014). Their point of view is confirmed by many others such Heat and Zahedi (2011), who elaborate that under Taliban rule, the right to education for women was not just restricted but virtually eliminated. This systematic denial of educational opportunities had severe and long-lasting consequences, significantly hindering the educational progress and societal participation of Afghan women and girls.

A substantial body of literature examines Taliban rule, Islamic radicalism, and women's rights, with a particular emphasis on the right to education. This field of research has expanded significantly, especially following the fall of the Taliban in 2001, the 9/11 attacks, and NATO's subsequent intervention in Afghanistan (Heath and Zahedi, 2011). I have synthesized key insights from these sources to provide a comprehensive understanding of the challenges faced by Afghan women under Taliban rule.

In the next part of this review, I will focus on the historical evolution of female education in Afghanistan, beginning in 1922, when the reformist King Amanullah Khan established the first schools for girls. This historical perspective will illuminate both the progress and setbacks on the journey toward educational empowerment for Afghan women.

2.6 Evolving or Reversing Perspectives on Female Education in Afghanistan

In this section, I will examine how Afghan culture influences women's education, as portrayed in the literature.

In their article, Albrecht et.al emphasize that gaps in educational opportunities are among the biggest challenges faced by women in Afghanistan. A 2019 survey revealed that 43.2% of respondents identified this issue as a significant concern. Under the Taliban's current rule, these gaps are widening, further restricting women's access to education. Improving gender equality through education is presented as a crucial solution. There are calls to ensure equal access to education for women and girls, alongside other forms of humanitarian assistance. Education is deemed essential for achieving long-term gender equality, as it helps to combat gender-based violence and dismantle social barriers (Albrecht, Rude and Stitteneder, 2022).

Yagubi and Ziaulhaq (2023) assert that Afghan women's education has encountered ongoing challenges, largely stemming from cultural barriers that significantly hinder progress. These cultural obstacles are rooted in entrenched patriarchal norms and traditional beliefs that favor male education and limit women's access to schooling. Despite all these issues, there have been significant efforts and advancements, particularly with the support of international organizations and local advocates. Nonetheless, considerable disparities and challenges persist.

In the same line, Jackson (2022) underscores that Afghan women's education has been profoundly impacted by political instability and entrenched cultural barriers, including traditional gender roles and societal expectations that frequently limit educational opportunities for women and girls. Despite these obstacles, Jackson acknowledges that there have been some advancements in female education, fueled by both international support and local initiatives. Nevertheless, ongoing conflict and resistance to cultural change continue to impede significant and lasting progress in this domain (Jackson, 2022).

Based on a survey conducted by Najam, Patrinos, and Bentaouet K. in 2024, it is clear that the ongoing restrictions on women's education are having significant negative effects. In their report from September 2024, they emphasize that the recent bans on women's education and employment are severely impeding social and economic progress in Afghanistan. By excluding women from these crucial spheres, the country faces an estimated annual economic loss of over $1.4 billion, which equates to 2% of Afghanistan's Gross National Income (GNI). This economic deficit not only impacts individual women but also undermines broader economic stability, jeopardizing the years of progress made toward sustainable development and the expansion of opportunities for women (Najam, Patrinos and Bentaouet K., 2024).

The article by Zeweri and Osman (2021) highlights the vital role of education in empowering Afghan women and advancing their rights. It notes past achievements, such as the establishment of girls' schools and increased enrollment in higher education before the Taliban's takeover. Education is essential for women to challenge norms and contribute to national development. However, significant setbacks have occurred since the Taliban returned to power. The piece also underscores Afghan women's struggles for leadership and equality, emphasizing their resilience and contributions to social and political movements (Zeweri and Osman, 2021).

In her article, Girowal contends that the resistance to women's education in Afghanistan is not culturally ingrained but rather a politicized effort to obstruct progress. She refutes the perception of Afghan hostility toward women's education by offering regional counter-examples. Girowal underscores the escalating politicization of women's education and argues that the opposition primarily arises from extreme interpretations of Sharia law (Girowal, 2024), a perspective I wholeheartedly support.

To sum up, the existing literature reveals that the struggle for women's education in Afghanistan parallels broader historical conflicts over women's rights. Resistance to women's education is not an intrinsic aspect of Afghan culture; rather, it arises from conflicts that have impeded progress. Although Afghan women have significantly advanced in various spheres of life over the past twenty years, these achievements remain fragile under the pressure of extremist forces, particularly during Taliban rule. Since Amanullah Khan's reforms in 1919, women's education has experienced fluctuating periods of growth and decline, often obstructed by political agendas.

In the following section, I will identify the gaps in the existing literature and explain why this study is essential to address them.

2.7 Literature gap

The literature review in this study has entailed a meticulous examination of scholarly articles, books, reports, and relevant studies from disciplines such as sociology, anthropology, gender studies, human rights, women rights, and Afghanistan studies. It is essential to explore the intersectionality of ethnicity and gender, particularly within the Afghan cultural milieu, to understand the nuanced experiences and challenges faced by Uzbek women in their endeavors to advance female education.

After conducting thorough research, I have determined that there is a notable absence of literature regarding female education pioneers among Uzbek women in Afghanistan, across English, Pashto, and Dari/Persian languages. Furthermore, there is a pressing need for additional pertinent books and articles

on this subject in Dari/Persian and Pashto, as they are currently unavailable through online searches. This is a significant gap in the existing literature. Although I have initiated the review process and analyzed some relevant literature, additional refinement and supplementation are imperative to establish a robust theoretical framework for my study.

In this research on modern female education in Afghanistan, I sought specific details, such as the number of teachers and students, regarding Masturat, the first school established in 1921. However, I was unable to find this information (Education History, 2016). Through my contacts, I came across two books discussing Bibi Mariam's family and their socio-cultural and socio-economic contributions to Afghanistan. Unfortunately, these important figures are rarely mentioned in other sources. While Ghulam Mohammad Maimangi, Bibi Mariam's brother, is referenced in some writings (Ghobar, 2001), notable Uzbek women such as Bibi Mariam and Mamlakat Banu are largely overlooked (Shahrani, 2005 & Amini, 2008).

I have relied on these books as essential and, in many cases, the only available resources. To expand on this foundation, I sought additional information from the British National Library and conducted interviews with Afghans across the globe who had personal knowledge of Bibi Mariam. These interviews provided invaluable insights not captured in existing written records. I will discuss this process in greater detail in other parts of this methodology section. Through these efforts, this research aims to address existing gaps in the literature and contribute to the production of knowledge. I hope that this academic work will enhance our understanding of the contributions of pioneering Uzbek women to the history of female education in Afghanistan.

In the following section, I will elaborate on the rationale behind selecting this subject as a current research theme and discuss the contribution of this research to the production of knowledge.

2.8 Study contribution

As stated previously, there is a notable deficiency in academic literature addressing the evolution of contemporary female education in Afghanistan. This gap in scholarship neglects the collaborative efforts between prominent Uzbek women and Pashtun queens in advancing and normalizing female education within Afghan society.

Despite the historical tensions between King Amanullah Khan’s grandfather, Amir Abdur Rahman Khan, and Bibi Mariam's father, Mingbashi—who was an influential figure in Faryab and was killed

by Amir Abdur Rahman Khan—the relationship between King Amanullah Khan and his family, including Amir Habibullah Khan and Bibi Mariam, along with her brother Ghulam Mohammad Maimangi, grew slowly to be, and then remained, positive. Following the death of Amir Habibullah Khan, this bond deepened, prompting Bibi Mariam to play a vital role in educating the king's family. She went on to establish girls' schools in Kabul, marking a significant milestone in the advancement of women's education in Afghanistan (Amini, 2008; Shahrani, 2005).
This collaboration marked a significant step forward for female education. The reformist policies implemented by King Amanullah Khan, supported by Queen Soraya and her mother, played a crucial role in normalizing female education and establishing a precedent for future educational advancements for women in Afghanistan (Education History, 2016).

In this context, it is vital to explore how these historical relationships and reforms laid the foundation for progress in women's education. By highlighting the shared efforts of Uzbek women, assisted greatly by the King's Pashtun-dominated family, this study seeks to provide a more nuanced understanding of the early strides taken toward female education in Afghanistan, as well as the lasting impact of these pioneering efforts on the progress of women in Afghan society (Amini, 2008; Shahrani, 2005).

Upholding academic integrity and a commitment to evidence-based insights is essential for rigorous knowledge production. This research adheres to these principles by grounding all findings and analyses in reliable and verifiable sources (Blatter and Haverland, 2012; Bryman, 2012; Brinkmann and Kvale, 2015). By upholding these standards, the study seeks to make a meaningful contribution to academic discourse, particularly in underexplored areas such as the evolution of female education in Afghanistan and the roles of Uzbek women and reformist leaders in this context.

In summary, the literature review underscores the historical fluctuations in Afghan women's struggle for the right to education, which has been profoundly shaped by the politicization of the issue as either Islamic or non-Islamic. Scholars point out that extremist groups, such as the Taliban, oppose women's advancement due to deeply rooted misogynistic ideologies, which have even been rejected by certain Islamic institutions (CBBISTS, 2024). Additionally, the literature indicates that Afghan cultural perspectives generally support women's right to education. The subsequent chapter will focus on the theoretical framework, detailing the relevant theories employed in this study.

3. Theoretical framework

This section establishes the theoretical framework for the research, employing intersectionality and feminist theory to examine the experiences of Afghan women, specifically Afghan Uzbek women, within the context of international human rights. The primary focus is on Islamic feminism, highlighting the intersection of religious, ethnic, and gender identities in local and global contexts. Drawing on the work of scholars such as Saba Mahmood, Chandra Mohanty, and Judith Butler, the framework integrates local and international feminist perspectives to ensure the preservation of Afghan women's Islamic identity.

By exploring Afghan Uzbek women's historical struggles and agency in advocating for females' right to education, this comprehensive framework emphasizes how gender performances and religious practices can align with international human rights standards while honoring Afghan women's national and religious identities. Given the enduring significance of Islamic identity, particularly for Afghan Uzbek women, the research incorporates an intersectional approach to delve deeper into their vulnerabilities, accounting for the multiple layers of their intersecting identities. Through this lens, the study aims to bridge Afghan national discourse with international human rights values while upholding the cultural and religious integrity central to a broader international perspective, while Afghan women's Islamic identity also remains intact and respected.

Due to the fact that historically, Afghan women's Islamic identity has been a significant focal point, particularly over the last century, I seek to introduce a framework that allows me to navigate their religious and gendered identities without conflict. I want to demonstrate how their gender performances can coexist harmoniously with international human rights values while respecting their national and religious identities.

3.1 Feminism

Feminism is a movement that seeks to challenge and dismantle the systemic injustices perpetuating male dominance and female subordination, as articulated by bell hooks. It addresses structural inequalities and emphasizes the importance of bringing women from the margins to the center of societal discourse. While different forms of feminism may offer context-specific theories, the fundamental message remains consistent: feminism advocates for justice and social harmony without

undermining individual identities. It promotes strategies aimed at eradicating institutionalized sexism and fostering a more equitable society (hooks, 2000).

Feminism confronts ingrained socialization processes, which normalize sexist attitudes and behaviors from birth. Biological differences and sexist ideologies cannot justify the subordination of women or the domination of men over women. It is crucial to recognize that feminism is not a movement opposing men, but rather a movement seeking to create a more peaceful and harmonious social and family life.[3] Oversimplifying feminism as being anti-men overlooks its true objective: to challenge institutionalized sexism and transform unjust power dynamics that harm women. Advancing feminist goals in society requires a shift in our mindsets and hearts, ensuring that justice is pursued in a way that promotes social harmony (hooks, 2000).

As stated earlier, Islamic feminism is a crucial consideration in this research paper, given the strong faith Afghan women, and Afghans in general, have in Islamic tradition. This paper focuses on female education in Afghanistan and the role of Uzbek women and their agency in this context. It is essential to acknowledge that education plays a vital role in transitioning Afghanistan toward democracy as a whole. Therefore, exploring ways to integrate international values and human rights into Islamic frameworks is essential and can be facilitated through Islamic feminism. It is also important to acknowledge that the voices of Afghan women and their gender are marginalized if our perspectives merely reinforce the status quo. Since education plays a significant role in this process, promoting a belief system that aligns with these values is crucial.

I will draw also upon Gayatri Spivak's insights, particularly her critique in "Can the Subaltern Speak?", which resonates with this research as it examines Afghan women's perspectives within the international community. Spivak emphasizes that marginalized voices are often misrepresented, appropriated, or silenced within prevailing global narratives, questioning whether the subaltern can genuinely articulate their viewpoints in such environments. In a similar vein, Afghan women have expressed their frustration and disillusionment with the international community, highlighting its failure to effectively address their lived realities and struggles. Their viewpoints reinforce Spivak's assertion that external actors frequently neglect or misrepresent the voices of those they profess to support, thereby perpetuating the marginalization they aim to confront. This connection underscores the necessity of authentically amplifying Afghan women's voices and prioritizing their agency in shaping conversations about their rights and futures (Spivak, 1988).

[3] I am highlighting this point because feminism is often portrayed within Afghan society as a perspective in opposition to men, a view that many male Afghan intellectual men have conveyed in their speeches across various platforms globally.

Furthermore, drawing on Saba Mahmood's "Politics of Piety" (2005a), this research aims to critically align the identity of Afghan women with feminist perspectives, and seeks to find common ground between Western and Islamic feminism. The goal is to acknowledge and secure the agency and resistance of Afghan women through their hardship and agency. Building on Mahmood's argument, the aim is to find a compromise between these perspectives. Mahmood argues that agency goes beyond resistance to patriarchy and can also encompass the preservation of religious and cultural traditions. She critiques Western feminist frameworks for not fully understanding the motivations behind these women's choices, and advocates for a more culturally nuanced approach that recognizes religious virtue as a form of agency. As a feminist social anthropologist with secular and leftist values, Mahmood sought to understand why women would align themselves with movements that seem to perpetuate their subordination. She suggests that acts of religious piety, often interpreted as oppressive, can represent meaningful expressions of agency, values, and identity, particularly relevant to Afghan women's engagement with religious discourse and their resistance to the Taliban's oppressive ideology, which marginalizes women from all parts of society. Additionally, Afghan women are following paths outside oppressive tradition and do not want to fall behind modern life.

However, the erasure of Afghan women from society is not only the endeavor of the Taliban; it is part of a broader struggle that has persisted for centuries, with the Taliban merely intensifying this marginalization.

As Kissane notes, Islamic influence took root in Afghanistan with the Arab conquest in the 7th century, profoundly shaping Afghan culture. Although Islam brought together people with diverse pre-existing beliefs, it also sparked heightened tensions between modernizers and Islamic scholars, particularly concerning gender equality. After enduring generations of external rule, Afghans naturally approach foreign ideas with skepticism, leading to a rift between those advocating for modernization, including gender equality, and those dedicated to preserving traditional practices (Kissane, 2012, pp. 17–19). I disagree to some extent with the notion that gender equality is solely a value originating from Western culture. I believe it is a universal human ideal that has sought to advance social justice and unity throughout history. Although recent changes may be attributed to Western cultural influences, gender equality goes beyond cultural limitations.

I align with Badran's definition, posting that Islamic feminism is a movement rooted in the Qur'an that advocates for gender equality in all aspects of life. It challenges patriarchal interpretations of Islam and calls for equal rights for men and women, rejecting the divide between public and private spheres. Badran emphasizes that proper education in Islamic teachings, particularly in ijtihad,[4] is crucial for

[4] Ijtihad refers to the independent reasoning or interpretation of Islamic law by a qualified Islamic scholar. It involves the application of reason and judgment to derive rulings from the Quran and the Hadith, allowing for

women to reclaim their rights and challenge traditional religious authorities. To this definition, Tohidi adds that Islamic feminism negotiates with modernity by adapting feminist demands to fit within an Islamic framework, making them more acceptable and enduring in traditional societies (Tohidi, 2003; Badran, 2006).

In the same vein, Tohidi underscores the significance of modernizing Islam to promote a more liberal and gender-equal interpretation, as many scholars believe this is pivotal for broader societal reforms such as democracy, pluralism, and civil rights, particularly women's rights. She stresses the need to empower women with knowledge of Quran, *fiqh*,[5] and feminist ideas to enable them to challenge the practices of Islamist authorities. However, engaging in critical dialogue about Islam of this nature requires a safe social space in Afghanistan, which is currently uncertain. Afghanistan already encompasses diverse interpretations of Islam, including Sufism,[6] Deobandism,[7] Wahhabism,[8] and the emergence of political Islam. To advance discussions on gender within Islam without inciting violence, it may be advantageous to consider the strategies employed by established Islamic feminists to foster dialogue and reinterpret Islam (Tohidi, 2003).

Kissane's 2012 study on Islamic feminism delves into the intersection of Islam and feminist thought, highlighting diverse interpretations of Islamic texts and the role of women in Muslim societies. This work argues that Islamic feminism addresses gender inequality by reclaiming principles of justice and equality, while also emphasizing that the movement is not homogenous. Through the portrayal of key figures, Kissane illustrates how these activists navigate their identities as both Muslims and feminists within various cultural and social contexts (Kissane, 2012).

The perspectives of Mahmood and Kissane parallel Mohanty's analysis in her article “Under Western Eyes.” In this piece, Mohanty critically examines how Western feminist scholarship often represents women from the Global South. She argues that these portrayals oversimplify the diverse experiences of

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adaptation to new circumstances while remaining within the framework of Islamic principles. Ijtihad was historically a method of legal development, but its practice was later restricted in some Islamic traditions. Today, the concept is being reconsidered in modern contexts as it pertains to reform and adaptability in Islamic law.

[5] Fiqh is the science of interpreting and applying Islamic law (Sharia) based on the Quran, Hadith (sayings and actions of the Prophet Muhammad), and other existing sources. It encompasses rituals, moral conduct, and legal matters in the daily lives of Muslims.

[6] Sufism is a branch of the Islamic tradition practiced in many Islamic countries. It prioritizes the internal quest for God and spiritual experience, focusing on personal devotion, self-purification, and direct connection with the divine (God) through meditation, prayer, and chanting. Sufis strive to achieve spiritual enlightenment and develop a closer relationship with God.

[7] Deobandism is a conservative Islamic movement originating in India. It emphasizes a strict adherence to Islamic law and traditional teachings, mainly influenced by the Hanafi school (one of the four major Sunni Islamic schools of jurisprudence, known for its flexibility and use of reasoning in legal rulings) of thought.

[8] Wahhabism is a strict, puritanical Islamic movement founded by Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab in the 18th century. It advocates for a return to what it considers the original principles of Islam and rejects innovations (bid'ah) and practices deemed un-Islamic.

these women, depicting them as universally oppressed and in need of rescue. Mohanty challenges the assumption that all women share the same experiences of oppression, emphasizing the importance of understanding specific cultural, social, and historical contexts to provide a more nuanced perspective. She highlights how Western feminism can inadvertently replicate colonialist attitudes by framing non-Western women as 'victims', which undermines their agency and individuality. Advocating for an intersectional approach, Mohanty calls for consideration of factors such as race, class, and nationality, asserting that these intersect with gender to uniquely shape women's experiences. Instead of a 'rescue narrative', she promotes solidarity among women across cultures, emphasizing collaboration and understanding over paternalism. Overall, Mohanty's work serves as a foundational text, urging feminists to critically reflect on their assumptions and engage more deeply with the voices and realities of women from diverse backgrounds.

In addressing the current situation of Afghan women, it is essential to engage with Islamic feminism while acknowledging the value of other feminist perspectives. Afghan women are pivotal in shaping modernity, working to carve a progressive path within an environment often constrained by authoritarian regimes in the name of Islam. Their resilience can serve as an empowering model for women in other Islamic contexts, demonstrating the potential to overcome similar restrictions. Recognizing their struggles and agency, as Judith Butler's concept of performativity suggests, is key to understanding their complex experiences and aspirations.

3.2, Gender Performativity and Identity Construction

In their book "Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity," Judith Butler critically examines traditional concepts of gender and identity. They argue that gender is not an inherent or fixed trait, but rather a performance shaped by societal norms. Butler critiques the binary understanding of gender, asserting that it is socially constructed and fluid. By introducing the concept of performativity, they suggest that gender identities are formed through repeated behaviors rather than being pre-existing. This work has significantly influenced feminist theory, queer studies, and discussions about identity, encouraging a more nuanced understanding of how gender operates within power structures.

In contrast to the works of Mahmood and Mohanty, Butler emphasizes the fluid and performative nature of gender identity, challenging binary conceptions of gender. While Butler acknowledges the influence of societal norms on identity formation, they focus on critiquing the stability of gender categories rather than providing a detailed contextual analysis of women's experiences across different cultures. This theoretical framework is particularly relevant for discussing the intersectionality of Afghan women's

identities, shaped by the complex interplay of historical, cultural, and socio-political factors (Butler, 1999).

Afghan women, especially under the Taliban regime, navigate a unique and multifaceted struggle where their gender identity intersects with ethnicity, class, and religion. These intersecting identities are crucial in understanding how Afghan women assert their rights and pursue social change. Their religious identity, which has been central to their societal roles, is now undergoing a shift toward modernization, particularly within some families and segments of society, even as they face severe restrictions under Taliban rule. Butler's argument about the fluidity of gender identity helps to frame this evolving dynamic, revealing the ongoing transformations in Afghan women's identities amid societal and political challenges.

Judith Butler's work, although pioneering in its exploration of the performativity of gender, does not deeply examine the specific, localized experiences of women across diverse global contexts, such as those of Afghan women. Their primary focus lies in deconstructing binary frameworks of gender and critiquing the rigidity of identity categories. However, the experiences of Afghan women, shaped by historical, religious, and cultural factors, offer a unique perspective that intersects with Butler's theories and requires an understanding of their distinct socio-political struggles.

For instance, the progressive reforms of Amir Amanullah Khan, which aimed to modernize Afghanistan and expand women's participation in public life, were met with strong opposition by illiterate leaders such as Habibullah Kalakani, who sought to preserve traditional religious values. Amanullah Khan's reforms were perceived by some as anti-religious, leading to his downfall and Kalakani's rise to power as a defender of religious conservatism (Zulfacar, 2006; Heath and Zahedi, 2011). However, over time, many in Afghan society have come to appreciate Amanullah Khan's vision and the progressive changes he sought to implement, particularly regarding women's rights. This historical tension between modernization and tradition continues to influence the complex socio-political dynamics surrounding gender roles and women's participation in Afghan society today (Ahmadi, 2016; Girowal, 2024).

Afghan women are navigating a complex landscape shaped by traditional expectations that dictate their roles in society, while also striving for greater autonomy and rights. Their experiences of gender are deeply intertwined with the political and religious frameworks that shape their lives. The return of the Taliban has significantly restricted women's freedoms, compelling them to adapt their expressions of gender within an oppressive environment. This recurrence of oppressive experiences under various governments, as highlighted by Girowal (2024), underscores the need to explore ways to enhance Afghan women's ability to respond to and resist these oppressive structures, both theoretically and practically. Their resilience and ability to adapt reflect how they negotiate and resist societal norms in their daily lives, drawing on Butler's concept of performativity. It is crucial for our feminist solidarity

to focus on creating frameworks that resonate with and function within the specific context of Afghanistan to support these women in their ongoing struggle. Butler's idea that gender is not an innate quality but rather a set of behaviors and performances resonates profoundly with Afghan women, who embody a form of performativity that is shaped by both oppressive and liberating forces. As they navigate the dichotomy between traditional roles and modern identities, Afghan women actively perform and negotiate their gender in ways that challenge dominant narratives and assert their agency (Butler, 1999).

Additionally, Butler's notion of the "psychology of power" provides valuable insight into the experiences of Uzbek women under the Taliban. Power manifests not only through societal norms but also internally, shaping these women's self-perceptions and desires. Social structures compel them to conform to restrictive norms that diminish their agency, influencing who is considered worthy of recognition. This dynamic profoundly affects their sense of identity and constrains their opportunities for action, revealing the deep-seated impact of internalized power on their lives (Butler, 1997b).

While Butler's framework is invaluable for deconstructing gender binaries, applying their theories to the experiences of Afghan women requires a deeper engagement with intersectionality. This entails considering the unique intersections of gender, religion, and socio-political forces that shape their realities. The struggles of Afghan women are deeply influenced by how their identities are performed and negotiated, both in response to oppressive systems and in pursuit of empowerment. A more nuanced approach is necessary—one that integrates Butler's insights with the specific socio-political and cultural challenges these women face. In the following section, I will delve into the intersectionality of Afghan women's experiences and their performative acts of resistance and emancipation, emphasizing the vulnerabilities and complexities that define their ongoing struggle for liberation.

3.3 Intersectionality

The concept of intersectionality originated from the feminist and civil rights movements of the 20th century. Kimberlé Crenshaw introduced the term in her article "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex," highlighting the unique challenges faced by Black women in the legal system. Crenshaw argues that traditional frameworks for addressing discrimination, focused solely on race or gender, fail

to capture the specific experiences of those who belong to multiple marginalized groups. She uses intersectionality to illustrate how Black women, for example, experience both racism and sexism in ways that are not merely additive but multiplicative, creating a distinct form of oppression. She utilizes the concept of intersectionality to illustrate how Black women encounter interconnected experiences of racism and sexism, rather than just facing these forms of discrimination separately. This interconnectedness creates a complex and intensified type of oppression. The overlapping of these identities gives rise to specific challenges that cannot be comprehensively addressed by solely examining racism or sexism in isolation (Crenshaw, 1989).

The concept of intersectionality is a pivotal framework in this research, offering insight into how different aspects of an individual's identity intersect to shape unique experiences of discrimination and privilege. This concept has expanded to encompass a wider range of social identities, making it essential for understanding the complexities of social inequalities, and for creating more inclusive policies and practices. Intersectionality reveals that identities such as race, gender, class, sexuality, and the many layers of one's identity, are not separate or independent from one another. Instead, they intersect and interact, creating complex social dynamics (Collins and Bilge, 2016, pp. 70–71).

To illustrate this concept, consider a bustling intersection where multiple roads converge. Picture an individual standing at the center, exposed to traffic from various directions. In a similar manner, individuals with multiple marginalized identities are more likely to encounter intersecting forms of discrimination and inequality, stemming from different facets of their identity. For instance, an older educated Uzbek Muslim woman living in a remote area may face discrimination that is profoundly different from that experienced by a young educated Pashtun Muslim woman residing in Kabul. The overlapping nature of these identities implies that their challenges cannot be fully understood by analyzing any single aspect of identity in isolation.

In Judith Butler's framework, intersectionality plays a crucial role in understanding the complexities of identity and social dynamics. According to Butler, gender is a fluid and performative construct shaped by societal norms and power relations. This idea aligns with intersectionality, which acknowledges that individuals have overlapping and intersecting identities, such as race, class, sexuality, and ability, that influence their lived experiences (Butler, 1997a).

The experiences of Uzbek Afghan women in Afghanistan, regarding gender and ethnicity, are profoundly influenced by their cultural, religious, and socio-political contexts within society. By applying Butler's theory, we can delve into how Afghan women perceive their identities within these interconnected systems of oppression. This perspective emphasizes the need to address the intricate interplay of various social categories when advocating for their rights, rather than relying on a singular understanding of gender oppression. Ultimately, this approach fosters more inclusive dialogue about

gender justice, recognizing that true emancipation necessitates considering the full spectrum of identities and experiences.

Building on Collins and Bilge's argument, addressing social divisions requires acknowledging anticolonial liberation movements, struggles for sexual freedom, and racial desegregation efforts. Intersectionality, as both an analytical and practical tool, fosters democratic inclusivity by integrating theory with social justice praxis. In this context, it becomes essential to analyze Uzbek Afghan women's lived experiences through the lens of intersectionality, recognizing how race, gender, and ethnicity intersect to shape their realities. It emphasizes the need for reflection to respond to the complex social dynamics at play (Collins and Bilge, 2016, pp. 70–33).

In conclusion, applying intersectionality to the study of Uzbek women's experiences in Afghanistan highlights the interconnected nature of the oppressions they face, while also offering avenues to promote inclusivity and social justice. This approach emphasizes the significance of integrating reflection and actionable strategies to confront entrenched inequalities and further democratic inclusivity.

4. Methodology

In this section, I will outline the chosen methodology, detailing its various components and emphasizing its importance to the overall research.

4.1 Positionality: Embracing Gender Sensitivity and Survivor-Centered Methods

As a dedicated researcher focused on women's human rights in Afghanistan, I navigate a complex environment in which women endure significant marginalization across social, political, and economic spheres. Access to education beyond the sixth grade is severely restricted under the Taliban regime, further exacerbating existing inequalities. In light of these pressing human rights concerns, it is essential to adopt a survivor-centered and gender-sensitive approach. Afghan women face systemic marginalization not only due to their gender but also because of societal structures that restrict their autonomy, regardless of their experiences with abuse.

According to Nothwehr et al. (2022), UN Women correspondingly emphasize the importance of a survivor-centered approach in research that prioritizes the rights and needs of survivors as research participants. This methodology fosters a supportive environment that upholds their dignity while minimizing the risk of re-traumatization. From a feminist perspective, it aims to challenge patriarchal norms and ensure that survivors' voices inform research in a non-harmful way. Empathy and respectful engagement are essential, protecting survivors' psychological well-being and empowering them to share their stories.

According to the above-written values, research must demonstrate patience in listening and engaging in discussions, encouraging participants to freely share their knowledge and feelings, while acknowledging their victimized positions (Chambliss and Schutt, 2019). In light of these principles, I initially engaged with participants I was already familiar with, and their initial responses were positive, influenced by my unique position as both an insider and outsider. However, as I expanded my outreach, some individuals became hesitant, concerned about the potential repercussions in such a volatile environment, especially regarding the risks of disclosing information about their clandestine educational activities to the Taliban. Recognizing their fears, I permitted the participants to guide the interview process, ensuring they maintained control over their involvement. This survivor-centered approach not only amplifies their voices but also creates a safe and empathetic space for engagement (Nothwehr et al., 2022).

Flexibility is an essential element of survivor-centered research. By accommodating participants' needs—such as allowing for breaks or delays—we enable them to share their experiences at their own

pace (Bryman, 2012). Thus, responding with tolerance and understanding is key. The research findings can inform advocacy efforts, contributing to positive change. Therefore, the insights shared during discussions hold significant value in driving meaningful progress. Peer feedback offers valuable insights to refine research at RWI, enhancing both its quality and transparency during the presentation of the research process (6 and Bellamy, 2012; Rosenberg, 2012).

I practiced this by regularly checking in with participants and extending the interview schedule over two months to ensure their comfort. This approach not only fostered trust but also facilitated meaningful exchanges, including a conversation with an 18-year-old teacher who courageously educates many girls in secret. She shared a poignant poem that captures the struggles of Afghan women denied education and expresses her dream of creating a space where young women can learn English and connect with the wider world. Her resilience and determination exemplify the strength of contemporary Afghan women, her and other young girls' stories are a vital part of this research.

Survivors often express complex emotions such as anger and disappointment, and it is crucial for researchers to approach these reactions with patience and understanding (Nothwehr et al., 2022). Additionally, feedback from peers enriches the research process and bolsters its academic and ethical integrity (Bellamy & Rosenberg, 2012).

During my interaction with a participant who is slightly older and closely related to me, she conveyed significant apprehension despite the trust we had previously established. She recounted distressing stories of women unjustly imprisoned by the Taliban, including instances of false accusations that led to severe social stigma. For example, one woman was accused of having an inappropriate relationship with a bank manager, resulting in her abandonment by her husband and a tarnished family reputation. This stigma also extended to her child, highlighting the far-reaching consequences of such allegations. As members of the Uzbek ethnic group, these women face heightened vulnerabilities, as they are viewed as dishonorable and lacking dignity under the Taliban regime. Although women of all ethnic backgrounds experience systemic oppression, Uzbek women are disproportionately targeted.

This narrative resonates profoundly within Uzbek community, where women exercise considerable caution to protect their honor in the face of escalating threats from informants and authorities. These challenges emphasize the importance of creating a respectful and safe environment for participants to share their experiences, which is essential for maintaining the integrity of this research and the advocacy efforts it aims to support. The findings will not only elevate marginalized voices but also facilitate meaningful change by addressing the intersections of gender, ethnicity, and systemic oppression.

The next section will discuss the gender-sensitive approach and its importance in integrating this principle into my research.

4.2 Gender-Sensitive Approach

Embracing a gender-sensitive approach necessitates a careful consideration of socio-cultural norms and discriminatory attitudes. According to Ann Oakley (1981), it is crucial to acknowledge the distinct rights, roles, and responsibilities associated with various genders within their communities and relationships. Researchers must remain aware of these dynamics to safeguard participants' emotional well-being and social standing.

Oakley's work provides invaluable guidance for the implementation of a gender-sensitive approach, particularly in qualitative research. She underscores the importance of recognizing how gender shapes the research process, especially in the context of interviews. Oakley critiques traditional methodologies for frequently neglecting gender dynamics, which can result in biases and misinterpretation of data (Oakley, 1981). She highlights specific challenges, such as male interviewers potentially adopting authoritative stances and female interviewers grappling with issues of credibility. These disparities can undermine the authenticity of participants' responses. Oakley advocates for the creation of safe environments for interviewees—especially women and marginalized groups—by employing active listening and adaptive questioning techniques (Oakley, 2000).

Oakley critiques the prevailing paradigms in social science research, encouraging feminist researchers to embrace diverse perspectives and subjective experiences rather than rigidly adhering to established methodologies. She emphasizes the limitations of traditional research methods, which often marginalize women's voices, and advocates for a reevaluation of how social scientists engage with issues of gender (Oakley, 1998).

A central component of Oakley's framework is reflexivity, which requires researchers to critically examine their own gender identities and biases to effectively navigate the complexities of the research process. Engaging participants in discussions about positionality fosters transparency and builds trust, establishing a solid foundation for open communication.

Incorporating Oakley's insights, I adopted a gender-sensitive approach in my interviews. I aimed to create a safe and open environment that encouraged honest dialogue by employing active listening and tailoring my questioning techniques to reflect each participant's unique perspective. Being attentive to non-verbal cues further enriched our interactions, helping to build rapport and trust—essential elements for eliciting authentic responses. I also reflected on my own positionality and considered how my gender

identity might influence the dynamics of the interviews. By remaining transparent and mindful of these factors, I facilitated meaningful interactions and cultivated mutual trust.

Integrating Oakley's principles into my research process has significantly deepened my understanding of the participants' experiences. This approach not only ensures ethical engagement but also enhances the richness and authenticity of the data, contributing to a more nuanced analysis of gendered experiences.

The next section will elaborate on self-reflexivity and how I addressed my positionality throughout the research process.

4.3 Self-Reflexivity

As emphasized by Sultana (2007), the identity of the researcher and the dynamics of power relationships are critical factors influencing the research process. I am aware of my position as a researcher, and I recognize that my identity—along with the focus of my inquiry and the implications of my findings—must be approached with objectivity and free from bias. Various aspects of my identity, such as my gender, ethnicity, attire, age, abilities, and my status as both an insider and outsider, significantly impact the research outcomes, as well as my interactions with participants, and the chosen subject (Sultana, 2007).

As a female researcher with Pashtun-Uzbek roots from Afghanistan, I can leverage my insider status to build trust with my participants. However, my extended time living outside of Afghanistan has exposed me to different cultural norms, positioning me as an outsider. This duality heightens my awareness of the need to be cautious about sensitive topics, particularly given the current political climate under the Taliban regime.

My complex identity presents both advantages and challenges. The insider/outsider dynamic enhances my research approach, allowing me to navigate Afghan society from multiple perspectives. Moreover, my experience as a research fellow positively informs my work. However, cultural and religious values, along with other challenges, could pose significant obstacles if I do not carefully consider my

positionality. Consequently, I aim to use my positioning to build trust with my participants, ensuring I accurately capture their lived experiences (Bellamy & Rosenberg, 2012; Bryman, 2012).

While I strive to minimize bias, I acknowledge that no research is entirely free from it. Our backgrounds inevitably shape our perspectives and the thematic choices we make. Nonetheless, I am committed to maintaining objectivity and ethical rigor throughout the research process, making equitable judgments based on data gathered from my participants and relevant literature. My goal is to ensure that the outcomes of my research are honest, transparent, and objective (Oliver, 2010; Rosenberg, 2012b; Chambliss & Schutt, 2019).

Recognizing the importance of self-reflection, I critically evaluate the power dynamics between myself and the participants. Given my focus on issues concerning the Uzbek minority and gender equality, I acknowledge the inherent bias this introduces into my perspective. I make every effort to maintain distance and objectivity throughout this research project.

Additionally, I recognize my familial connections to Pashtuns and my identification as part of the Uzbek minority. My experiences, shaped by my mother's critiques and our shared time together, contribute to my ability to remain impartial. My father's respect for gender equality and my mother's pioneering role as a female educator further inform my approach, helping me assess diverse perspectives without bias.

My aim is not to act as a representative for my participants; rather, I seek to provide them with a platform to share their own stories through the data they offer. While I do not claim to resolve any of the issues faced by my participants, my goal is to accurately portray the current state of gender equality in the context of my research. I hold deep respect for the individuals involved in this project, who have generously shared their courageous and invaluable contributions. Their input has been instrumental in completing this work, which I have been passionate about since childhood, when I first learned about the pioneering efforts of Uzbek women in promoting female education in Afghanistan.

Upon completing my research, I received phone calls from individuals in Afghanistan and abroad, which brought attention to further contributions made by early Uzbek women. I have incorporated these verified accounts into my study and remain receptive to documenting any additional contributions to address potential gaps and ensure inclusivity in future revisions.

As a researcher, I am committed to maintaining an impartial perspective and adhering to rigorous standards of objectivity and integrity in my work (Oliver, 2010; Bellamy & Rosenberg, 2012; Bryman, 2012). My objective is to contribute to the production of reliable and replicable knowledge that can withstand scrutiny and serve as a valuable resource for future research.

The next section will discuss how I identified and utilized secondary data to enhance the outcomes of my research.

4.4 Secondary Data

Following Bryman's principle of balancing primary and secondary data, I ensured equal consideration for both to achieve a comprehensive and rigorous approach. Secondary data must be reliable and replicable (Bryman, 2012), though a notable scarcity of information on my topic required a multifaceted approach. I gathered data from diverse sources, including books, academic journals, and social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, which are widely used by Afghans to share valuable information. To verify the information collected, I sought input from knowledgeable individuals. I also explored materials in multiple languages, including Dari, Pashto, and Uzbeki, to ensure thorough coverage.

In integrating data, I carefully considered practical, ethical, and epistemological dimensions (Sultana, 2007). I prioritized the reliability of resources and applied ethical considerations to ensure the unbiased use of materials in producing objective knowledge.

During my research, I collaborated with several prominent Afghan scholars worldwide. Key contributors included Faqir Wadan, who guided me in accessing resources such as those in the British Library and connected me with Uzbek researchers, and Guman, my former English professor from Faryab University, who facilitated contact with Uzbek authors, including Kazem Amini. Amini, a distinguished researcher based in Iran, has extensively written about Uzbeks and provided references to figures like Bibi Mariam, which are cited in this study.

After communicating with the British Library, I received valuable links to historical books and a proposal to investigate historical newspapers for pertinent information. One option suggested hiring a librarian agent through my institute. This collaboration with RWI's librarian was a helpful suggestion.

Additional contributors included Humayun Surkhabi, who offered invaluable insights and materials, and Rahmatullah Surkhabi, a grandchild of Bibi Mariam residing in the United States, who significantly enriched this research. The biographical details these participants provided was essential context for exploring this underexamined topic, and are included in the appendix.

The next part will outline the methods employed for interviewing participants.

4.5 Interview Method

For this research, I employed digitally conducted semi-structured in-depth interviews, due to their practicality and flexibility (Bryman, 2012).

This research comprises two key components: the historical role of Uzbek women in advancing female education in Afghanistan, and the contemporary challenges faced by Uzbek women under the Taliban regime, particularly in their efforts to provide educational opportunities beyond grade 6.

The first phase of the research focused on exploring the pioneering contributions of Uzbek women in establishing formal modern education in Afghanistan. This included the creation of the inaugural female education center, where the first educator was an Uzbek woman. Due to the scarcity of written records, the research relied mostly on engaging with individuals possessing direct knowledge of these events. Capturing their lived experiences, particularly from elderly participants, was essential to preserving valuable historical insights.

Given the global dispersion of participants, interviews were conducted using platforms such as WhatsApp and Zoom. This phase gathered information on Uzbek women who were instrumental in introducing modern education for women in Afghanistan, highlighting their contributions to gender equality and educational initiatives. By excavating these narratives, the research contextualizes and underscores the enduring legacy of Uzbek women in shaping Afghanistan's educational landscape.

To collect this information, I employed diverse methods, including reviewing books, browsing Facebook pages, and reaching out to individuals with connections to these women, such as their grandchildren, close friends, and relatives. Although some elderly participants were unable to engage actively, others provided invaluable assistance despite logistical challenges and delayed responses (Chambliss and Schutt, 2019).

Significant efforts were made to connect with Princess Suraya Malika and Princess Hamdam, the granddaughters of King Amanullah and Queen Soraya, currently residing in Italy. Richard Bennett, the UNSR, and a former research fellow at RWI, facilitated this connection. While the process was lengthy, these connections were crucial for accessing information unavailable in existing literature (Bellamy, 2012).

Additionally, I sought assistance from the British Library to access relevant archival materials. However, as obtaining these materials required a physical Reader Pass, I coordinated with the RWI Library to facilitate institutional access on my behalf.

The second component of the research examines contemporary Uzbek women's resilience in advocating for educational opportunities beyond grade 6, despite the Taliban's restrictive policies. This analysis highlights their ongoing struggle for educational equity and empowerment, emphasizing their determination to overcome societal barriers and promote inclusivity. To understand these contemporary efforts, I interviewed female teachers about their contributions and challenges, gathering first-hand accounts to enrich the research and deepen perspectives on their advocacy.

In addition to interviews, the research draws on a range of resources, including archival materials, scholarly literature, and other relevant sources, to triangulate data and construct a comprehensive portrayal of Uzbek women's contributions. While significant findings have emerged, further inquiry is required to expand the analysis and deepen the scope of understanding.

Furthermore, interviews with individuals of royal or princely lineage are anticipated to offer unique perspectives on the historical and contemporary roles of Uzbek women in education advocacy. By integrating these narratives with supplementary resources, the research aims to illuminate the complexities surrounding women's education in Afghanistan, both historically and today, contributing to informed policy-making and social reform initiatives.

The next section will discuss the fieldwork and sampling methods employed in this research.

4.6 Fieldwork, interview process, and Sampling

During the fieldwork, I traveled to Italy to meet the granddaughters of Amir Amanullah Khan, who provided limited but significant information. In London, I engaged with participants who shared valuable historical documentation and insights about the struggles of Uzbek minorities for inclusiveness. These contributions, unavailable in written form, are now ethically incorporated into my research. Additionally, I conducted online interviews with relatives and descendants of Uzbek pioneer women, whose biographies are included in the appendix to preserve their stories, in alignment with their wishes.

Initially, my fieldwork plan included a visit to northern Afghanistan; however, due to security concerns and fact that Richard Bennett was denied entry into the country, I conducted all interviews online. Leveraging insider knowledge and previously gathered regional information, I crafted targeted questions and obtained comprehensive responses. Following Chambliss and Schutt (2019), I carefully addressed participants' concerns and incorporated their advice to ensure ethical engagement.

The sampling comprises two groups. The first includes individuals knowledgeable about the historical role of Uzbek women in advancing female education, and the second consists of women currently providing clandestine education to young girls beyond grade 6.

For the historical analysis, I connected with eleven individuals, including Afghan princesses in Italy and the family of Bibi Mariam, who guided me to valuable Dari-language resources and a Facebook page. In London, I engaged with Bibi Mariam's relatives, who offered insights into the lives of Bibi Mariam and Mamlakat Banu, along with critical written materials.

The second group includes approximately 40 participants, aged 18 to 57, from the provinces of Mazar-i-Sharif, Faryab, and Jawzjan. These women teach clandestine classes, often under the guise of religious education, to groups ranging from 2 to 50 students. Despite the Taliban's stringent regulations and their ethnic vulnerability, they continue to assert agency in their efforts to educate young girls.

These provinces were selected for their significant Uzbek populations and my lived experiences in the region. Participants, fluent in Dari and Uzbek, primarily communicated with me in Uzbek, fostering intimacy and trust during interviews. This methodology enhanced the quality of interactions and provided a nuanced understanding of participants' experiences and the educational challenges they face. These insights not only highlight their resilience but also enrich the study of Afghanistan's educational and social landscape.

The next section will outline the interview process.

4.7 The Interview Process

The interview process began with an informed consent procedure to ensure transparency. Participants were made aware that our conversations would be used for research purposes, reflecting my ethical commitment to engagement. Most participants agreed to online interviews via WhatsApp or Zoom, some of them allowing for audio recordings. In February, I initiated outreach to secure sufficient participants, but due to delays from the institute, interviews did not begin until April (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992).

Several obstacles complicated the process. Some participants lacked internet access, while others, constrained by new Taliban regulations on private teaching, expressed fear and requested anonymity. Many refused voice recordings, photos, or disclosure of identities and locations. I reassured them of the

confidentiality of their data (Bryman, 2012). To accommodate their concerns, I used mostly written responses to interview questions, supplemented by brief voice calls during which participants shared valuable insights.

Participants frequently expressed the need to maintain a facade of support for the Taliban to protect themselves. While appearing compliant, they clandestinely educated their daughters beyond grade 6, limiting enrollment to close relatives to mitigate trust concerns. During interviews, many lowered their voices when discussing the Taliban's injustices, indicating the sensitivity of their remarks.

To address potential gaps in the data, I proactively inquired about additional aspects that participants felt needed exploration. Unfortunately, one young participant, who initially showed enthusiasm and referred others for interviews, ceased responding. Although I respect her decision, I remain concerned for her safety. She previously disclosed that the Taliban had instructed her to stop tutoring sessions, including English, mathematics, and Dari. A follow-up with another participant confirmed her safety, though the reasons for her disengagement remain unclear. Notably, this incident occurred before our initial contact, indicating that my research did not contribute to her situation.

In the next segment, I will outline how data was coded and utilized in this research.

4.8 Data Coding and Analysis

To analyze the interviews, conducted in both written and audio formats, I employed open coding to break down, compare, and categorize the data (Bryman, 2012). After re-reading and verifying the information, I organized it based on significance and identified emerging patterns. A color-coding system was used to differentiate themes, ensuring no valuable information was overlooked.

Given the sensitivity of the themes and participants' vulnerability, I prioritized confidentiality and safety, adhering to ethical standards throughout the process (Gambs and Kim, 2015). While the data provided rich insights into participants' struggles, family support, trust issues, and accountability, its depth posed challenges in aligning it with the scope of the research (Bellamy, 2012; Bryman, 2012).

Once coding was complete, I connected the findings to relevant literature and theoretical frameworks. This process led to further exploration of women's agency, enriching the theoretical and literature review sections of the study and resulting in a more thorough and nuanced analysis (Bryman, 2012; Gambs and Kim, 2015).

According to the information provided by participants, the years referenced are typically in the Hijri Solar calendar, which is widely utilized in Afghanistan. To improve clarity and accessibility, I have converted these dates to the Gregorian calendar, the internationally recognized standard, ensuring better understanding for a wider audience.

The next segment will outline the ethical considerations addressed in this research.

4.9 Ethical Concerns

In line with RWI's request to implement a survivor-centered and gender-sensitive approach, I adhered strictly to ethical considerations, prioritizing the safety and anonymity of participants throughout the research process (Sultana, 2007). As a feminist and human rights researcher, I employed harm reduction strategies to minimize risk and ensure the well-being of participants (Nothwehr et al., 2022).

During data collection, I followed the Swedish Research Council's guidelines, emphasizing informed voluntary consent, confidentiality, and transparency at all stages. Participants were provided detailed information about the research purpose, how their contributions would be used, and their right to withdraw at any time. I also shared my background and my role as a research fellow supporting the UNSR mandate on human rights in Afghanistan (Bryman, 2012; Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015).

Given the harsh realities faced by women and marginalized groups, I approached interviews with a strong sense of responsibility, ensuring no participant was placed at risk (Hermerén, 2011). Confidentiality was a recurring concern, and I assured participants their identities and data would remain protected. I remained mindful of power dynamics and differing perspectives, integrating harm reduction strategies and adopting a survivor-centered approach to foster trust and minimize harm (Crawford, Kruckenberg & Loubere, 2017).

This commitment to ethical rigor and transparency ensures that my research maintains integrity and respects the contributions of all participants, while advancing the rights of minorities and promoting gender equality.

The next segment will outline the limitations and scope of this research.

4.10. Limitations and Demarcation

The interview process faced significant challenges due to new regulations introduced in April 2024, which imposed stricter requirements for private courses. These restrictions added complexity to engaging participants, particularly since all participants in the later phase of my research are based in Afghanistan. Multiple attempts were often necessary to gather the required information through live discussions and written inquiries.

While digital interviews provided efficiency and valuable insights, the lack of face-to-face interactions limited opportunities for direct observation. Additionally, the minority ethnic background of my participants heightened their vulnerability under Taliban discouragement and restrictions. Many participants preferred written communication over live digital interactions to reduce risks of detection, reflecting their understandable apprehensions. Ensuring the safety of all participants remained a priority throughout the research process.

Another limitation was the scarcity of written resources, with primary sources limited to two printed books and data from Facebook pages related to the first female educators. While referencing social media in academic work is unconventional, I supplemented this information with my background knowledge and the books to provide a comprehensive understanding of the social context. While these platforms are generally considered less rigorous, the information utilized was sourced from Dari-language books, which were appropriately cited. Every effort was made to ensure the accuracy and reliability of the data, despite the challenges of accessing traditional academic resources.

I should also mention that, upon completing the research findings, I revisited the introduction, literature review, methodology, and theoretical framework. Adjustments were made to ensure coherence and alignment across all sections, as emphasized by Bryman and Rosendberg (Bryman, 2012; Rosenberg, 2012).

Upon concluding my research, I received phone calls from individuals both in Afghanistan and abroad, which shed light on additional contributions made by early Uzbek women. I have integrated these verified accounts into my study and remain open to documenting further contributions to address any potential gaps and ensure inclusivity in future revisions.

In conclusion, this research adopted a qualitative approach, integrating interviews with secondary data to investigate the contributions and challenges faced by Afghan women in education. A survivor-centered and gender-sensitive framework was employed to safeguard participant safety and confidentiality. Despite facing limitations, such as limited resources and constraints on fieldwork, the methodology generated rich and nuanced data, laying a strong foundation for future research and advocacy efforts.

The next chapter will present the findings of this research.

5. Analysis and Discussion

5.1. Trailblazers of Change: The Legacy of Champions for Education in Afghanistan

In this section, I aim to highlight the groundbreaking contributions of early Uzbek women who were pivotal in advocating for women's rights to education in Afghanistan. Their efforts played a vital role in dismantling societal barriers that had long relegated women to domestic spheres, preventing them from pursuing careers as teachers, attending school, or engaging in public life. This initial breakthrough was profoundly significant: without it, Afghan women today might lack the foundational strength needed to resist the oppressive policies currently enforced by the Taliban.

Throughout my research, I had the privilege of connecting with many enlightened Uzbek women from both Afghanistan and abroad. They introduced me to several pioneering female educators who are dedicated to advancing education in Faryab and northern Afghanistan. These regions, where female education continues to make strides, owe much to their tireless efforts. I have acknowledged these remarkable individuals in my work; however, I welcome future suggestions to revise and expand my research to ensure that no significant contributors are overlooked. These women deserve recognition, and it is essential to preserve and honor their legacy for future generations.

The contributions of these early advocates symbolize a crucial step in Afghanistan's journey toward gender equity in education, reflecting humanity's broader movement toward inclusivity. It is imperative

to recognize and honor these trailblazers, as their legacy has provided the groundwork for contemporary resistance, and their accomplishments should not be overlooked. Their courage and determination continue to inspire Afghan women and others striving for equality in difficult circumstances.

5.1.1 Bibi Mariam

Bibi Mariam, sometimes referred to by her surname "Surkhabi",[9] a prominent Uzbek woman from Faryab,[10] is honored as the first female teacher in the region and in Afghanistan. She played a pioneering role in advocating for women's education within the royal family, launching this movement in 1901 following the death of Amir Abdurrahman Khan (Shahrani, 2005 & Amini, 2008).[11]

[9] The surname Surkhabi became associated with the family after Bibi Mariam's grandchild, Yonus Surkhabi (1924–19XX), a prominent author and poet, adopted it. While some historical texts retroactively apply the surname to earlier figures like Bibi Mariam and Mamlakat Banu, it was not used during their lifetimes. For accuracy, I will refer to them by their original names, Bibi Mariam and Mamlakat Banu, though some references use Mariam Surkhabi and Mamlakat Banu Surkhabi. Given this, I find it appropriate to use "Bibi," a culturally respectful title, to honor Bibi Mariam's esteemed character.

[10] Faryab is predominantly inhabited by the Uzbek community, and is renowned as the home province of Bibi Mariam and many other pioneering educated Uzbek women. Until recent years, this remote province lacked proper infrastructure. Significant efforts towards rebuilding and construction were initiated during the presidency of Hamid Karzai and continued under President Ashraf Ghani. Located in the northwestern region of Afghanistan, Faryab has a population of approximately 1,109,000. It shares borders with the provinces of Jawzjan, Sare-e Pul, Ghor, and Badghis and has an international border with Turkmenistan. The province has a history of regular conflicts, primarily due to the dissatisfaction of the Uzbek ethnic group with the central government in Kabul and various ruling powers, influenced by ethnic tensions.

[11] Amir Abdur Rahman Khan seized the territory of the Uzbek Amir, Amir Delawar Khan, in Faryab province (1879–1884 CE/1296–1301 AH), capturing several members of Amir Delawar Khan's family, including his 7-year-old son and the child's mother, as well as nobles and commanders. They were taken to Kabul, where they were detained and later executed. This tragic event resulted in the deaths of 27 prominent Uzbek men from Maimana and Turkestan, including Amir Delawar Khan and Abdul Baqi Khan "Mingbashi," the father of Professor Ghulam Mohammad Maimangi and Bibi Mariam, in 1303 AH (1885–1886 CE). At that time, Bibi Mariam remained in Maimana with her mother, while her step-brother, Professor Ghulam Mohammad, was taken to Kabul along with their father (Shahrani, Anayatullah, 2005 & Amini, Mohammad Kazem, 2008).

Bibi Mariam was born in 1880 in Faryab, which is in Maimana, the northern province of Afghanistan. As a member of a powerful, renowned, and enlightened family, Bibi Mariam was exposed to a wide range of subjects from an early age, including contemporary science, primary religious knowledge, literature, history, fine penmanship, and the arts, all within the comfort of her home, the palace of Faryab ('Arg') environment (Shahrani, 2005 & Amini, 2008).

In the 'Arg' or palace of Faryab, there was a vast library filled with valuable and rare books, mostly in Uzbek but also in Dari languages. Bibi Mariam, the daughter of the most prominent military figure, had access to this library. Guided by her literate mother, she delved deeply into the extensive collection of books and developed a profound interest in studying these works. As a result, she became well-versed in various periods of Afghan history, literature, and the influence of foreign powers on the region. Even after the province and palace were captured, the library remained in the possession of Bibi Mariam's family. She treasured these books, taking many of them with her when she moved to Kabul and later bringing them back when she returned to Maimana. Tragedy struck when Mohammad Gul Khan Momand, a prominent Pashtun figure from Kabul, visited Maimana. He delivered a speech in Turkish, a language unfamiliar to the people of Maimana. However, Turkish was used intentionally because it is related to Uzbek. He used this language to create intimacy and convince people who didn't believe the government. His words were translated into Uzbiki by Sofijan Agha, brother of Karim Naziri, another prominent man in Maimana. In his speech, Mohammad Gul Khan Momand claimed that to improve the literacy and education of Uzbek children, it was necessary to enhance their literature. He convinced the people to gather their books, promising that this would contribute to their educational development. Tragically, this was a deceitful strategy aimed at manipulating the people. The collected books, including those Bibi Mariam held dear, were gathered and subsequently burned in a field in the Khoja Dokoh district of Jawzjan province. This devastating loss haunted Bibi Mariam, and she mourned the destruction of those cherished books for the rest of her life. In this way the treasure of Uzbek people in Maimana was destroyed (Humayon Surkhabi[12]).

Following the death of Amir Abdur Rahman Khan, Bibi Mariam took the opportunity to visit her stepbrother, Ghulam Mohammad Maimanagi,[13] in Kabul. Her remarkable talent and knowledge quickly

[12] Humayun Surkhabi, a distinguished individual who has served in numerous high-ranking positions over the years in Afghanistan. His biography will be included in the appendix.

[13] Mingbashi had three wives, one of whom was the mother of his seven-year-old son, Ghulam Mohammad Maimanagi. When Faryab was captured by Amir Abdur Rahman Khan, Mingbashi and other prominent leaders were taken to Kabul and subsequently executed. Following Mingbashi's death, his son, Ghulam Mohammad, remained under close surveillance by the king and his spies in Kabul and was not permitted to return to his home province of Faryab. Aged 9, he penned a letter to the King, expressing his desire to return to his hometown of Maimana. Enclosed in this correspondence was a meticulously drawn picture of a bird that captured the King's attention. Intrigued by the young boy's talent, the King requested that Maimanagi recreate the drawing in front of the Amir. It was only after this live demonstration, where Maimanagi's artistic abilities were undeniably evident,

earned her recognition among the Amir's family and the nobility of Kabul. As a result, she was appointed as a tutor for the children and young women of the royal family, which granted her access to the royal household.

Bibi Mariam dedicated numerous years to educating the children and youth of the royal family. In 1921, during the rule of Amanullah Khan (1919-1929), Queen Soraya supervised the establishment of the girls' school Rashdia Masturat. Bibi Mariam was one of the initial teachers appointed at the school and the sole Afghan teacher. Consequently, she became the first female to receive a regular salary as a teacher at the institution (Shahrani, 2005 & Amini, 2008). Subsequently, she received the "Honored Medal of Education",[14] the first female teacher to attain such recognition. Surprisingly, this distinction is not documented in any formal academic sources, or at least none that I have been able to find, despite my efforts (Shahrani, 2005 & Amini, 2008).

Two of her relatives, currently residing in London, provided valuable insights about her during my interview. Key points from this interview will be cited and incorporated into the analysis.

> [D]espite her father "Mingbashi"[15] having been killed by the king, Bibi Mariam demonstrated remarkable bravery and forgiveness by educating the royal family's daughters. Her focus on forgiveness, bravery, politics, and strategy, combined with her leadership in culture and

that his talent was fully recognized. To further hone his skills, Maimanagi was placed under the mentorship of the Royal family's resident artist John Carry, who also served as a physician and was a British citizen. This mentor provided the guidance and training necessary for Maimanagi to develop into a prominent artist. His growth as an artist not only contributed to his own success but also laid the foundation for his support of Bibi Mariam in her progressive efforts to promote women's rights to education among Uzbeks. This is important, because his presence and support played a pivotal role in creating opportunities for Bibi Mariam and advancing her efforts to advocate for women's right to education. His rise in status also provided an opportunity for his stepsister, Bibi Mariam, to establish connections within the royal circle when she visited him in Kabul after the Amir's death. Throughout his time in Kabul, Ghulam Mohammad was closely monitored by the Amir's spies due to his lineage as the son of an adversary who had been executed for opposing the ruler (Shahrani, 2005 & Amini, 2008).

[14] The *Medali Aali-e Ma'aref*/Medal of Excellence in Education (Amini, 2008).

[15] The title Mingbashi, an Uzbek term signifying "leader of a thousand," was bestowed upon a military leader who commanded a thousand individuals. This title denoted not only his leadership but also his widespread recognition as a prominent military figure in Faryab. In the context of that era, the Mingbashi held a position akin to what would be considered a commander of artillery in contemporary military formations.
Two differing accounts exist regarding the circumstances surrounding Mingbashi's confrontation with Amir Abdur Rahman Khan. According to the first narrative, as relayed by Mingbashi's descendants, he and his brother Delawar Khan were invited as guests after the capture of the province, with assurances of safety from the Amir. However, despite these promises, all the provincial leaders, including Mingbashi, were ruthlessly executed near Kabul's Bala Hesar. This execution was reportedly due to their opposition to the Amir, exacerbated by their involvement in clashes that resulted in the deaths of many of the Amir's soldiers. The second narrative, based on testimonies and historical texts connected to Mingbashi's family, suggests a different perspective. It claims that after their defeat by Amir Abdur Rahman Khan, Mingbashi and his allies were captured, transported to Kabul, and subsequently sentenced to death. During this period, Mingbashi's young son, Ghulam Mohammad, who was only seven years old, remained with his mother in the capital city, surviving on a modest annual allowance. Despite these hardships, Ghulam Mohammad later rose to prominence, marking a significant turn in his fortunes.

> education, made a significant contribution to the advancement of Afghan women's lives. (Rahmatullah Omid[16]).

After contributing to the establishment of a girls' school in the capital city of Kabul, Bibi Mariam was determined to bring this progress to her hometown of Faryab and extend it to the Uzbek community and the local population. Leveraging her influential position, she persuaded other prominent families in Maimana to allow at least one daughter from each family to attend school. Bibi Mariam then established a school in Faryab called Setara (Star)[17] in her own home, with her daughter-in-law Mamlakat Banu Surkhabi, serving as its first teacher and principal. This school continues to operate as a high school in Maimana and has educated many prominent female students from the province. Bibi Mariam married her cousin, Osman Qul Mahram Bashi, and they had five children, all of whom received a good education. Among them was Mohammad Sediq Khan, who became the father of Yunus Surkhabi, a renowned researcher and poet. Bibi Mariam passed away in 1963 (1342 SH) at the age of 83 (Shahrani, 2005 & Amini, 2008).

Bibi Mariam had three daughters—Aysha, Nawida, and Tahera—who were also involved in both studying and teaching students in their mother's absence. During Shah Mahmud Khan's tenure as Prime Minister, Bibi Mariam, accompanied by Mamlakat Banu (whose contributions to female education will be discussed in a separate section), traveled to Maimana and established a school for girls. This school, now known as Setara (Star), was originally called Neswan (Female). Despite budgetary constraints, Bibi Mariam and Mamlakat Banu opened the school in their own home, demonstrating their dedication to advancing girls' education despite the financial challenges they faced. It is worth noting that Tahera Surkhabi, one of Bibi Mariam's daughters, was formally honored with the title "Distinguished Mother of Afghanistan" for her exceptional commitment to her children's education. Despite the untimely passing of her husband, Ghulam Mohaidinkhan Maimanagi, Tahera Surkhabi provided outstanding guidance and support, enabling her children to become influential figures in society. Three of her sons achieved high-ranking positions in the government: Ahmad Shah Surkhabi served as a minister, while Humayon Surkhabi and Timorshah Surkhabi also played significant roles in governmental policy at that time. Additionally, Tahera Surkhabi was both the daughter-in-law and niece of Ghulam Mohammad Maimanagi.

[16] Rahmatullah Omid, the grandson of Bibi Mariam, currently resides in the United States. His profile is included in the appendix.

[17] I have been in contact with several women who were educated at that particular school and are currently still alive. Aisha Jan, the original midwife in Maimana, and Sara Surkhabi, one of the first principals at the school, have informed me that the school was initially named Masturat, in homage to the first female school in Kabul. Eventually, the name was changed to Setara, which means “Star”.

Bibi Mariam's initiatives to promote women's education resonate with Saba Mahmood's theories on agency. Mahmood argues that agency is not merely about resisting cultural norms; it also involves working within societal frameworks to effect meaningful change. By establishing the Setara School in her own home, Bibi Mariam normalized the concept of women's education in a deeply patriarchal society, embodying what Mahmood refers to as "embodied agency"—the capacity to navigate and subtly transform existing structures from within (Mahmood, 2005b). Rather than directly challenging societal norms, Bibi Mariam's approach exemplified contextual pragmatism. She operated within the constraints of her environment to create new opportunities for women. Her actions reinforce Mahmood's assertion that agency is not solely about defiance, but also about fostering capacities, such as education, that can lead to substantial change (Mahmood, 2005b).

In conclusion, through her work at the Rashdia Masturat and the Setara schools, Bibi Mariam demonstrated this nuanced form of agency. Progress was achieved not by rejecting tradition outright, but by reconfiguring it to embrace women's empowerment. Her legacy illustrates that when agency is exercised thoughtfully within cultural contexts, it can yield lasting effects on societal norms and advance gender equality. Bibi Mariam was instrumental in laying the groundwork for women's education in Afghanistan. As the first female teacher, she shattered barriers and created a framework for educational advancement in a society resistant to change. Her efforts at the Rashdia Masturat School, along with the establishment of the Setara School in Faryab, exemplified her unwavering commitment to empowering women through education. By normalizing the concept of women's education, she inspired future generations and set a benchmark for educational reform in Afghanistan. Her enduring legacy underscores the transformative power of education in fostering gender equality and driving societal progress.

The next section will highlight another inspiring Uzbek woman whose tireless efforts to normalize female education deserve admiration and recognition.

5.1.2. Mamlakat Banu: A Groundbreaking Leader in Advancing Women's Education

Mamlakat Banu, the daughter of Mustafa Qul, was born in during the reign of Amir Habibullah Khan (1901–1919) in Kabul. After the death of her mother when Mamlakat Banu was just two years old, she was raised by her aunt, Bibi Mariam, whose family held a deep appreciation for knowledge and education. Growing up in this intellectually stimulating environment, Mamlakat Banu acquired contemporary knowledge and emerged as a highly educated woman of her era (Shahrani, 2005 & Amini, Kazem, 2008).

She later married Sidiq Surkhabi, Bibi Mariam's eldest son, and together they had three sons, all of whom were well-educated. Among them, Yunus Surkhabi (1924–19XX) distinguished himself as a celebrated poet and researcher in Afghan literature, earning recognition as one of the nation's most influential literary figures (Shahrani, 2005 & Kazem, 2008).

While Bibi Mariam taught in the royal palace, Mamlakat Banu played a pivotal role in expanding their educational mission. When Amir Amanullah Khan established Afghanistan's first girls' school, Masturat, outside the royal palace at Gulestan Saraye (now known as Zarnegar Park), Mamlakat Banu actively participated in this important initiative. Her contributions significantly enhanced the school's success, and it was later renamed Lise Zarghon during King Zahir Shah's reign (1933–1973) (Shahrani, 2005 & Amini, 2008).

Mamlakat Banu was dedicated to advancing female education, particularly during the tenure of Prime Minister Shah Mahmud (1946–1953). In her hometown of Maimana, she, with the assistance of Bibi Mariam, established the first girls' school, using their influence to obtain official approval for a school building. Additionally, she successfully petitioned the Ministry of Education to elevate it to a high school, which was subsequently named Lise Setara (the High School of Setara). This institution educated generations of women in Faryab, nurturing many prominent female leaders until it was closed by the Taliban (Shahrani, 2005 & Amini, 2008).

Later in her life, Mamlakat Banu taught history and literature at Rabia Balkhi High School in Kabul, dedicating more than 40 years to promoting female education in both Kabul and Faryab. Her outstanding contributions were recognized with two Medal-e-Aali-e-Maref (Excellence in Education

Awards) (Shahrani, 2005 & Amini, 2008). She passed away in 1972 at the age of 82 in her home in *Karte Parwan*, Kabul, and was laid to rest at Shohada-e-Salehin Cemetery. Her legacy continues to inspire, as reflected in the fond memories of those who knew her (Shahrani, 2005 & Amini, 2008). Many of her former students, now professionals in various parts of the country, fondly recall their experiences and cherish their memories of her. Two of her former students, now in their late 70s—one residing in London and the other in Faryab—shared their recollections of her with me:

> [S]he was genuinely kind, actively engaged, and consistently highlighted the importance of empowering us and our daughters through education. Her unwavering dedication to this cause made her an exceptional and truly inspiring figure for all who had the privilege of knowing her. (Suhaila Surkhabi)

A student of hers from Faryab:

> [M]any of us from the northern regions share a deep appreciation for her remarkable contributions to advancing female education. We hold her dedication in high regard and recognize the transformative impact she has had on our lives and on humanity as a whole. (Aysha jan)

Mamlakat Banu's relentless efforts broke down barriers and paved the way for women's empowerment through education in Afghanistan, leaving an indelible mark on the country's history.

Judith Butler's concept of performativity offers a valuable framework for understanding the actions of Mamlakat Banu and Bibi Mariam as trailblazing educators. Their initiatives can be viewed as transformative acts that redefined gender norms within the patriarchal and ethnically stratified society of Afghanistan. By educating girls and advocating for female education, they boldly challenged societal expectations, illustrating how identity is shaped through repeated actions that defy established norms. Their efforts in establishing schools, mentoring women, and normalizing education for girls were performative acts designed to dismantle traditional barriers to women's empowerment (Butler, 1999).

From an intersectional perspective, the lack of institutional recognition for Mamlakat Banu and Bibi Mariam highlights the compounded marginalization they experienced as both women and ethnic Uzbeks in Afghanistan. In contrast, their brother Ghulam Mohammad Maimanagi is honored through the establishment of the *Hunar Hay-e Zeba* (Institute of Fine Arts). This disparity underscores the interplay of gender and ethnic discrimination, revealing that while the contributions of Uzbek men are acknowledged, those of Uzbek women frequently go unrecognized (Butler, 1999).

In conclusion, the absence of schools or institutions named after Mamlakat Banu and Bibi Mariam serves to illustrate how gender and ethnic biases can erase women's legacies, even when their efforts have significantly influenced Afghan society. While Ghulam Mohammad Maimanagi is celebrated, their significant contributions to education and the empowerment of marginalized communities are

largely overlooked. Recognizing their contributions through formal acknowledgments, such as naming schools or institutions after them, would not only remedy historical oversights but also affirm the value of their transformative work in advancing education and empowering marginalized communities.

A historical depiction of Mamlakat Banu receiving a Medal of Excellence in Education.

The next section highlights Masturat and Setara, Afghanistan's first female schools, where Bibi Mariam and Mamlakat Banu served as the first teachers. These institutions were vital in advancing female education and empowering women, with their students emerging as early advocates for girls' education.

5.1.3. Masturat and Setara: The First Female Schools in Kabul and Faryab

Masturat is the first modern female school in Afghanistan, established in Kabul in 1921 through the efforts of the reformist king, Amir Amanullah Khan. The tireless efforts of Queen Soraya and Bibi Mariam were instrumental in establishing the first female school (Education History, 2016).

As previously mentioned, based on the two available references, Bibi Mariam was the first Afghan female teacher at Masturat. However, her contributions are not widely documented in other sources. I could only find her name in two books written by Uzbeks, with no mention in other references, and the reason for this omission remains unclear (Shahrani, 2005 & Amini, 2008).

Bibi Mariam was among the many resilient women from the Uzbek community who assumed groundbreaking roles as educators and advocates for women's education in Afghanistan. Despite facing significant challenges, including social stigma and a lack of respect for women in such positions, she persevered. These women and their families often faced social ostracism, adding to their difficulties. Nonetheless, they persisted, inspiring others to follow their example (Suhaila surkhabi and Aysha jan).

It is crucial to acknowledge that the progress made was not solely due to the individual efforts of these women. They were also supported by female members of the Pashtun-dominated royal family, fostering a harmonious coexistence among different ethnic backgrounds. Bringing such initiatives into scholarly discussion is essential to encourage others, especially in a conflict-ridden Afghanistan where non-harmonious relations between ethnic groups hinder sustainable development.

Queen Soraya, profoundly influenced by her highly educated father, Mahmud Tarzi, utilized her position as queen to advance her agency and champion gender equality in Afghanistan. Tarzi, leveraging his influence as both the father-in-law of King Amanullah and the country's first foreign minister, mentored and motivated Queen Soraya. The progressive reforms of the Amani Movement, spearheaded by King Amanullah and supported by Queen Soraya, led to the establishment of Afghanistan's first girls' school and high school, Masturat, where her mother, Rasmiya, served as the first principal. Between 1921 and 1928, over 800 girls attended Masturat. In 1928, co-education was introduced in the first and second grades at Amaniyya Lycee (Education History, 2016). Throughout all these campaigns, Bibi Mariam and later Mamlakat Banu stood by Queen Soraya (Shahrani, 2005 & Amini, 2008). Their contributions, support, and presence alongside the Queen during this transformative period have not been sufficiently documented in historical sources.

Due to the absence of a formal higher education system in Afghanistan at the time, top graduates were sent abroad to countries such as Germany, France, and Egypt for further studies. Additionally, some students, including women, were sent to Turkey for advanced education. During the Amani period, a total of 205 Afghan students, including 10 women, were studying in Turkey. This initiative marked a significant step forward in the educational advancement and empowerment of Afghan women (Education History, 2016).

It is noteworthy that Bibi Mariam stands out as a pioneering figure in the history of education in Afghanistan, being recognized as the first Uzbek female educator. However, despite her significant

contributions, her name is absent from many of the referenced materials produced in Kabul. Her legacy can be critically examined through the lenses of intersectionality and Judith Butler's theory of performativity (Butler, 1999). As an Uzbek woman facing the dual challenges of gender and ethnic marginalization, she courageously defied societal norms by teaching royal children, establishing schools, and advocating for girls' education. Her transformative efforts redefined women's roles within a patriarchal and ethnically stratified society, leaving a lasting impact on education in Afghanistan. Yet, despite her foundational efforts, Bibi Mariam's legacy remains largely overlooked. While many schools honor other prominent women, her crucial role as the first dedicated advocate for female education in Afghanistan has not been formally recognized.

In conclusion, Masturat, founded in 1921, marked a significant milestone as Afghanistan's first female school and was an integral part of King Amanullah's reform initiatives. Bibi Mariam, its inaugural female teacher, alongside Queen Soraya, was instrumental in promoting women's education despite encountering various social and cultural challenges. Their efforts, examined through the lens of intersectionality, reveal how the overlapping identities of gender and ethnicity shaped their struggles and contributions. Furthermore, their roles embody Judith Butler's concept of performativity, as their actions redefined societal norms, laying a foundation for Afghan women to pursue higher education and effectively challenging patriarchal structures in transformative ways.

The next section will provide a brief introduction to Setara, the first female school in Faryab, which has played a pivotal role in normalizing women's education in the northern regions[18] of Afghanistan.

5.1.4. Setara (Star) the first female school in Faryab

Setara School was established in 1327 SH (1948) within the private residence of Bibi Mariam, as the government lacked the resources to formally authorize the creation of a school. Initially, 22 girls from various affluent families were enrolled, with each family contributing one student. This remarkable initiative was made possible through the visionary efforts of Bibi Mariam. These early students went on to become a new generation of educators, founding schools across Faryab and Jawzjan (Shahrani,

[18] "I mention northern Afghanistan because some educated students from these schools became the first female teachers in Mazar-e-Sharif and Jawzjan, located in the northern provinces" (Suhaila Surkhabi).

2005 & Amini, 2008). Among them was Bibi Zulaikha, who subsequently established a girls' school, utilizing her home as the venue.

In conclusion, through the dedicated efforts of Mamlakat Banu, Setara was eventually promoted to a high school. Following this achievement, the government approved the construction of a dedicated building for the institution. Today, Setara is recognized as one of the most prestigious schools in Faryab, having educated a significant numbers of the province's professionals and leaders (Shahrani, 2005 & Amini, 2008).

The next segment will delve into the remarkable contributions of students of Bibi Mariam and Mamlakat Banu, emphasizing the lasting impact of their efforts to promote female education across generations. It highlights the contributions of three prominent individuals—Bibi Zulaikha, Sara Surkhabi, and Suhaila Surkhabi—chosen for the availability of information regarding their essential roles in advancing female education in Faryab and Kabul. Their work, often overlooked in scholarly discourse, exemplifies the foundational role of Uzbek women in the history of education in Afghanistan.

Among these trailblazers is Bibi Zulaikha, a third-generation student of Bibi Mariam who has made noteworthy advancements in furthering female education in Jamshidi, Faryab. Drawing on interviews with her colleagues and students, this analysis highlights Bibi Zulaikha's dedication to establishing a school through her own initiative, thereby normalizing female education in a challenging societal context. As a protégé of Mamlakat Banu, the fellow student of Bibi Mariam, Bibi Zulaikha furthered the educational legacy of her mentors, underscoring the lasting influence of this movement. In light of the limited written records, these interviews provide valuable insights into her contributions and their significant impact on her community.

5.1.5. Bibi Zulaikha Wahedi[19]

Bibi Zulaikha Wahedi was among the pioneering female students at Setara School in Faryab. Bibi Mariam utilized her privileged position to encourage the enrollment of one girl from each high-ranking family, aiming to launch female education in Maimana, Faryab. After graduating from Setara, some of these students, including Bibi Zulaikha herself, went on to establish their own schools. While they are considered the third generation of Bibi Mariam's students in Afghanistan, they represent the first generation in Faryab to champion female education. This information was gathered through interviews conducted with some of her colleagues and students.

> Bibi Zulaikha born in 1941 (1320 SH) in Faryab, she hailed from an enlightened and religious family in Maimana. She emerged as a pioneering advocate for girls' education within her community. As one of the first students of Mamlakat Banu at 'Lise Setara'/the school of Setara, she cultivated a strong commitment to education and gender equality. With the support of her father, who encouraged her to pursue knowledge beyond the conventional boundaries placed on girls of her era, she became a powerful force for educational reform and social progress (Noor Ahmad Qhaitmas, a younger colleague of Bibi Zulaikha[20]).

Another colleague emphasized the significance of her efforts in normalizing female education, highlighting the transformative impact of her pioneering steps.

> [I]n 1960 (1339 SH), she took the courageous initiative to establish a school for girls in her own home. Utilizing her reputation and influence, she successfully attracted students during a time when female education faced considerable societal resistance. As the first teacher in the area, she encountered many challenges but remained unwavering, earning her the esteemed title of "Teacher Zulaikha." Her steadfast dedication and enthusiasm were apparent to all who had the privilege of witnessing her teaching (Saleha Wolker, a younger colleague).

She was a pioneering advocate for women's education, known for her compassionate approach and dedication to her students. Her supportive environment inspired them to overcome societal barriers and pursue education, cementing her legacy in advancing women's education in the area.

I present here the exact wording and the poem quoted by her colleague about her. According to her colleague, this well-known poem in Afghanistan encapsulates her teaching philosophy: "[T]he teacher's lesson flows with the melody of love; the child who runs away will be drawn back to the school with joy" (Noor Ahmad Qhaitmas).

[19] Bibi Zulaikha is the granddaughter of Bibi Mariam's brother, Malek Shah, and the mother of the author.
[20] Refer to the appendix for a detailed biography of his life and contributions to education.

This perspective is corroborated by others:

> [T]hrough her efforts, tens of girls were educated, many of whom went on to become teachers themselves. Teacher Zulaikha's legacy extended beyond education; when situation forced her to step back from teaching, she redirected her efforts toward charitable work. She provided support for the poor, particularly orphans, whom she cared for and raised until adulthood, often helping them establish their households after marriage (Sara Surkhabi, Saleha Wolker and Atefa Rahin).

A younger colleague noted further:

> [T]eacher Zulaikha's impact reached far beyond the classroom. When circumstances necessitated her departure from teaching, she redirected her efforts toward charitable work, providing vital support to impoverished families and orphans. She guided orphans into adulthood, often assisting them in establishing their households after marriage. Her remarkable contributions were widely acknowledged and appreciated (Saleha Wolker).

One of her students highlighted her unwavering dedication to humanity:

> [I]n her later years, while residing outside Afghanistan, she continued her charitable work by sending aid to those in need in Afghanistan. Her students, now spread across various regions, remember her as an active and inspiring person who tirelessly advocated for girls' education (Sharifa Bahmanyar, former Head of the Women's Council in Faryab).

Those who knew her commented upon her death and legacy:

> [S]he passed away in October 2020 (26 Aqrab 1399 SH) in Tashkent Uzbekistan and was laid to rest in Mazar-e-Sharif. Her contributions brought joy and opportunities to countless girls and instilled hope in the broader community she served (Noor Ahmad Qaitmas).

> [S]he always focused on creating educated women and girls around her. Her contributions are immeasurable (Sharifa Bahmanyar[21]).

> [S]he is a source of pride for Uzbek women and for all women in Afghanistan (Laila Zare, an Uzbek poet living in the USA).

> [H]er approach to supporting those in need and fostering highly skilled educators was exceptional. It is difficult to fully articulate her humility and remarkable character, as she consistently demonstrated a deep commitment to gender equality and the advancement of women in her community (Atefa Rahin[22]).

During an interview, one of her students, a respected elderly midwife from Faryab—who lives with a disability and remains unmarried—shared a compelling account of Bibi Zulaikha's pioneering contributions to women's education. Defying societal norms and her parents' wishes, Bibi Zulaikha courageously took the initiative to enroll the midwife in school, despite concerns about damaging the family's honor. Although this midwife belongs to a later generation, she successfully established

[21] Refer to the appendix for a comprehensive biography detailing her life and contributions to advancing gender equality in Faryab.
[22] See her short biography in the appendix.

a career while still confronting the lingering stigma surrounding girls' education. Her story underscores the lasting influence of trailblazers like Bibi Zulaikha, as well as earlier pioneers like Bibi Mariam, who began breaking down these barriers four generations ago (Shahrani, 2005 & Amini, 2008).

Bibi Zulaikha's contributions to female education in Faryab can be viewed through the lens of Islamic feminism, which seeks to empower women within the scope of the principles of justice, equality, and knowledge found in Islam. By advocating for girls' education, Zulaikha boldly challenged patriarchal norms and underscored the Quranic injunction that seeking knowledge is a fundamental obligation for all Muslims, regardless of gender. Her endeavors not only contested narrow interpretations of gender roles but also underscored that promoting women's education is both a moral and a religious duty. Through her efforts, Zulaikha harmonized her faith with the pursuit of social equity, helping to shift community perceptions regarding the role of women in education and society (Tohidi, 2003).

In conclusion, this narrative highlights the intergenerational impact of early female education advocates in Afghanistan. These pioneers not only opened doors for women's education but also challenged deeply entrenched societal norms. Their bravery and vision empowered subsequent generations of women to pursue education and professional careers, despite continued cultural resistance. These stories underscore the transformative power of education and the essential need to document and honor the legacies of remarkable women whose contributions frequently go overlooked. The school founded by Bibi Zulaikha remains in operation today, although it is now identified by the name of the district. Renaming this school in her honor would be a fitting acknowledgment of her enduring influence on education and her community.

In the upcoming section, I will introduce Sara Surkhabi, another key advocate for female education in Faryab and the wider northern region of Afghanistan. She is notably recognized as the first female senator from Faryab in recent history.

5.1.6. Sara Surkhabi: A Trailblazer in Afghan Women's Education

Sara Surkhabi, born in 1945 (1324 SH), is one of the students of Mamlakat Banu. She completed her education and began her career as a high school teacher in Andkhoy, a district in Faryab, in 1962 (1341SH). By 1966 (1345 SH), she had been appointed as a teacher in Setara high school and later became its head teacher (sar malem)**.** During this time, she continued her own higher education at Nadema Qhaisari School, where she passed her exams and achieved her baccalaureate degree (Arab, 2018).

In 1978 (1357 SH), Sara Surkhabi was appointed principal of Lise Setara. She also served as a teacher at Jernil Ghawsuddin School and Neswane Afghan Kot School. In 1991 (1370 SH), she returned to her role as principal of Lise Setara. However, due to the worsening situation in Afghanistan, she migrated to Saudi Arabia in 1997 (1376 SH) (Arab, 2018). In 2002 (1381 SH), after the situation in Afghanistan improved, Surkhabi returned to the country and became the Head of the Women's Affairs Council. In 2006, she was appointed as a senator in the 15th and 16th terms of the Meshrano Jirga (Upper House of Parliament) by decree of President Karzai.

Surkhabi received several honors for her contributions, including the Medal of Knowledge (Pohana), commendations (Tahsin Nama), appreciation award (Taqdir Nama), and financial awards (Bakhshishi Mali). She also became a member of the High Council for Peace/Shoraye Aali Sulh (Arab, 2018). Over a career spanning 53 years, Surkhabi dedicated herself to promoting women's education and gender equality in Afghanistan, leaving a lasting impact on the nation's progress (Arab, 2018). During the interview I conducted, while discussing Bibi Zulaikha's contributions, she noted that:

> I elevated the Jamshidi School, established by Bibi Zulaikha, to the level of a high school. Today, many engineers, teachers, doctors, and lawyers have graduated from that school. Through my own efforts, I also transformed the schools of Torpakhto, and Desaidan into high schools. As a woman, I strongly believe that education is essential for empowerment (Sara Surkhabi).

Despite their significant contributions, figures such as Sara Surkhabi, Bibi Zulaikha, Bibi Mariam, and other Uzbek women remain largely unrecognized. Unlike many institutions named after women in different parts of the country, there are no schools honoring their names. This lack of recognition underscores their intersecting identities as Uzbeks, women, and residents of Faryab, a remote and marginalized region of Afghanistan (Collins and Bilge, 2016).

Applying Judith Butler's concept of performativity, we can observe how their efforts to promote female education challenge patriarchal norms; however, they still lack formal acknowledgment. This absence of recognition poses a risk to their legacies, which may diminish over time. The contributions of these women illustrate how the intersection of ethnic and gender marginalization can silence significant historical efforts (Butler, 1999).

In conclusion, Sara Surkhabi's remarkable contributions to female education and her distinction as the first female senator from Faryab underscore her commitment to promoting women's empowerment in Afghanistan. Her efforts not only confronted societal and cultural barriers but also laid the groundwork for future generations of women to gain access to education and leadership opportunities. Sara Surkhabi's legacy stands as a compelling example of resilience and progress, illustrating the transformative power of education and representation, particularly in marginalized regions.

The following section highlights a pioneering Uzbek woman from Faryab who devoted her life to advancing female education. She established a school and was among the first to travel abroad to enhance her teaching skills—a remarkable achievement given the societal taboo at the time against women traveling without a mahram (male guardian). Her success was made possible through her mother's unwavering determination, enabling her to overcome these cultural barriers. This struggle remains relevant today, as the Taliban's restriction requiring women to travel with a mahram reflects the ongoing challenges faced by Afghan women. This account is based on a personal interview with Suhaila, currently residing in London.

5.1.7. Suhaila Surkhabi: A Pioneer in Afghan Women's Education

Suhaila Surkhabi,[23] the granddaughter of Professor Ghulam Mohammad Maimanagi, is the daughter of Abdul Rauf and Sapida Laila (of Turkish descent). She was born in Kabul and later moved to Maimana, where she began her education at the age of five. Under the leadership of Mamlakat Banu, her father's aunt, who was instrumental in establishing schools in Kabul and Maimana, Suhaila became an active participant in advancing female education.

[23] This information is derived from Suhaila Surkhabi's notes and an interview conducted by the author.

As stated previously, during this time, it was highly stigmatized for girls to attend school, and many families were reluctant to send their daughters. Despite these challenges, the school eventually opened, initially offering education up to grade six and later expanding to grade nine. Suhaila was among the second-round students at the school Setara). After completing her education at the sixth grade, she began working as a teacher at the same school. When the school upgraded to include ninth grade, she resumed her studies, graduated, and then returned as a teacher once again.

Recognizing the need for professional development among educators, the Ministry of Education selected Suhaila to participate in a scholarship program (bursia). The program aimed to enhance the qualifications of teachers across Afghanistan. Out of the candidates, 10 women and 11 men were chosen, with one representative from each province. Despite societal resistance, Suhaila's enlightened family supported her decision to participate. Her mother, in particular, stood firm against objections from other relatives, declaring, "I will send my daughter." Suhaila traveled to Kabul for a two-month English preparatory course before being sent to the Philippines, where she toured various cities and attended a three-month professional training program. This experience broadened her perspective and significantly enriched her teaching skills.

Upon returning to Afghanistan, Suhaila moved to Kabul with her family to support her siblings' higher education. She later married her cousin, Humayun Surkhabi, and began working at Parikot School in Demazang, Kabul. After relocating to a new area, she secured a position at Lamhe Shahid School, where she was promoted to head teacher (sarmalem). Over six years in this role, Suhaila skillfully balanced her responsibilities at home and work, managing the school with energy and dedication.

During her tenure at Lamhe Shahid, Suhaila noticed that the school was overcrowded and could no longer accommodate its growing student population. She collaborated with a colleague whose husband worked in the Ministry of Public Welfare (Fawaid-e-Amma) to address this issue. After extensive communication, they successfully established Nazo Ana[24] School, relocating part of Lamhe Shahid's student body to the new institution. Nazo Ana School flourished, accommodating 2,000 students and 70 teachers, with Suhaila serving as its head teacher. She dedicated 28 years to this role, fostering a generation of educated Afghan women who later became prominent figures in society.

[24] Nazo Ana, known as the "Mother of the Afghan Nation," was a 17th-century Pashtun poet who played a crucial role in promoting unity among Pashtun tribes. She also had a significant influence on her son, Mirwais Hotak (1673–1715), who founded the Hotak dynasty and ruled Kandahar. He is widely recognized for uniting Afghan tribes and resisting Persian domination. In Kabul, a school named after Nazo Ana honors her legacy and emphasizes the importance of acknowledging women's contributions. This is a significant and positive development in a country like Afghanistan, where women's achievements have often been overlooked. However, this recognition raises a critical question: why have figures like Bibi Mariam and other Uzbek women, who made equally important contributions, not received similar acknowledgment?

In 1992, as the situation in Afghanistan deteriorated, Suhaila and her family migrated to England with the help of a family friend, Dr. Asif Barna. Since then, Suhaila has lived in England for 33 years. While her contributions in England have not been as visible as in Afghanistan, she has focused on raising her four children, all of whom are now educated and serving in professional roles.

Suhaila Surkhabi embodies the principles of Islamic feminism by advocating for female education within the framework of Islamic values. Her resolute determination, bolstered by the support of her family, reflects Saba Mahmood's concept of agency as she navigated societal constraints to create opportunities for Afghan women. Through her efforts, Suhaila not only challenged patriarchal norms but also remained deeply rooted in her faith, leaving a lasting legacy of empowerment and education (Mahmood, 2005a; Kissane, 2012).

In conclusion, Suhaila Surkhabi stands as a remarkable example of resilience and leadership in the advancement of female education in Afghanistan. Overcoming societal barriers, she transitioned from student to teacher, engaged in international training, and took on leadership roles at prominent institutions such as Lamhe Shahid and Nazo Ana. Her commitment not only transformed the educational landscape for Afghan women but also empowered thousands of girls, leaving an indelible mark on the country's educational history. Despite adopting a quieter role after her migration to England, her dedication continues to inspire others.

5.1.8. Banu Tajwar: Pioneer Female Teacher of TorPakhto Village

Banu Tajwar was one of the pioneering students of Mamlakat Banu, and a key figure in advancing girls' education in the conservative district of Turpakhtu, Faryab. Born into an enlightened family in the village of Tor Pakhto, she encountered early challenges, including the loss of her mother at a young age. Banu was nurtured by the educated and supportive Sorkhabi family.

In 1943, encouraged by Mamlakat Banu, the first female teacher in Faryab province, Banu Tajwar enrolled in school. She displayed exceptional talent and graduated from sixth grade with top honors. As the only educated girl in her village, located several kilometers from the city, she recognized the

transformative power of education and committed herself to ensuring that other girls in her community also had access to learning opportunities.

Banu Tajwar was resolute in her mission to establish a school, diligently going door to door to persuade families to allow their daughters to attend. Her tireless efforts garnered the attention of local education authorities, leading to the establishment of a three-grade school in her village in 1961. Despite limited resources, including only a few blackboards and makeshift classrooms under trees, she taught girls with unwavering dedication, often managing three classes in a single day.

Her commitment inspired students like Noor Bibi Jan, who went on to become a teacher and continues Banu's legacy today. Banu's teaching was monitored and praised by educational supervisors of the time, such as Juma Khan Barati and Morteza Qol Khan Rahmati. In recognition of her dedication, her family donated land for the creation of a girls' school, which later expanded and was upgraded to a high school in 2008. Today, this institution graduates thousands of students each year, perpetuating her vision for education in the region.

In 1966, Banu Tajwar married Hajj Saleh Mohammad Bahmanyar, a prominent figure in Faryab province. She continued her teaching career at Setara High School, where she had once been a student, nurturing generations of learners and ensuring that girls had the opportunity to pursue an education.

The participant who provided this information stated that:

> I was one of her students and a witness to her unwavering dedication during a time when such work was exceptionally challenging. Her commitment to education and the empowerment of girls in our community was truly remarkable and served as an inspiration to all of us (Sharifa Bahmanya[25]).

Banu Tajwar's work can be examined through Judith Butler's theory of performativity, which states that identities and societal norms are constructed and reinforced through repeated actions. Tajwar's dedication to establishing a school and teaching under challenging circumstances actively challenged the patriarchal norms of her conservative society, broadening the possibilities for women in her community. By educating generations of girls, she not only confronted existing power structures but also embodied a new narrative of agency and empowerment, transforming societal perceptions of women's roles in education and leadership (Butler, 1999).

[25] Sharifa Bahmanyar, one of the participants, contributed valuable information about Bibi Zulaikha and Banu Tajwar. Her biography, highlighting her role as an active Uzbek woman in society over recent decades, is included in the appendix.6/9/2025 8:00:00 AM

In conclusion, Banu Tajwar's unwavering commitment to girls' education redefined her community and questioned societal norms, leaving a lasting legacy of empowerment and progress.

In summary, Chapter 5.1 presents findings on the historical and ongoing struggles of Uzbek women to advance female education in Afghanistan, addressing all critical sub-questions. These insights illuminate their historical roles and the challenges they faced.

The interplay of gender and ethnicity significantly heightened the vulnerability of pioneering Uzbek women, such as Bibi Mariam. Their dual identities exposed them to systemic marginalization within a patriarchal and ethnically stratified society, where power and recognition were predominantly held within male-dominated structures. As a result, their valuable contributions to education and societal development often went unrecognized. This lack of visibility is illustrated by the absence of educational institutions named after eminent Uzbek women, despite their considerable efforts and impact, reflecting the compound effects of gendered and ethnic discrimination.

Bibi Mariam was a pivotal figure in female education history, serving as the first female teacher and an educator within the royal family. Her work with both the royal family and ordinary women in Kabul and Faryab established a vital foundation for female education in the country. In addition to her teaching role, she actively advocated for women's rights and educational equity. Despite these significant contributions, her achievements remain largely unrecognized in societal and academic narratives, often overshadowed by her male counterparts, including her brother, whose name is associated with institutions such as the "Hunarhaye Zeba" art institute.

The prominence of Uzbek women as pioneers in female education arises from their historical commitment to knowledge and learning. Many of these women hailed from privileged families that valued education and had access to extensive libraries and intellectual resources. This cultural dedication to education, particularly through madrassas[26] before the advent of modern schools, enabled Uzbek women to assume a leading role in educational progress. Families like that of Bibi Mariam, known for their access to rich literary collections, played a crucial role in fostering intellectual engagement and advancing female education.

The contributions of Uzbek women to education and gender equity have been insufficiently recognized in both academic discourse and societal narratives. This lack of acknowledgment perpetuates their invisibility and reinforces the systemic marginalization they encounter. While male figures have received both celebration and institutional recognition, the vital roles that women have played have

[26] Chapter 5.2 will offer further insights on this topic.

often been sidelined, reflecting the intersectional vulnerabilities imposed by their gender and ethnic identities.

The continued neglect of Uzbek women's contributions highlights a broader issue of historical and cultural erasure. Despite their significant influence in promoting female education and advocating for human rights, these women have not received the recognition they rightfully deserve. This oversight is deeply embedded in the patriarchal structure of Afghan society, where male experiences and achievements are consistently prioritized. The failure to commemorate figures such as Bibi Mariam within institutions and societal narratives further entrenches their marginalization, despite their groundbreaking and pioneering contributions.

In conclusion, this research underscores the vital yet frequently overlooked role of Uzbek women in advancing female education in Afghanistan. Their intersectional identities have led to systemic neglect, despite their substantial contributions. Historically, their commitment to education reflects both resilience and leadership, making it imperative to recognize and institutionalize their efforts to rectify past injustices and inspire future generations. Acknowledging their contributions is essential for cultivating a more inclusive understanding of Afghanistan’s educational and cultural history.

In the following chapter, I will examine the contributions of the Uzbek people to the advancement of education rights in Afghanistan. This analysis draws primarily on an interview with Ramizpoor, a human rights researcher, whose insights are bolstered by secondary data to enhance the reliability and relevance of the information provided.

Chapter 5.2.

5.2.1. Uzbeks' Historical Contributions in Afghanistan before 1921:

Upon completing the first draft of my research and presenting it at an RWI conference, I received invaluable feedback from a former research fellow, Ramizpoor.[27] He shed light on the significant contributions of the Uzbek people in advancing educational opportunities in Afghanistan's history, particularly through madrassa-style education even before 1921.

[27] A research fellow at RWI and a renowned scholar specializing in Afghanistan.

Ramizpoor emphasized that historical madrassas are different from those promoted by the Taliban, which contradict modern educational values. Traditional madrassas offered a blend of religious and foundational education, focusing on moral instruction without politicization or violence, such as suicide bombings. The recent links between some madrassas and extremism do not reflect their original mission. He emphasized that this educational model not only provided essential learning but also advocated for women's rights to education long before the establishment of modern educational systems in 1921—a central focus of my research. Ramizpoor highlighted that the Uzbek community's implementation of madrassa-style education was guided by objectives aligned with the contemporary scientific knowledge of the time.

I had the privilege of interviewing Ramizpoor and reviewing his written materials, which greatly enhanced my understanding of the contributions of Uzbek people to education prior to the establishment of modern schooling. His insights highlighted the importance of figures such as Bibi Mariam, her mother, and her grandmother, who received their education within the traditional madrassa system, benefiting from their privileged royal family background (Shahrani, 2005 & Amini, 2008). This underscores the progressive role madrassa education played in the Uzbek context. To ensure the reliability and replicability of my research, I also incorporated additional relevant materials from existing literature in this regard.

5.2.2. A Brief Historical Overview

Ramizpoor emphasizes that madrassa-style education, which integrates contemporary subjects with religious studies, constitutes a remarkable historical contribution of the Uzbek people in Afghanistan. He states:

> Throughout history, Uzbeks have cultivated a rich educational legacy and established scientific centers that have significantly advanced knowledge across various fields, including the arts, literature, astronomy, and religious sciences. A notable example of such an influential institution in Islamic history is the Ulugh Beg Madrassa, founded in 1417 AD by Ulugh Beg, the grandson of Timur (Tamerlane, who ruled from 1370 to 1405) in Bukhara. This madrassa provided educational opportunities to hundreds of students in both religious and natural sciences for many years. The founder, deeply passionate about astronomy, also constructed a renowned observatory on the site. This highlights the integration of various academic disciplines—such as astronomy, mathematics, philosophy, and Islamic sciences—during that era.

He adds:

> The emergence of distinguished scientific and literary figures within the Uzbek ethnic group throughout history—such as Goharshad Begum (1378–1456), Sultan Husayn Bayqara (1438–1506), and Mir Nizamuddin Ali Shir Nava'i (1441–1501)—highlights the rich cultural and scientific heritage of this group, which is primarily found in present-day Afghanistan. Their contributions have significantly shaped educational advancement in the region and beyond.

As noted by Ramizpoor, Alami highlights Goharshad Begum's extraordinary achievements in promoting women's rights and her political engagement during the Timurid era. These efforts represent important milestones in the history of female leadership and advocacy for women's education. Goharshad's work not only championed women's rights but also established a lasting legacy of female empowerment during her time. Numerous scholarly articles have explored her contributions, and her influence continues to resonate in Herat, particularly through the enduring architectural landmark that bears her name (Alami, 2020).

Therefore, Goharshad Begum's contributions to advancing women's rights and her political performativity stand as remarkable achievements in the history of female leadership and advocacy for women's education. Her actions demonstrated a profound engagement with the socio-political norms of her time, utilizing her position of power to challenge traditional constraints and promote women's education. From the perspective of Judith Butler's theory of performativity, Goharshad's actions can be seen as a performance of agency within the constraints of her historical and cultural context. By repeatedly enacting leadership roles and advocating for women's rights, she redefined what was possible for women of her era, subtly transforming societal norms around gender (Butler, 1999).

Numerous scholarly articles have been written about her contributions, emphasizing the transformative impact of her initiatives. Her legacy is preserved in Herat,[28] particularly through the enduring architectural landmark associated with her name, which continues to symbolize her commitment to education and empowerment.

Ramizpoor emphasizes that throughout history, many madrassas have significantly contributed to promoting educational opportunities. He adds:

> Following Ulugh Beg's Madrassa in Bukhara, several other notable educational institutions emerged, including the Kukeldash Madrassa, the Mir Arab Madrassa, and the Divan-Begi Madrassa. From the 15th to the 20th centuries, these centers were instrumental in providing

[28] Herat, a historic city in western Afghanistan, has long been a center of culture and intellect. Known as the "Pearl of Khorasan," it flourished during the 15th century under the Timurid Empire, particularly during the reign of Queen Goharshad Begum, who championed the arts, architecture, and education. Celebrated for its landmarks, including the Herat Citadel and the Goharshad Mosque constructed in 1418, Herat remains a testament to Afghanistan's rich cultural heritage (Alami, 2020).

> education and disseminating Islamic knowledge. It's important to note that the establishment of educational centers in regions ruled by Uzbeks in northern Afghanistan predates the founding of other religious schools, such as the Deoband School in Delhi, India, established in 1867 AD by Syed Ahmad Khan, by four centuries. This fact underscores the earlier and more advanced legacy of educational initiatives among the Uzbeks.

He thereby underscores that the madrassas of Bukhara, particularly the Divan-Begi Madrasa, played a crucial role in delivering religious and scientific education in Afghanistan prior to the establishment of the Deoband School in India. Many religious scholars from northern and northeastern Afghanistan pursued their studies at these institutions until the Soviet Union took control of Uzbekistan and Central Asia in the early 20th century. Titles such as Mullah and Da-Mullah emerged during this period, reflecting the academic ranks held by religious scholars.

According to Ramizpoor, while the Deoband Madrassa, founded in 1866 in India, developed long after the madrassas of Bukhara and Samarkand, it has nonetheless had a profound impact on education in Afghanistan and across South Asia. Its influence reaches beyond its geographical origins, shaping educational practices and religious thought throughout the region. Barbara Metcalf (1978) also highlights the Deoband Madrassa as a vital institution for Islamic education, noting its innovative curriculum that marries traditional Islamic sciences with modern approaches. This model not only inspired a revivalist Islamic movement but also reinforced religious orthodoxy through a decentralized network of affiliated madrassas (Metcalf, 1978).

Ramizpoor reflects on his childhood experiences of attending a few days of private lessons at a women's informal school run by a Haji Mullah[29] in Mazar-e-Sharif. He believes that such home-based educational methods, often led by women, have played a critical role in promoting literacy and cultural development among the people of northern Afghanistan.

The Uzbeks' steadfast commitment to pursuing education, despite the numerous intersecting barriers they face, serves as a powerful example of active resistance against oppressive narratives. This intersectional perspective not only underscores the historical marginalization of Uzbeks by prevailing power dynamics but also highlights the importance of reclaiming and recognizing their significant contributions to Afghanistan's educational landscape. This historical context sheds light on the intricate and evolving nature of educational and cultural influences in Afghanistan, demonstrating the early contributions of Uzbek local leaders alongside the external forces that later shaped the region's educational environment.

[29] The title "Haji Mullah" was bestowed upon women who completed the comprehensive curriculum offered by madrassas during that period, reflecting their extensive understanding of religious and scholarly subjects. These women not only possessed profound knowledge relevant to their time but also embraced the role of educators, imparting their knowledge to younger students.

Ramizpoor elaborates further:

> A clear illustration of the Uzbeks' dedication to education even can be found in the events of the past few decades in Afghanistan, particularly following the collapse of Dr. Najibullah's government in 1992. During this tumultuous period, Kabul and many other Afghan cities were engulfed in factional wars among various jihadist parties and groups. However, in northern Afghanistan, under the leadership of a prominent Uzbek leader—who was later accused of widespread human rights violations—opportunities for education and higher learning flourished.

He asserts that these educational initiatives were extended not only to Uzbeks but also to children and youth from all communities in the northern provinces. Consequently, many young individuals from the southern and central regions of Afghanistan sought refuge from ongoing conflicts to continue their education in the north.

According to Ramizpoor, historical narratives authored by Western writers in the 18th and 19th centuries often depicted Uzbeks as backward and illiterate, with their low literacy rates emphasized as a defining characteristic. However, these portrayals were often shaped by political agendas and the biases of dominant powers in Afghanistan, which tended to favor their primary allies while marginalizing minority groups.

He points out that recent studies contest these narratives by illustrating that Uzbeks, much like Tajiks, have historically valued education highly and shown a strong commitment to learning. Despite facing systemic challenges and marginalization, they have continuously sought educational opportunities and worked diligently to preserve their intellectual and cultural heritage. This notable discrepancy between biased historical depictions and the actual experiences of Uzbeks highlights the need for more inclusive and accurate historical accounts.

By applying Judith Butler’s concept of intersectionality, we can better understand the marginalization of Uzbeks as a result of intersecting factors such as ethnicity, political repression, and cultural exclusion. Butler posits that identity is constructed through performative acts that are shaped by power structures. In this context, the depiction of Uzbeks as uneducated is a product of intertwining political and colonial narratives designed to undermine their intellectual contributions.

Despite these obstacles, the Uzbek pursuit of education stands as a significant act of resistance against systemic exclusion. This intersectional perspective illuminates the historical power dynamics that have marginalized Uzbeks while also reinforcing the importance of recognizing their contributions to Afghanistan’s educational landscape. This historical analysis highlights the intricate and evolving nature of education in Afghanistan, emphasizing the early roles played by Uzbek scholars, leaders, and institutions in shaping the region's intellectual and cultural heritage.

In conclusion, the representation of Uzbeks in Afghanistan as backward by many writers highlights the complex interplay of ethnic, political, and cultural marginalization. Applying Butler's concept of intersectionality reveals how power structures have been used to cultivate these narratives to diminish Uzbek contributions. Nevertheless, Uzbeks have actively resisted these misrepresentations by prioritizing education, thereby emphasizing the necessity of reclaiming their historical agency and recognizing their pivotal role in the advancement of education in Afghanistan. This historical context highlights the nuanced and evolving nature of educational and cultural influences in Afghanistan, showcasing the early contributions of Uzbek local leaders alongside the subsequent external forces that shaped the region's educational landscape.

The next section investigates the challenges encountered by contemporary Uzbek female teachers in their efforts to promote education amidst the Taliban's oppressive regime, which severely restricts women's rights, including the prohibition of education beyond the sixth grade. In spite of these daunting circumstances, these educators demonstrate remarkable resilience by conducting clandestine classes in their homes, risking their safety and lives to uphold the fundamental right to education for girls and women.

Chapter 5.3.

5.3.1 Current Struggles and Resistance of Uzbek Women

As previously mentioned, Uzbek women have long been at the forefront of advocating for female education in Afghanistan, despite not receiving due recognition for their efforts. This struggle has been further exacerbated by the rise of the Taliban and other extremist Islamic groups. Women encounter substantial resistance when pursuing education or employment outside the home, particularly under Taliban rule and in contexts shaped by extremist Islamic ideologies in Afghanistan. This challenge is further magnified for women from minority groups, as the intersection of gender and minority status heightens their vulnerability.

In this section, I aim to delve into the ongoing and actual challenges faced by Uzbek women in their roles as teachers, holders of higher education, and members of the Uzbek ethnic community. The objective is to highlight their marginalized perspectives and underscore the importance of

acknowledging their contributions, particularly as women who conduct secret classes at great personal risk. As Afghan women living abroad, especially those of us serving as research fellows at the Raoul Wallenberg Institute (RWI), and in collaboration with the Special Rapporteur on Human Rights, we must recognize our responsibility to demonstrate solidarity. It is essential that we provide a platform for these suppressed voices in Afghanistan, ensuring that their experiences are included in the broader human rights discourse.

All the participants in this section of the research currently conduct secret classes to avoid detection by the Taliban, with the number of students ranging from two to fifty. The teachers of larger groups, consisting of twenty to fifty students, are generally younger women aged 18 to 30. They operate outside the city in more secluded areas. Some of the participants teach mostly close relatives, offering some protection. Their youth and the relative isolation of location enable them to undertake this dangerous mission with greater boldness. Their age instills a sense of invincibility, and their deep resentment toward the Taliban fuels their determination to continue educating others despite the risks involved.

Engaging in conversations with these educators highlights their unwavering enthusiasm and dedication to promoting female education. Despite encountering significant challenges, they remain hopeful and resilient, inspiring profound admiration through their determination. One noteworthy individual is Jam 2, an 18-year-old teacher who passionately instructs multiple subjects, placing a strong emphasis on English. She exemplifies a steadfast commitment to advancing education, even in the face of adversity.

Jam 2 articulated her aspirations, stating:

> [I] have long envisioned establishing my own school, with a primary focus on teaching English. I firmly believe that this language serves as a crucial gateway to the world and has the potential to enhance our capabilities. Furthermore, I am a passionate advocate for expanding educational opportunities for girls. Although my cousin had committed to supporting this vision, the rise of the Taliban forced him to flee the country. Despite these challenges, my dream remains steadfast, and I hold onto the hope that it will become a reality in the near future (Jam 2).

She also reflected on the personal ramifications of her cousin's departure, mentioning that, "[M]y cousin, a prominent Uzbek, fled the country, which significantly curtailed my opportunities since he was my primary source of support" (Jam 2). Her story underscores the systemic hurdles faced by women educators in oppressive regimes, as well as the profound resilience they exhibit in their pursuit of educational change.

Many participants conveyed that their situation as Uzbeks is serious under the Taliban's regime, and affects them in various ways. Numerous male relatives have left the country due to their prominent positions, education, or status. This exodus has resulted in psychological distress and heightened fear, as they are increasingly aware that the Taliban may further oppress them because of their ethnicity. This sentiment was frequently articulated among the participants.

This expression illustrates the significant impact of societal norms and power dynamics on these individuals' aspirations and experiences, particularly within the context of the Taliban's rule. This narrator expresses a strong desire to establish a school focused on teaching English, highlighting the importance of education and language as tools for empowerment, which was new for me. This ambition reflects an awareness of the broader societal need for educational opportunities, especially for women, and underscores a commitment to overcoming barriers imposed by oppressive regimes, confirming.

A wish for online education was articulated from all the participants, for example:

> [I] wish we had access to online education opportunities, such as computer courses, English language courses, and online bachelor's degree programs-particularly in fields like law and international law (Shahr 5).

Many young teachers expressed this aspiration as a shared dream—the desire for access to online educational resources, including computer courses, English language training, and online bachelor's degree programs, especially in disciplines like law and international law. For these educators, such access would not only enhance their professional development but also empower them to better serve their communities by bridging the gap between local knowledge and global standards. This desire reflects a broader yearning for opportunities that can equip them with the skills needed to navigate both national and international frameworks, contributing to long-term educational and social progress.

I learned about an educational initiative offered by a TV channel called LAPIS, which provides lectures in both Dari and Pashto in Afghanistan. However, when I spoke with my participants from Jawzjan and Faryab, I discovered that they were unaware of this resource. The reason for their lack of awareness remains uncertain. This disconnect illustrates the challenges of effectively disseminating educational materials across various regions, potentially due to factors such as limited media access, inadequate infrastructure, or insufficient outreach efforts in rural areas.

There has long been a strong desire among the people of Afghanistan for learning international languages like English, especially among the younger generation. Establishing a school where instruction is conducted in English could represent a pivotal step in linking the village and its girls to a broader world, helping them to become integrated into global citizenship.

The aspirations of learning English, pursuing computer courses, or depending on relatives to establish schools and educational programs have become increasingly unattainable due to the Taliban's resurgence. The departure of essential family members, who were vital sources of support, has further complicated this situation. This illustrates how the oppressive dynamics of the Taliban not only suppress

individual agency but also disrupt critical social networks that once enabled personal ambitions. The absence of family members—many of whom fled due to their significant political or social roles—emphasizes the psychological distress experienced by Uzbeks, who now face heightened fears of oppression based on their ethnicity.

Overall, this narrative encapsulates the interplay between personal dreams and the overarching societal norms shaped by oppressive power structures. It demonstrates how individuals internalize fear and limitations imposed by these dynamics, thereby affecting their sense of agency and potential for achieving their goals. The participants' experiences illustrate the broader struggles of marginalized groups in Afghanistan, revealing how societal conditions can hinder aspirations and perpetuate cycles of oppression.

Judith Butler's concept of the 'psychology of power' offers valuable insights into how societal norms and power structures influence individual identities and subjectivities. The fear and constraints imposed by the Taliban foster an internalized sense of oppression that significantly impacts individuals' agency and aspirations. This narrative emphasizes the relationship between personal dreams and the prevailing societal norms shaped by oppressive power dynamics. It illustrates how individuals internalize the fear and limitations stemming from these circumstances, ultimately impeding their sense of agency and potential to fulfill their goals (Butler, 1997a).

This context emphasizes how various social identities, including ethnicity and gender, intersect to shape the experiences of participants facing oppression. They are acutely aware that their ethnic backgrounds may render them more vulnerable to targeted repression by the Taliban. This concern was often voiced by participants, who frequently referenced the departure of family members or other distressing situations stemming from the Taliban's actions (Butler, 1999).

As mentioned earlier, in the methodology section, all of these expressions stemmed from a fear of detection. The discussions revealed a widespread sense of terror and anxiety among the participants, emphasizing the ongoing fear of being discovered. Their teaching process is one of the priority of their agency. They do teach clandestine classes however there are more restrictions that make the participants worried.

Their teaching process is a priority for their agency, and while they conduct clandestine classes, the increasing restrictions imposed by the Taliban exacerbate the participants' concerns. These restrictions, including intensified surveillance and the threat of severe punishment, heighten the participants' fear and anxiety, making it increasingly difficult for them to engage in educational activities.

> [D]uring the first Taliban regime from 1996 to 2001, I taught young girls in secret, and I continue to do so today. Back then, I received partial funding from CHA,[30] an NGO, but much of my work was voluntary. Now, I teach solely on a volunteer basis, focusing on educating my close relatives with a group of just six students. The current situation is far more perilous, with eroded trust and pervasive spies. People betray one another, reporting to the Taliban, making it exceedingly risky. Previously, I taught all my acquaintances, but now I hesitate due to the lack of trust, even within our own community (Najla 1).

During the first Taliban era from 1996 to 2001, Najla 1 was able to conduct clandestine classes with more students; however, she is no longer able to do so. This sentiment is shared by all participants in Faryab, highlighting a stark contrast to the situation in Jawzjan. The erosion of trust within the community has led to a significant decline in educational opportunities for younger girls beyond the sixth grade. This deterioration not only affects individual educational attainment but also undermines social cohesion within the community. The impact of this loss of trust will be explored as a critical factor influencing the Uzbek community in Faryab, emphasizing its implications for collective identity and resilience.

Saba Mahmood's theory of agency underscores the intricate relationship between cultural norms and individual actions. She argues that the erosion of trust significantly weakens a community's ability to mobilize and advocate for educational rights through their agency and performance. For Mahmood, agency encompasses not only resistance but also the navigation of social and political constraints. In examining the context of Faryab, we will explore how the decline of trust serves as a critical factor impacting the Uzbek community, shaping collective identity, resilience, and the ability to create educational opportunities for women and girls (Mahmood, 2005b).

However, the situation in Jowzjan differs from that in Maimana and Mazar-e-sharif. In Jowzjan, local religious leaders (Mulla Imam) and neighborhood representatives (Wakil-e-Guzar)[31] have successfully worked together to support clandestine classes for between 20 and 50 female students. While these sessions are officially centered on religious topics, they discreetly incorporate scientific subjects without notifying the Taliban authorities. This arrangement is possible due to the mutual trust among local leaders, allowing for a more flexible and covert approach to education in a highly restrictive environment. This trust emphasizes the unique social cohesion within the community, enabling a pragmatic balance between adhering to religious expectations and ensuring educational access for women.

[30] CHA (Coordinating Humanitarian Assistance) is an NGO focused on coordinating humanitarian assistance; https://www.cha-net.org/.

[31] "Wakile Guzar" is an Afghani term that translates to "neighborhood representative" or "community leader" in English. This person acts as a local representative or spokesperson for a specific neighborhood, often as a liaison between the community and higher authorities.

One of these teachers shared insights about her currently successful class:

> [I] have the privilege of teaching 50 girls under an agreement with the local representative and the local clerk. While my primary focus is on religious subjects such as the Quran, I also incorporate additional subjects that I believe are important for their education (Jaw 1).

She is a young and passionate teacher, wholeheartedly dedicated to the transformative potential of education. Introduced to me by a trusted friend, she highlighted the necessity of maintaining her anonymity, reflecting the widespread atmosphere of fear and caution among educators in Taliban-controlled areas. In honoring her request and respecting the privacy of all involved, I will not disclose their locations.

In Jowzjan, educators such as her strategically incorporate the Quran into their curriculum, prioritizing religious instruction to demonstrate compliance with Islamic principles to the Taliban authorities. This approach aligns with Saba Mahmood's theory of agency, which explores how individuals, particularly women, navigate restrictive environments by working within dominant frameworks to carve out spaces of resistance. By emphasizing religious teachings, these educators subtly assert their agency, using the very norms that limit them to safeguard their broader educational mission. This exemplifies how agency can emerge through accommodation and negotiation rather than overt defiance (Mahmood, 2005b).

The trust established between local religious leaders and educators has enhanced their effectiveness as educators. From an Islamic feminist perspective, they adeptly exercise their agency within Islamic frameworks (Kissane, 2012). By prioritizing Islamic studies, they create a legitimate platform to introduce scientific subjects, thereby promoting women's empowerment and education. The collaboration between local religious leaders, referred to as Mulla Imams, and neighborhood representatives, known as Wakil-e-Guzar, exemplifies how these individuals strategically navigate religious and cultural norms to create educational opportunities for women, even in the face of the restrictive conditions imposed by the Taliban.

This approach resonates with Islamic feminist principles that advocate for agency within the Islamic context, emphasizing that efforts to provide education are not merely acts of defiance; they are grounded in a renewed understanding of these women's roles within Islamic society (Tohidi, 2003). The mutual trust established between these local leaders further underscores the community's commitment to fostering an environment that supports women's education, actively challenging the patriarchal structures that restrict their opportunities.

All of the participants firmly believe in the transformative power of education, which they see as an essential tool for empowerment. Among them is Zara 1, a devoted and experienced teacher who single-handedly raised her children after the tragic loss of her husband during an internal conflict. Despite

being young at the time and choosing not to remarry, she takes great pride in successfully managing her life without the support of a partner.

> [E]ducation is a powerful tool for empowering women. I currently teach at a school for students up to grade 6, but I also hold clandestine classes at my home for five older girls who come in hijabs to avoid detection. I am committed to continuing these classes because I believe in the transformative power of education. If I had not been educated, it would have been tough to survive after losing my husband and being left to care for two children on my own. Thanks to my education, I was able to raise my children independently, without relying on anyone else's help (Zara 1).

All participants consistently emphasized the significance of education, underlining that survival in the modern technology-driven era is unattainable without it. This perspective mirrors the assertion of Richard Bennett, the UN Special Rapporteur, who articulated that education is not only an intrinsic human right but also a pivotal instrument for upholding other rights (Bennett, 2004).

> [I] am deeply committed to engaging girls in education because I believe it is the only path to emancipation and achieving equality. My greatest hope is to see a day when illiteracy no longer exists in our country … [H]owever, the risks we face are significant. The Taliban's prejudice against Uzbeks means we must be particularly cautious to avoid being discovered teaching in defiance of their rules. According to them, subjects like physics, biology, and mathematics have no place in the education of females, which is why I must take extreme care not to be caught … [I] dream of a time when everyone can attend school without fear. Education is a fundamental necessity, as vital as oxygen and water, especially in today's globalized world. Without education, it is impossible to meet even the most basic needs in this age of technology (Zara 2).

Zara 2 is an ambitious woman with remarkable emotional resilience and two daughters whom she supports unwaveringly, aspiring for their empowerment insofar as the situation in Afghanistan allows. Many participants with children voiced their desire for their daughters to be empowered through education. This mission has the potential to contribute to a brighter future, provided the circumstances permit.

> [A]s a teacher, I formally educate students up to grade 6. However, I also secretly provide English, mathematics, and physics tutoring to six students at home. They are beyond the specified grade level due to the restrictions imposed by the Taliban. These circumstances are further complicated by my 19-year-old daughter's ongoing struggle with psychological health issues. Unfortunately, I lack the financial means to seek proper treatment for her in Kabul or abroad. Because of the absence of a legitimate government, I am compelled to keep my daughter's condition hidden, given the stigma surrounding such issues, particularly for young women (Zara 3).

I was aware that disability, particularly among girls, is often stigmatized, leading many parents to conceal their children’s disabilities, especially those that are less visible, such as autism or other neurodevelopmental conditions. However, I was taken aback when the participant revealed that she

would not disclose her condition, fearing it might jeopardize her chances of marrying a 'good' person. This made me reflect on the uncertain future facing these girls, who may enter demanding environments, such as their in-laws' households, without having openly discussed or addressed their disabilities.

> [M]aliha jan, please keep this a secret and do not share it with anyone … [M]y daughter has epilepsy and she can lose consciousness at any moment. Unfortunately, we cannot afford the treatment she needs. It is treatable in Pakistan or neighboring countries, but we simply do not have the means to pursue it (Zara 2).

Certainly, I will refrain from discussing the revelation of their wishes. However, this presents a dilemma that must be acknowledged, as it exacerbates the challenges faced by these girls. It is crucial to have conversations about this issue and work toward creating a more manageable future for them; otherwise, they may have to navigate a life filled with difficulties.

However, as previously mentioned, the primary challenge of conducting clandestine classes is that they are often disguised as lessons on the Quran or other religious subjects. While this strategy is vital for maintaining cover, it restricts the breadth of education and limits the broader learning opportunities available to participants.

> [I] teach students, primarily focusing on Quran and religious subjects, while also incorporating other subjects like mathematics, English, and physics into the lessons. My goal is to present it as a religious course without challenging or opposing the Taliban … [I] understand that our efforts extend beyond our own children, contributing significantly to social harmony, literacy development, and the cultivation of meaningful achievements among future generations. This collective contribution merits recognition; however, the efforts of Uzbek men frequently receive more acknowledgment than those of women (Zara 4).

For generations, they have actively championed female education, yet their contributions frequently remain unrecognized. Participants often highlight the achievements of influential figures who are conspicuously absent from academic discussions, underscoring the pressing need for greater acknowledgment of their impact on female education.

The participants believe their contributions go unrecognized, resulting in feelings of frustration and disillusionment. This lack of acknowledgment undermines their sense of agency and perpetuates marginalization. Recognizing their efforts is essential for fostering empowerment and underscoring their roles within the community. Without this recognition, their capacity to effect meaningful change is diminished.

According to Judith Butler, the Hegelian tradition associates desire with recognition, suggesting that our yearning for recognition shapes our social existence. While this concept holds some validity, it overlooks significant factors. The criteria for being recognized as human are constructed socially and can change over time. Frequently, these criteria that bestow 'humanness' upon certain individuals can deny it to others, creating a hierarchy between those fully regarded as human and those deemed less-

than-human. As Butler notes, these social norms profoundly affect our understanding of who deserves rights and political inclusion, as recognition varies by race, gender, and ethnicity. Some individuals are perceived as less than human or entirely unrecognized, resulting in unlivable conditions. Furthermore, the desire for recognition is intricately linked to gender; when available forms of recognition undermine individuals, they create a power dynamic that influences who is seen as human. Thus, desire is closely entwined with social norms and power, determining who receives acknowledgment as human and who does not (Butler, 1999, 2005).

I deeply empathize with the psychological distress that my research participants experience due to the pressures of teaching, especially when compounded by family problems and unrecognition of their contribution. Their voices, tears, and visible distress have a profound impact on me.

In my interviews with these women, it became evident that two-thirds of the participants have a family member who either suffers from a psychological issue or has a disability. Many of them feel compelled to keep the problem hidden, especially if the affected individual is a daughter. This reluctance stems from the stigma associated with having a daughter who is ill or has a psychological condition, as it is believed that such a girl will struggle to find a suitable marriage partner. In this context, marriage is viewed as a crucial aspect of a girl's life, and there is a strong societal expectation that she must appear 'proper' to secure a good match.

Despite facing distressing and stressful situations, all the participants maintain hope for a brighter future. They have expressed a shared sentiment encapsulated by the phrase, 'The end of every dark night is a bright day.' This saying reflects a common belief among the young participants that, despite current difficulties and challenges, there is optimism for a better future. It underscores their conviction that positive change will inevitably follow periods of hardship, which brings me a sense of satisfaction.

However, the erosion of trust emerged as a significant concern for all my participants in Fariab and Mazare-sharif, who perceived it as one of the most valuable aspects undermined by the Taliban. The success of the Taliban in dismantling trust within the community was particularly alarming and unexpected for me. This breakdown of trust is the primary reason many of my participants are hesitant to take on more students, as it becomes increasingly challenging to maintain secrecy with larger groups. Additionally, as previously mentioned in the methodology section, conducting interviews with these participants involved a combination of written responses to specific questions and verbal discussions via WhatsApp because of stressful situation and trust damage. This approach was essential for maintaining both security and clarity in our communication. I will discuss trust as a key element of social cohesion in a separate section.

To sum up regarding the participants' distress, resilience, and agency, Saba Mahmood's concept of agency provides valuable insights into how these women navigate their circumstances. Mahmood's framework underscores the notion that individuals in oppressive environments can assert their agency not merely through overt resistance, but by negotiating within the constraints imposed upon them. Despite their challenges, the participants' optimism and hope for a brighter future demonstrate their capacity to maintain agency even in the face of adversity (Mahmood, 2005b).

To sum up this section, using the lens of Judith Butler's theory of performativity further elucidates the idea that the participants' expressions of hope and resilience are not simply passive reflections of their situations; instead, they represent performative acts that challenge societal norms and expectations. Their collective belief that 'the end of every dark night is a bright day' embodies a shared performance of hope, acting as a subtle yet powerful form of resistance. By voicing this optimism, they create space to counter marginalization and envision positive change within their lives and communities (Butler, 1999).

In the following section, I will explore the role of family support, which all participants identified as a crucial factor in enhancing their resilience, shaping their performativity, and facilitating their engagement in the educational process. This support is considered essential for their journey toward empowerment and greater autonomy.

5.3.2 Family Support Empowers Girls and Women to Advance Their Agency

The upcoming section examines the influence of family on the personal development and agency of the participants. All participants rely heavily on family support, especially the support of men, in a conservative and patriarchal society like Afghanistan. The concept of 'family'[32] holds significant importance in Afghanistan, and all participants refer to the nuclear family as their primary source of support.

Married participants were brought up in nuclear families and later transitioned to extended family structures through marriage and parenthood, while unmarried participants continue to live with their nuclear families. This traditional trajectory, particularly among Uzbek women, is influenced by economic and social factors. Family members, especially educated mothers, have had a profound impact on the participants' attitudes, behaviors, and sense of self-determination.

[32] The definition of family differs across cultural contexts; however, in Afghanistan, it maintains its traditional significance, which is deeply rooted in kinship ties, shared responsibilities, and social hierarchy.

The practice of remaining single for an extended period or for life is more commonly observed among Tajiks and, to some extent, Pashtun females, but it is relatively uncommon among the Uzbek population. Marriage is generally considered essential for daughters in this ethnic group's families. However, early or child marriage is prevalent among Uzbeks in isolated regions, especially in areas experiencing severe economic hardship. This practice is also observed in urban areas, particularly in families facing economic difficulties, with lower levels of parental education, or experiencing instability and insecurity due to ongoing conflict. The rule of the Taliban has exacerbated these concerns among Uzbeks regarding infringements on their rights, further intensifying social and economic challenges.

Girls and women consistently highlight the significance of family support, viewing it as a notable source of pride. Conversations with participants revealed that their resilience and capacity to overcome challenges are deeply connected to the support they receive from their families. This support—be it emotional, material, or otherwise—plays a vital role in empowering them to navigate difficult situations and pursue their aspirations, particularly in contexts where external assistance may be lacking. Family support functions as both a safety net and a foundation for their personal and educational growth.

The following assertion, made by Jam 7, is echoed by numerous participants from the younger generation:

> [M]y mother has always been a source of motivation for me, encouraging me to stand firm and fight against injustice. She instills in me the strength to be resilient in the face of adversity. My 15-year-old sister is also a great support to me; she is like an extension of my own strength, helping me in countless ways. Additionally, I have an 18-year-old friend who has become another pillar of support … [I]n Afghanistan, life is incredibly challenging, we rely on each other for survival. Being a girl or a woman has always been difficult, but under the Taliban regime, it feels as though we experience a constant struggle … [A]s my friend often reminds me, we must learn to live within this harsh reality and fight for the sake of the next generation (Jam 7).

The theme of family support and its importance for future generations consistently surfaced in the responses of all participants. They expressed pride in the presence of strong female figures within their families, noting that these women not only serve as pillars of support for their immediate households but also extend their influence to extended relatives. Such women are seen as instrumental in positively shaping male attitudes, thereby creating a more supportive environment for women within the family. Additionally, it was observed that men raised by educated or strong mothers often exhibit more supportive attitudes toward their wives, underscoring the intergenerational impact of female empowerment within the family structure. This dynamic highlights the essential role of family in fostering progressive attitudes toward women's education and societal roles.

Participants' comments echo this widely, noting how their mothers are an example of resilience, e.g.:

> [M]y mother has always told us that her fight was for our future. Yet, I wonder how long this struggle will continue and which generation will finally succeed in securing the right to education-a fundamental right that should be inviolable … [T]his is the dream that we, the girls of Afghanistan, cling to with hope (Jam 5).

At times, I perceive a deep sense of disillusionment in their words and voices as they reflect on the ongoing nature of their struggle. It is disheartening to recognize that, despite over a century of efforts to advance women's rights and education, it often feels as though they remain at the starting point (Zulfacar, 2006; Heath and Zahedi, 2011; Kabeer and Khan, 2014). The persistent challenges they encounter suggest that progress has been slow and uneven, causing many to question how substantial change can truly be achieved within their lifetimes. This sense of stagnation underscores the necessity for renewed strategies and stronger support systems to break the cycle of marginalization (Girowal, 2024) and move toward meaningful, lasting progress.

Interviewing mothers and daughters within the same family uncovered a shift in attitudes across generations. While generalizing these findings may not be ideal, the observed differences between younger and older participants suggest a promising trend. This generational shift could have significant implications for shaping attitudes toward addressing ethnic and gender-based violence, highlighting potential avenues for advocacy and intervention. As one participant noted:

> [E]mpowering our daughters is crucial for ensuring they have a brighter future. We must advocate for their rights within the home, establishing a strong foundation that enables them to carry this empowerment into society … [B]y championing their rights in the family, we provide them with the confidence and opportunities necessary to succeed and thrive beyond the domestic sphere (Najla 7).

The participants view their daughters as active agents in the broader struggle for women's empowerment, a role they aim to cultivate within the family, which plays a crucial role in shaping societal structures. Drawing on Judith Butler's concept of performativity (Butler, 1999), it is evident that these women are not simply passive recipients of empowerment; rather, they actively perform and embody decision-making roles within the domestic sphere, challenging traditional gender norms. Similarly, Saba Mahmood's notion of agency underscores that empowerment is not solely about overt resistance; it also involves navigating and exercising agency within existing cultural and social frameworks (Mahmood, 2005b). As articulated by the participants, women's empowerment often begins within the family. When women are empowered to make significant household decisions, they not only expand their roles within the family but also cultivate the confidence and skills necessary for broader societal success. This foundational empowerment fosters leadership and decision-making abilities that extend into education, professional careers, and beyond. When a woman is recognized as an equal contributor within her family, her sense of agency and autonomy is strengthened, enabling her to engage with external environments more assertively. Thus, the family becomes an essential space for

the performative enactment of empowerment, where agency can take root and thrive, ultimately leading to broader societal transformation.

The participants acknowledge the significance of aligning with international laws and human rights principles. They believe that the integration of national values with international legal frameworks must respect the cultural and Islamic identity of their community. Moreover, they express a strong desire to engage with and contribute to the global human rights discourse. They envision a harmonious integration in which adherence to international standards enhances rather than compromises their cultural and religious sensitivities, ultimately strengthening their position within the global framework while preserving their unique identity.

> [W]hile I recognize the importance of international law and human rights in the Afghan context, it's important to integrate these values in a way that aligns with our religious and cultural traditions. Just adopting international values as Afghan values without a comprehensive educational framework is not enough. We need to figure out how to effectively deal with our current situation … [W]hen we compare our situation with neighboring countries like Pakistan and Iran, which share the same religion but have different outcomes, we can see the impact of high illiteracy rates in Afghanistan. Addressing this issue through education is crucial for improving our socio-political landscape (Shahr 1).

This discussion is vital as it brings attention to the ongoing limitations on women's rights, which have perpetuated cycles of oppression throughout history (Girowal, 2024). Numerous contemporary experts on Afghanistan are now calling for a thorough reassessment of these issues, emphasizing the need to dismantle these entrenched patterns of injustice (Zulfacar, 2006; Heath and Zahedi, 2011; Kabeer and Khan, 2014). In the current context, this debate is especially significant, highlighting the persistent denial of women's agency and the urgent necessity to reevaluate policies that have historically marginalized them.

This discussion gains further depth when viewed through the lens of Islamic feminism, which challenges patriarchal interpretations of Islamic texts and advocates for women's rights within an Islamic framework. Scholars such as Nayereh Tohidi underscore that Islamic feminism serves as a crucial avenue for reinterpreting religious and cultural norms that have historically perpetuated gender inequities. In the context of Afghanistan, the ongoing denial of women's agency can be understood as a result of deeply entrenched socio-religious practices that conflict with the egalitarian principles found in Islamic teachings. By reassessing these practices through an Islamic feminist lens, the movement to dismantle oppressive systems is congruent with both religious authenticity and a commitment to justice. This approach not only critiques existing power structures but also opens pathways for policy reforms that promote gender equity while honoring cultural and religious frameworks (Tohidi, 2003).

Participants raised concerns about the limitations of the madrassa-style education system, highlighting its narrow focus and insufficient scope. They stressed the importance of international support to prevent

Afghanistan from exclusively adopting this model, and advocated for a more balanced educational framework that integrates modern, secular, and inclusive principles alongside traditional teachings. They argued that such an approach would create greater opportunities for women and promote societal progress while aligning with international standards. The prevalence of restrictive educational models not only impedes intellectual growth but also hinders advancements in gender equity.

In the following section, I will analyze how this model impacts participants' lives and its broader implications for the future of women's education in Afghanistan.

5.3.3 Uzbek Women's Perspectives on *Madrassa*[33] Education and Its Impact on Human and Women's Rights

This section is essential to include, as it directly reflects the concerns of the participants. With the potential reintroduction of *madrassa-style* education in Afghanistan by the Taliban, serious apprehensions arise regarding human rights, especially women's rights. During discussions, *madrassa-style* education was a prominent theme, with participants unanimously opposing its implementation. They recognized the underlying objectives of *madrassa* education system and expressed profound concern about its oppressive nature, particularly the curriculum, which they saw as a direct threat to women's rights and freedoms.

According to Amiry, *madrassa-style* education, as implemented by the Taliban in Afghanistan, focuses exclusively on religious instruction. The curriculum in Taliban-operated *madrassas* for girls is structured into three levels, with a strong emphasis on Islamic law and religious studies. Subjects include Sarf Baha'i[34] (Arabic grammar), Shurut al-Salah[35] (the rules of prayer), Zad al-Talibin (a religious text), Dars al-Balagha[36] (rhetoric), and Usul al-Fiqh[37] (principles of Islamic jurisprudence). This narrow focus on religious teachings limits the educational scope and reinforces the Taliban's ideological control (Amiry, 2024).

[33] In recent Afghanistan, madrassa education has traditionally emphasized religious studies, focusing on Quranic reading and writing and religious matters, rather than scientific subjects. It is worth noting that in Iran, where the language is similar (Dari in Afghanistan and Persian in Iran, with minor differences in accent), schools are also called madrassas, which can lead to confusion. This clarification helps to distinguish between the two contexts.
[34] Sarf Baha'i refers to the study of Arabic grammar, emphasizing the rules of verb conjugation and word formation.
[35] Shurut al-Salah are Arabic terms that refer to the rules and conditions for performing Islamic prayer (Salah). They outline the necessary prerequisites and procedures for proper worship.
[36] Dars al-Balagha is the study of Arabic rhetoric that emphasizes the art of eloquent expression and effective communication in both speech and writing, especially in Islamic texts.
[37] Usul al-Fiqh refers to the principles of Islamic jurisprudence. It involves studying the methods and rules used to derive Islamic law (Sharia) from its primary sources: the Quran, Hadith (prophetic traditions), consensus (Ijma), and analogy (Qiyas). This discipline lays the foundation for interpreting and applying Islamic legal rulings effectively.

As stated previously, Amiry emphasizes that madrassa-style education serves primarily to reinforce the Taliban's oppressive rule over the people of Afghanistan, particularly targeting women. According to him, this approach poses significant risks for the future, as women are increasingly marginalized from broader society. Moreover, these schools threaten to transform them into agents of extremist ideology. A report by Amu TV reveals that interviews with girls from these institutions indicate a strong inclination toward accepting Taliban ideology and a radical interpretation of Islamic law, particularly Sharia. This trend is alarming and demands urgent attention (Amiry, 2024).

Amiry's description aligns with the participants' views on *madrassa-style* education as a calculated strategy employed by the Taliban to reject women's rights and empowerment. This approach seeks to restrict access to modern knowledge, stifle critical thinking, and undermine women's autonomy under the pretense of religious instruction. Participants regard this educational system not only as an insufficient alternative to formal education but also as a method of perpetuating gender-based oppression, ultimately denying women their fundamental rights to equal education and opportunities.

Incorporating quotes and insights from participants reveals their frustration with the current Taliban-applied educational landscape. These perspectives also highlight concerns about the limitations of *madrassa-style* education and its impact on women's rights and opportunities. All participants expressed negative views toward madrassa-style education, such as this statement, conveyed by 18-year-old Shahr 2 in an angry tone:

> [M]adrassa-style education is no different from having no access to education at all. It restricts our access to modern knowledge, to science, to computers, and to the world. How can it ever compensate for normal schooling? It cannot. Through this education, they will teach us how to silently accept the oppressed life they impose on us.

In this context, "they" refers to the Taliban or any religious leaders that want to imposing this type of education. As previously stated, the participants recognized that such a system seeks to limit their intellectual development and, in return, suppress their ability to pursue broader opportunities and autonomy.

> [U]nlike women in the past, we now have access to literacy. Many of us learn to read and write at home, often taught by women in our families. However, in today's education, it is essential to focus on a broader range of subjects and modern knowledge in order to be part of the global community. This cannot be achieved through traditional madrassa-style education alone (Zara 4).

> [E]nglish and computer skills are crucial subjects essential for navigating the contemporary world. Regrettably, these subjects are frequently excluded from madrassa-style education. The knowledge acquired through madrassas can often be replicated at home, emphasizing that this form of education does not provide the comprehensive understanding necessary in today's society. Consequently, madrassa education fails to equip students with the vital skills needed for success in the current global landscape (Shahr 3).

The discussions brought to light a widespread frustration with the current educational landscape and the potential consequences of reintroducing *madrassa-style* education. Participants voiced concerns about the restrictive nature of such a system, emphasizing its potential to perpetuate gender inequality and limit women's access to essential knowledge and opportunities. This collective frustration underscored the urgent need for a more inclusive and progressive approach to education that genuinely empowers women and advances their rights within Afghan society.

In this way, participants' concerns regarding the promotion of an exclusive educational model that not only discourages modern education but also confines girls to traditional roles as mothers and wives is relevant. This narrow view of women's societal roles undermines their potential contributions to both education and professional fields, perpetuating cycles of inequality and obstructing progress in women's rights in Afghanistan, as highlighted by Girowal (2024). One of the older participants noted that:

> [I]am genuinely concerned about how we can prevent our children from embracing this mindset. It poses a significant danger to our generation and the future. Once such beliefs become deeply entrenched in society, reversing them becomes incredibly difficult. I am certain that it would take many generations to bring about improvement in this regard (Bari 1).

Some participants even urged me to reach out to the international community to amplify their voices and convey their concerns effectively:

> [C]an't you, Maliha jan, ask the international community to regard this issue as a concern that impacts not just us, but the region and the world as a whole? The implications of these educational policies extend beyond our immediate community, affecting stability and progress throughout the region and beyond. It is vital for the international community to recognize the interconnectedness of these challenges and take action that reflects their global responsibility (Zara 3).[38]

This frustration reflects a broader issue within Afghan society, where *madrassa education* is seen not only as an inadequate replacement for formal schooling but also as a tool for reinforcing the oppressive structures that many women are striving to overcome.

As all the participants are well-educated, politically astute, and keenly aware of how Islamic thought is being politicized, they are resolute in their determination to prevent this from shaping the mindset of the next generation. They expressed a profound awareness of the ramifications of radical Islamic ideologies and voiced significant concern about the future of their children and their country. They are

[38] They inquired about my role as a research fellow at the Raoul Wallenberg Institute (RWI), where I support the UNSR mandate on human rights in Afghanistan. Despite my efforts to clarify the limitations of my role in this capacity, their questions persisted.

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apprehensive that if their children's minds are influenced by these radical thoughts, it will not only impact their community, but also have far-reaching consequences for their region and the world. They spoke earnestly and urgently, emphasizing the perilous consequences of such indoctrination. The participants strongly urged me to amplify their voices and draw attention to global human rights organizations, particularly those operating in the region, to halt the spread of this harmful ideology that could result in widespread brainwashing.

To sum up: the perspectives of the participants are in harmony with those of the United Nations Special Rapporteur (UNSR), who emphasizes the detrimental impact of *madrassa-style* education on generational progress and human rights. The UNSR asserts that education is a fundamental right and advocates for collective efforts to advance modern education in Afghanistan. This initiative seeks to alleviate regional instability and uphold global human rights standards (Bennett, 2024a).

Another significant issue in the educational sector, particularly concerning female teachers who are participants in this research, is the decline in their wages. This matter is critical, as it not only impacts the financial stability of these educators but also has broader implications for the quality and sustainability of education for girls. In the following section, I will thoroughly explore this topic, integrating the perspectives of the participants to offer a well-rounded understanding of how wage reductions affect female teachers and the education landscape as a whole.

5.3.4. Taliban Wage Reductions for Female Teachers Cause Concern Among Women

Throughout the process of editing my data collection, I consistently sought feedback from the participants. Their perspectives play a crucial role in this research, offering valuable insights into their experiences and challenges. Including their viewpoints is not merely a procedural formality, but a fundamental aspect of accurately representing and understanding their realities and survival strategies. Their contributions are essential for maintaining the integrity and comprehensiveness of the study, reflecting the true nature of their lived experiences.

When I first reached out to participants in March 2024, rumors were circulating about potential salary reductions. Despite regular communication, participants expressed optimism that these reductions would be prevented through international intervention. However, by August, it became clear that salaries for female teachers instructing grades beyond six had indeed been reduced.

In reality, after the Taliban's resurgence in August 2021, there was a need to reopen girls' schools in Afghanistan. The academic year usually starts on March 21 in the country. In March 2022, the Taliban announced that girls up to grade six would have to wait to return to school until the necessary

preparations were made according to their strict interpretation of Islamic law. They made assurances that schools would eventually reopen and that teachers would continue to receive their salaries during this period. However, the Taliban not only continued to impose oppressive measures rooted in misogyny against women, but they also reduced the salaries of these female teachers for grades up to six. As of now, there are still no indications of the reopening of girls' schools.

The Taliban's ongoing systematic oppression of women highlights their deeply entrenched misogynistic stance. In March 2024, I first learned about plans to reduce women's salaries, which was officially confirmed by June 2024. I found this information on Twitter under the title “Lack of Clarification on Taliban Supreme Leader's Order Leads to Suspension of Female Staff Salaries” (AfghanAnalyst, 2024). The report stated that women were informed their monthly salaries would be reduced to 5,000 Afghanis starting in June 2024. However, the implementation of this decision has been postponed, leaving many female teachers in a state of uncertainty.

According to a writer on X (formerly Twitter), the Taliban's Minister of Education has suspended salary payments for all female staff in the education sector. This suspension will continue until the Supreme Leader clarifies whether the salary reduction applies only to women banned from working or to all female employees. This decision came in response to protests by female staff in Kabul hospitals, who expressed outrage over their salaries being slashed to 5,000 Afghanis per month. The timeline for when this measure will be enforced remains unclear (AfghanAnalyst, 2024).

The writer continues by noting that this suspension, coupled with the lack of clarity surrounding the Taliban's policies, highlights the precarious and worsening situation for women in Afghanistan. It further exacerbates their marginalization and economic disenfranchisement under the oppressive regime, underscoring the Taliban's sustained effort to dismantle women's rights and livelihoods (AfghanAnalyst, 2024).

Upon being contacted by a participant reporting a reduction in their salary, I took it upon myself to verify if others were similarly affected. It is truly disheartening; these women were already facing significant economic hardships while caring for children, ill family members, and elderly relatives who are unable to work and lack a pension. Many families also include individuals with disabilities, compounding their struggles. Furthermore, the psychological issues within these households remain unaddressed due to the dire economic circumstances, leaving them without access to necessary treatment.

> [T]he Taliban has drastically reduced the salaries of female teachers to just 5,000 Afghanis. During the salary distribution process, teachers are required to recite specific verses from the Quran. Those who are unable to do so from memory are marked as absent and subsequently do not receive their salary … [T]hey (the Taliban) contends that if teachers cannot recite Quranic verses or answer religious questions, it indicates a lack of essential knowledge of the Quran.

> While they do not regard illiteracy as a significant concern, they view the inability to recite the Quran from memory, despite being literate, as a serious issue, leading to punitive measures against the teachers (Bari 1).

This situation was echoed by other participants, who expressed concern about how to manage their lives in light of such significant economic reductions:

> [T]he Taliban's policies appear to disregard the fundamental needs and challenges faced by families in these circumstances. The absence of alternative opportunities or support mechanisms leaves us in an untenable position. The severe reduction in financial resources, coupled with restrictive social policies, places an enormous burden on us, making it increasingly difficult to meet basic needs and provide for our children (Najla 2).

It is a dire situation for women who are living with children and no male presence in their homes:

> [T]his situation is critical. Some single mothers with multiple children are experiencing extreme deprivation and struggling to survive. Their voices are not being heard, and there is a lack of justice. Please help raise awareness for their concerns, Maliha jan (Bari 3).

The shift in the educational system towards a *madrassa-style* approach and the closure of girls' schools beyond grade 6 constitutes a violation of individuals' rights to modern education. This situation has been further exacerbated by the reduction of women's salaries. Such actions by the Taliban must be held accountable, as emphasized by many participants in this research.

Madrassa-style education is ill-suited for contemporary society and does not effectively address today's educational needs, which are markedly different from those of a thousand years ago. A thriving society requires access to modern education, which can harmoniously coexist with Islamic principles. Islamic feminists such as Tohidi and Badran critique the Taliban's policies through the lenses of ijtihad (independent reasoning) and fiqh (Islamic jurisprudence). They assert that the Taliban's interpretation of Islamic teachings distorts the foundational principles of fiqh, which emphasize justice, equality, and the pursuit of knowledge for both men and women. These distortions not only hinder societal progress but also reinforce gender inequality, undermining the potential for women to make meaningful contributions to their communities (Tohidi, 2003; Badran, 2006).

The reduction of female teachers' salaries and the enforcement of punitive measures for not memorizing Quranic verses by the Taliban misapply ijtihad in a way that exacerbates women's socio-economic hardships, particularly for widows and single mothers. This not only misinterprets Islamic law but also undermines core values of social justice, compassion, and dignity embedded in Islam (Tohidi, 2003; Badran, 2006).

Using the lens of Saba Mahmood's feminist analysis, we can explore the experiences of female teachers under Taliban rule, highlighting the tensions between agency, religious practices, and state power over

women's lives. Mahmood challenges the idea that empowerment always involves resistance, suggesting that women can exercise agency through participation in religious and cultural norms (Mahmood, 2005b).

The Taliban's requirement for female teachers to recite Quranic verses reflects a state-imposed form of religious devotion that restricts women's agency. Mahmood would emphasize that the frustrations and pleas for help from the women reflect a different form of agency, showing they are not passive victims but active in asserting their voices within restrictive conditions. Thereby, Mahmood's feminist perspective uncovers the complexities of these women's experiences, where agency is constrained by religious and patriarchal structures, yet they still assert their needs and desires in a broader struggle for dignity and justice (Mahmood, 2005b).

They are profoundly oppressed due to the de facto authorities' failure to support efforts aimed at improving their quality of life through systemic reforms. Instead, the actions of these authorities have further restricted their opportunities, worsening their circumstances and effectively marginalizing them from society. Consequently, they are experiencing significant dissatisfaction and uncertainty about their future.

During our discussion, the participants urgently conveyed that their current circumstances are unbearable. They implored me to engage the international community for meaningful action. While female markets have been established in many major cities where only women can operate, regions like Faryab and Jowzjan lack such opportunities. The participants specifically requested that INGOs consider setting up markets in Maimana and Sheberghan. As it is well-known[39] in the region and even in the whole country that Uzbek women possess exceptional skills in creating beautiful handicrafts, including intricate embroidery, woven carpets, and a variety of artisanal products. Establishing dedicated markets for these goods would not only enhance their economic independence but also allow them to share their cultural heritage with a wider audience. Such initiatives could significantly improve their livelihoods and contribute to their overall wellbeing, underscoring the urgent need for international support and intervention.

[39] Uzbek women are known for their skills, which make significant contributions to the cultural and economic fabric of society. They are known for their strong work ethic and exceptional craftsmanship, effectively utilizing their time in daily activities and engaging in entrepreneurial ventures at home. In order to showcase their skills, I will include examples of their handcrafted work in the appendix, as shared by the participants. This addition will provide tangible representations of the exceptional craftsmanship that Uzbek women contribute to their communities. By displaying these handmade items, we can emphasize their cultural significance and economic potential, highlighting the urgent need for support and recognition from the international community. Additionally, recognizing their skills fosters a sense of pride and solidarity within the community, emphasizing the importance of preserving their cultural heritage. In this way they also promote economic development. Supporting and enhancing the visibility of Uzbek women's talents has the potential to strengthen inter-ethnic relationships and encourage collaboration, ultimately leading to greater social cohesion and empowerment across the region.

As stated before, widowed teachers have expressed significant frustration and distress about their precarious situations, feeling trapped with no viable options for supporting their children. With only 5,000 Afghanis to rely on, they face insurmountable challenges in providing for their families. This financial strain affects their ability to meet basic needs and contributes to a sense of hopelessness as they grapple with the realities of their circumstances in a context that offers limited economic opportunities. The emotional and psychological toll of their situation underscores the urgent need for targeted support and intervention to assist these vulnerable individuals in overcoming the hardships they face.

> [T]he current policies enforced by the Taliban have had a profound and detrimental impact on our lives. According to their directives, we are prohibited from leaving our homes without a mahram, severely limiting our mobility and access to essential services. Furthermore, the recent reduction in our salaries to 5,000 Afghanis exacerbates our already precarious situation. This drastic cut undermines our ability to support our families, particularly when we are expected to manage with minimal financial resources while caring for children and without the support of a male guardian (Zara 3).

Such assertions were echoed by most of the participants.

> [W]hat does the international community say about the situation where a woman is required to stay at home, "Maliha," and is still experiencing a salary reduction? … [W]hat can single mothers with many children do in this context to support their families? (Jam 1).

Addressing this question from my participants was challenging, as I did not have a clear response and lacked the authority to provide one. Their experiences of hardship deeply resonate with me, and while I acknowledged their concerns in a supportive manner, I had to explain that I could not offer a definitive answer. However, I assured them that the individuals I work with in the Afghanistan program at RWI are genuinely concerned about the situation of women in Afghanistan.

> [I]n light of these dire conditions, it is imperative that our plight is communicated to the international community. Maliha, we urgently need your assistance in amplifying our voices on a global stage. The current situation is untenable, and without external intervention, our ability to sustain ourselves and our children is gravely compromised. We face overwhelming difficulties, and it is crucial that our struggles are acknowledged and addressed by the international community (Masouda 1).

The Taliban not only infringes on women's rights but also significantly undermines the opportunities that women have diligently pursued. Judith Butler's concept of performativity provides valuable insight into the experiences shared by participants in this research, highlighting how Taliban policies reinforce rigid gender norms and restrict women's agency. According to Butler, gender is constructed through repeated actions and social norms; the Taliban's mandates—such as requiring women to stay at home without a male guardian and slashing their salaries—perpetuate the subordination of women within Afghan society. These policies not only regulate behavior but also actively shape the very essence of womanhood under Taliban rule. The enforced dependence on male guardians and financial deprivation

illustrate how these norms establish a rigid gender hierarchy. Moreover, the psychology of power is intricately connected to these performative acts; the Taliban's strict enforcement of gender roles utilizes psychological mechanisms to instill fear and dependence among women (Butler, 1997b, 1999).

Participants' calls for international attention emphasize the performative nature of these restrictions and advocate for resistance against such oppressive definitions of womanhood. This resistance champions women's rights to mobility, dignity, and economic participation, effectively challenging the narratives imposed by the Taliban and revealing the potential for subverting entrenched power structures.

In summary, despite being barred from teaching and facing salary cuts, women refuse to be silenced. Instead, they actively resist and seek intervention from the international community through various means. Educating girls in clandestine classes stands as a powerful act of resistance, showcasing their agency within the confined spaces permitted by authoritarian regimes, as Mahmood highlights (Mahmood, 2005b). These women effectively utilize the limited opportunities available to them to advocate for education and challenge oppression, embodying what can be referred to as a "silenced voice" of defiance.

In the next segment, I will explore the pride expressed by Uzbek women as they celebrate their ethnic and cultural heritage.

5.3.5. Cultural Variations in Uzbek Families

In this section, I aim to explore the unique aspects of Uzbek cultural heritage that have positioned the Uzbek community as pioneers in advancing women's education compared to other ethnic groups in the region. Historically, Uzbek society has placed a strong emphasis on education, particularly for women, which is deeply rooted in their cultural, religious, and social practices. Unlike other groups, many privileged Uzbek families prioritized reading and writing, even in the absence of formal schools. Educated mothers from these families often had access to home libraries, enabling them to enhance their knowledge—a practice that is particularly commendable.

> [I]n their castle, our grandfathers maintained an extensive library filled with valuable and well-regarded books. Bibi Mariam’s mother, who educated her daughter, had a deep love for reading and regularly engaged with these texts. She had an exceptional memory for poetry and proverbs, often quoting notable figures in conversation. This habit clearly demonstrated the impact of the intellectual environment in which she was raised (Homayon Surkhabi).

This tradition had a profound impact on those around them, particularly within the closely-knit ethnic community, where people interacted closely and learned from each other. Its influence extended to the

late 19th century when Bibi Mariam was very young, around the 1890s, serving as an inspiration for others in the community to follow similar steps and promote the well-being of their own families and children.

The community's progressive approach to women's education reflects its cultural values, which prioritize knowledge and learning as vital for personal and communal development. The early inclusion of women in the educational sector within Uzbek society not only elevated their status, but also served as a model for other ethnic groups. By challenging more conservative norms, it demonstrated the transformative potential of education. Examining these cultural differences reveals the leading role of the Uzbek community in promoting gender equality through education.

When Bibi Mariam and her daughter-in-law returned to Faryab to establish a girls' school, they faced significant challenges. However, by leveraging their respected status within the community, they were able to open the school in their private home. As mentioned in the first section, this initiative not only provided educational opportunities for girls but also encouraged others to support and normalize girls' schooling in the region. Their actions were bold and impactful, showcasing a strong commitment to advancing female education in a context where such efforts were particularly difficult. This pioneering endeavor not only set a precedent for future educational initiatives but also contributed to changing societal attitudes toward women's education.

> [B]ibi Mariam and her daughter-in-law were esteemed figures in their community, recognized as trailblazers for girls' education in Maimana. Their decision to establish a girls' school was groundbreaking, defying the prevailing norms that limited educational opportunities for women. I recall how challenging and perilous it was for them to take such a courageous stand, as advocating for girls' education involved considerable risks. Their determination in the face of adversity not only laid the groundwork for future educational initiatives but also inspired others to champion the cause of women's education, despite the societal and cultural challenges they faced (Sara Surkhabi).

This initiative opened the door for others to follow suit, as many of her students later took similar steps in promoting education. One notable example is Zulaikha Wahidi, a former student who has since become the first midwife in Fariab. She reflects on her experiences and the impact of Bibi Mariam's pioneering efforts, emphasizing the importance of education in her journey and the subsequent empowerment of women in her community.

> [W]hen she established a girls' school in her home, it was met with widespread appreciation, gaining the trust of the community. As a result, more families felt comfortable sending their daughters to attend classes, marking a significant first step toward fostering agency for both the educator and the students. This initiative not only advanced educational opportunities for girls but also represented a crucial move toward empowering women in the community (Aysha jan).

It is worth noting that during that time, the concept of gender equality was not recognized. However, the values instilled within these households, which prioritized the education of both boys and girls and encouraged the pursuit of knowledge, indicate a significant shift in attitudes towards gender roles. This shift occurred more seamlessly in environments where misogynistic views against females were less prevalent. This is further evidenced by Bibi Mariam's experience when she traveled to Kabul and was invited to teach the royal family's women. Her position as an educator for the royal family underscores how, as an educated woman from an Uzbek royal lineage, she was ahead of her time. Her mother, also educated and well-versed in the knowledge of that era, laid the foundation for this progress.

> [I]n our cultural tradition, it is customary to pursue supplementary work beyond our formal employment. At home, we consistently engage in activities such as embroidery, sewing, and weaving. These practices not only help to maintain financial stability by generating additional income but also ensure that our free time is spent productively. By partaking in these traditional crafts, we uphold our cultural heritage and contribute to our household economy. This dual benefit of cultural preservation and economic support underscores the significance of these activities in our daily lives (Zara 4).

It is notable that when Bibi Mariam was teaching the royal families' females, Amir Amanullah Khan and Queen Suraya were struggling to promote women's rights in Afghanistan. They opened the first female educational institution. It was during this time that Queen Suraya, who had a Pashtun father (Mahmood Tarzi) and had been educated outside the country, became the first female minister of education (Heath and Zahedi, 2011; Education History, 2016; Yaqubi and Mehrnoosh, 2023). My argument is not to undervalue the Pashtuns or other ethnic groups' contributions in this regard. If this opportunity had not been given by the royal family to Bibi Mariam, the progress may not have been possible. My argument is here to bring acknowledgement to reduce tension between different ethnic groups, especially when it is not necessary.

If Bibi Mariam made such a substantial contribution, it should have been duly acknowledged and incorporated into academic discussions. It would be fitting to have at least one school named in her honor, recognizing the challenges faced as an Uzbek woman in a deeply conservative religious society like Afghanistan.

All the participants took pride in their extracurricular activities outside of their formal jobs. Being a teacher or pursuing work outside the home is one thing, but engaging in activities at home during leisure time is uncommon among many other ethnic groups.

> [U]zbeks and Turkmens share similar lifestyles, utilizing their free time to bolster their family's economic well-being, which is commendable. Instead of idling away our time, it's more beneficial to channel our energy into contributing to our economy and overall welfare (Zara 1).

Uzbek women are making noteworthy advancements in promoting female education while remaining devoted to preserving their cultural pride. They adeptly balance the pursuit of modern knowledge with the safeguarding of their historical legacy and traditional craftsmanship. This dual commitment exemplifies a performative embodiment of agency, as articulated by Judith Butler. By continually fulfilling their roles as educators and cultural preservers, they challenge the limitations placed upon them, asserting both their identity and autonomy (Butler, 1999).

In conclusion, Uzbek women illustrate that cultural pride and the pursuit of female education can coexist harmoniously. Their efforts demonstrate that through these performative acts, they resist marginalization and ensure that both their legacy and traditions endure alongside their quest for modern empowerment.

In the next section, I will discuss the promising shift in societal support for women's education, as reflected in the participants' responses.

5.2.6 A Promising Shift in Societal Support for Women's Education

In this section, I will discuss the significant shift in societal attitudes that occurred after 2001. Following the establishment of the new government, women and girls gained access to various educational opportunities, marking a pivotal moment in which longstanding barriers to women's education began to break down. They were no longer confined to traditional roles, but instead, were encouraged to pursue education and careers in diverse fields. This change not only empowered women, but also fostered a broader cultural acceptance of their abilities and contributions to society. The increasing access to education for women revealed the crucial role played by support from families and communities in sustaining this progress, signifying a promising transformation in societal values.

> [I] have two friends whose husbands were illiterate at the time of their marriages. Despite this, these women were exceptionally talented. In our Uzbek culture, marriage often takes place when it is deemed the right time, regardless of educational background. Nevertheless, both women received significant support from their husbands, enabling them to continue their education while raising children. As a result, they both became doctors and are now practicing in their field. This level of support is quite rare and represents a significant shift in societal attitudes, reflecting a growing belief in the capabilities of women and slowly gaining more acceptance (Bari 1).

> [E]ducation is crucial for addressing all other issues, and as women, we are strongly dedicated to empowering through education. It is the cornerstone for realizing and understanding our rights (Najla 5).

> [I]t is evident that in the 20 years leading up to the Taliban's return, many young people, both women and men, had the opportunity to learn English and acquire computer skills. This education significantly strengthened our resistance and resilience against the Taliban's rule … [W]hen we compare the period of Taliban control from 1996 to 2001 with the current situation after their resurgence in 2021, a noticeable difference becomes apparent. During their first rule, the Taliban imposed brutal punishments such as stoning, lashing, and other forms of barbaric treatment. However, these practices have been subtly reduced this time, largely due to the power of knowledge, which has facilitated our connection to the broader world (Jam 4)

The contrast between my experiences in Afghanistan about three decades ago and the present day is remarkable. This transformation is visible not only in societal structures but also in the aspirations and perceptions of individuals. One of the most encouraging aspects of my discussions with participants is their genuine enthusiasm when sharing the positive changes they have witnessed. Even amidst a conflict-ridden environment, their voices frequently convey hope and optimism, reflecting a profound and inspiring sense of progress. This emerging pride and resilience indicate that, despite ongoing challenges, Afghanistan is undergoing changes that foster hope for the future.

> [M]aliha, do you remember how, in our time, families often encouraged their daughters to become teachers? Teaching was considered an ideal profession for women, as it required fewer working hours and allowed them to balance their professional responsibilities with household duties. However, this perception has now shifted significantly … [T]oday, families aspire for their daughters to pursue careers in law, computer science, advocacy, and various other professional fields. This change reflects a broader transformation in societal attitudes—families no longer see women's roles as limited to certain professions but instead recognize their capabilities and potential across diverse fields … [T]he evolving aspirations for women's careers signify a growing acknowledgment of their agency and contributions beyond traditional roles (Najla 3)

All the participants from my generation consistently shared similar sentiments. They expressed a sense of happiness and gratitude for the increasing acceptance of women's education and professional advancement. In contrast, younger generations perceive this shift as the standard rather than an extraordinary transformation. This divergence in perspectives highlights a generational change in attitudes toward education. Older generations often reflect on their experiences of limited opportunities and societal resistance, while younger individuals engage in discussions with a sense of expectation and entitlement regarding education and career advancement. This evolving mindset underscores the profound societal transformation that has taken place over the years.

> [M]y mother and even my aunt often shared stories of their struggles to pursue careers as doctors or lawyers—professions that were largely unacceptable to their families at the time. They aspired to roles beyond teaching, yet were frequently denied the opportunity (Jami 1).

Many young participants echoed this sentiment when asked about their different perceptions. One young girl told me her thoughts:

> [T]he restrictions on women's education were shaped by a range of complex factors. In our province, there were no faculties or universities offering degrees in medicine, law, or engineering, limiting academic opportunities for women. Additionally, the journey to Mazar-e-Sharif was long and hazardous, with rough and unsafe roads that heightened parental concerns about security and the perceived vulnerability of their daughters. Consequently, many families hesitated to allow their daughters to pursue higher education in distant cities … [H]owever, many of these barriers have now diminished. Today, our province offers a broader range of university faculties with diverse academic programs, significantly expanding educational opportunities … [I]nfrastructure has also improved, enabling safer and more efficient travel to Mazar-e-Sharif within a few hours. Furthermore, career prospects have widened, and salaries in various fields have increased, making professional pathways more viable and financially sustainable for women. These advancements signal broader societal progress and a more supportive environment for women's ambitions and participation in higher education and the workforce (Shah 1).

All these perspectives are expressed within the framework of a reality—whether imagined in the past or envisioned for the future—where the Taliban is no longer in power.

Some older participants vividly recall instances in which the Mujahideen killed young girls merely for seeking an education. These traumatic events profoundly influenced societal attitudes toward women's education, contributing to a persistent fear and resistance regarding girls' access to schooling. The violence and intimidation not only instilled fear in families but also reinforced restrictive norms that hindered educational opportunities for women for decades.

> [M]aliha, you may remember that some of our teachers and friends lost their lives simply for being students or educators. During that time, the Taliban, as we understand them today, had not yet existed. It was the Mujahideen who perpetrated these acts of terror. Ironically, many of those who once opposed education have since transformed into political figures, now presenting themselves as more moderate and even supportive of women's education (Jam 1)

This sentiment was echoed by at least some participants:

> [I] find it deeply unsettling how political shifts can alter narratives over time. While some former Mujahideen now champion women's education, their past actions have left a lasting mark on societal attitudes and institutional progress. My wariness of politics stems from its historical tendency to obstruct human development—particularly for women. The political landscape, often defined by power struggles, has repeatedly undermined peace, security, and broader societal progress, perpetuating cycles of instability that disproportionately impact women (Zara 1).

The evolving attitudes toward women's education represent a significant transformation that has unfolded over time. The growing acknowledgment of the importance of female education, along with the increasing advocacy for diverse career opportunities for women, are both remarkable and encouraging trends. While numerous factors have influenced this shift, one of the most significant has

been the transformation of the Mujahideen.[40] After assuming power, they publicly endorsed female education, lending it a form of religious legitimacy that facilitated broader acceptance. This shift has profoundly impacted public perceptions, gradually reshaping societal attitudes toward women's educational and professional ambitions.

Consequently, there is growing resistance to the Taliban's opposition to female education, especially when it is presented as an Islamic mandate. The previously dominant narrative that restricted women's education under the pretext of religious justification appears to be losing its power. The notion that Islam inherently opposes female education is now being critically evaluated and, in many instances, outright rejected.

A particularly encouraging sentiment expressed unanimously by my participants encapsulates this shift: "We now strongly believe that female education is not a threat to our Islamic identity." This rising awareness and changing societal perspective mark a significant step towards expanding educational opportunities for women in Afghanistan.

As previously mentioned, the evolving views on women's education indicate a hopeful societal transformation. The younger generation remains optimistic, convinced that the downfall of the Taliban will usher in a brighter future. Meanwhile, the older generation actively nurtures this optimism, fostering a sense of solidarity that markedly contrasts with the past.

In earlier times, although young girls aspired to progress, older generations, constrained by societal and political limitations, often discouraged them from aiming for goals beyond what seemed attainable. Today, despite the Taliban's ban on female education and professional growth, the older generation reassures young girls that this oppression is temporary. They firmly believe that the Taliban will eventually be overthrown and place their hopes in international intervention. One participant eloquently shared this sentiment:

> I truly believe the Taliban will soon be removed because their tyrannical rule cannot endure indefinitely. Even if we lose more years in the process, our lives are at stake, and as girls, we suffer the most. Nonetheless, I remain hopeful that when change occurs, we will swiftly recover

[40] During the conflict between the Mujahideen and the communist-led government in Afghanistan between 1978 and 1992, the Mujahideen actively targeted educated girls and instilled fear in schools and universities. They carried out violent attacks, including throwing acid on girls' faces and other forms of terrorism, to prevent them from attending school. Additionally, they burned numerous schools as a tactic to intimidate communities and suppress educational opportunities for women. To justify these actions, they portrayed schools as non-Islamic institutions that violated Islamic laws, reinforcing the perception that formal education, particularly for women, was incompatible with religious principles. As a result, societal attitudes during this period were largely unsupportive of women's education, further entrenching barriers to their academic and professional advancement.

> our losses through hard work to achieve our goals. Hope and perseverance can make anything possible … [M]y proficiency in English and computer skills connects me to the world, allowing me to engage in online learning—at least until access is disrupted (Jam 2).

This resilience, optimism, and determination to progress are truly inspiring and uplifting. Access to the internet and digital skills have profoundly shaped people's attitudes, particularly among the younger generation, who are increasingly connected and informed about diverse ways of life. This connectivity fuels their desire to engage with the global community. For instance, proficiency in English has enabled them to tap into a vast array of information and interact with the world beyond their immediate surroundings.

A striking example of this shift occurred when I met an 18-year-old girl in a remote village in Faryab. She passionately aspired to establish an English school in her community, and her commitment was unwavering. Determined to make her dream a reality, she reached out to her cousin, who had previously held a high-ranking position before fleeing to Iran following the Taliban's return to power. He expressed his willingness to support her in opening the school when the circumstances allowed.

This village boasts a legacy of educational resilience. It was once home to the first female teacher who courageously opened a girls' school in her private home—a story that deeply inspired this young girl and reinforced her dedication to education. Just as human progress is often propelled by those who inspire one another, this village stands as a testament to the enduring spirit of change, human rights, and the pursuit of a better life.

This noteworthy shift in societal attitudes can be examined through Saba Mahmood's theory of agency, which challenges Western interpretations of empowerment that focus exclusively on resistance to societal norms. Mahmood underscores that agency involves not only opposition but also the ability to navigate and thrive within one's cultural and social context. The narratives shared by participants illustrate how women, despite facing systemic obstacles, actively pursue education and professional careers, drawing upon their awareness, determination, and strategic adaptability. Their quest for knowledge reflects a profound understanding of their societal position and the global landscape, showcasing a form of agency that is both contextually grounded and forward-looking.

For instance, the women who became doctors despite growing up in restrictive environments exemplify how individuals can advance within existing cultural frameworks. Their success in education and careers, notwithstanding societal limitations, reveals a nuanced form of agency—one that does not necessarily reject traditional norms outright but seeks to transform them from within. Furthermore, the emphasis on education as a means of empowerment highlights their capacity to engage with and reshape

their social realities, reinforcing the notion that agency can be expressed in various ways beyond direct resistance (Mahmood, 2005b).

In conclusion, these narratives illustrate how education empowers women and transforms societal norms in both subtle and profound ways. By challenging and gradually redefining traditional structures, Afghan women assert their agency in a manner consistent with Mahmood's theory. This points to a hopeful trajectory towards gender equity and cultural advancement.

The next section will explore the mental health of Uzbek women in Afghanistan following the Taliban's return, based on participants' responses.

5.2.7 The Mental Health of Uzbek Women in Afghanistan After the Taliban's Return

It is crucial to thoroughly explore and present the perspectives of my participants on their mental well-being. This is essential to ensure that their viewpoints are not ignored or overlooked in discussions about their current psychological state. The mental health of Afghan women has unquestionably been adversely affected by the repressive measures enforced by the Taliban. The significant restrictions and extensive deprivation they have faced since the Taliban's return to power have taken a heavy toll. Failing to capture and document their personal accounts and experiences would be a disservice, silencing their voices and dismissing their concerns. Hence, I am including this section to ensure that their voices are heard.

Participants shared various accounts of their daily lives, and I have included those that represent the perspectives most frequently narrated and emphasized by them.

> [I] am currently teaching students up to grade 6 and also conducting private classes at home. Additionally, I am a teacher and a board member of an organization called "Conflict Resolution and Student Support Network" one organization that we have in the school. I often notice distress on the faces of girls, which indicates their psychological state. I make an effort to approach them and engage in conversations to better understand their concerns. I have many stories about these experiences that I can share with you (Zara2).

Zara 2 recounted a story from her school, illustrating how girls experience the hardships of daily life as underage individuals and must endure these challenges.

> [I] have a student in Grade 5 who recently appeared very upset, with a pale complexion, which made me concerned that she might be experiencing depression. I initially noticed her distress and called her out of the classroom to speak with her privately, but she was reluctant to talk. Later, when she was absent from school, I spoke with her classmates, who informed me that

> her parents had arranged her marriage due to their financial difficulties. They mentioned that she has lost interest in life and often cries when she is alone … [T]he next time I spoke with her, I gently acknowledged that I was aware of her marriage and invited her to share any problems she might be facing at home, offering my support. However, she simply shook her head, denied any issues, and wiped away her tears. Through further inquiry, I learned that she had been forced into marriage with a 15-year-old boy, while she herself is likely only 12 or 13 years old (Zara 2).

Another participant shared a similar story about the experiences of young girls:

> [I] noticed that a young girl was often absent from class. Upon speaking with her classmates, I discovered that she is the daughter of a single mother who works as a domestic laborer, undertaking tasks such as washing clothes, baking bread, and cleaning houses. While her mother is away working, this 12-year-old girl bears the responsibility of looking after her younger siblings. Regrettably, such circumstances are far too prevalent (Zara 3).

Another shared their creative endeavors:

> [I] have authored three books, one of which is titled "How Marginalized Ethnic Groups Experience Daily Life in School" … [W]hile these works are not yet published, I aspire to share them when the time is right to amplify my voice. Alongside my books, I also indulge in the art of poetry, particularly "ghazals[41]", through which I articulate my pain and tears. This creative pursuit brings me great solace (Jam 2).

These narratives illustrate Judith Butler's theory of performativity, which suggests that both actions and social roles are influenced by and reinforce existing power structures. The situations faced by the young girl, as described by the participants, exemplify how societal norms are performatively reiterated, confining women to caregiving roles and perpetuating cycles of gendered labor and marginalization. Conversely, the participants' experiences of hardship, coupled with their creative expressions through literature and poetry, serve as acts of resistance that reshape narratives and challenge the marginalization of both ethnic and gender identities. These examples underscore the dual role of performativity in sustaining and simultaneously disrupting power dynamics within oppressive structures.

Some participants, or their daughters, chose to pursue midwifery, as it was one of the few educational options available to them. For example, a 40-year-old teacher faced considerable challenges when she had to return to her studies to adapt to the limited opportunities. Many participants actively encouraged their daughters to study midwifery, recognizing it as one of the few viable paths for women. However, the recent Taliban ban on midwifery education has left many feeling deeply distraught (Guilbert, 2024). One participant, overwhelmed with emotion, called me in tears to share her despair. I have encountered similar accounts on various platforms, confirming this troubling reality. Furthermore, members of our

[41] Ghazal refers a poetic form that originated in Arabic poetry and is prevalent in Persian and Urdu literature. It is composed of rhymed couplets and a refrain, frequently exploring themes of love, loss, and longing. While each couplet can stand independently, they are typically linked by a central theme or emotion. Ghazals are known for their intricate wordplay and vivid imagery, effectively conveying profound emotional and philosophical ideas.

organization, which supports midwifery education, have reported numerous distressing stories from those affected by the ban.

In conclusion, the participants shared numerous distressing stories that are often deeply interconnected. While only a selection of these accounts is included here, they represent the broader challenges faced by Uzbek women in Afghanistan. The return of the Taliban has had a profound impact on the mental health of Uzbek women, as evidenced by their testimonies. These narratives illuminate the psychological toll of repression, forced marriages, and overwhelming responsibilities, highlighting the urgent need to document and address their experiences.

The following section will address participants' concerns about the erosion of trust within the Uzbek community in Faryab.

5.3.7. Erosion of Trust and Cultivation of Fear by the Taliban:

The trust of Uzbek women has been significantly undermined with respect to their own community and their interactions with the international community. This sense of disillusionment mirrors the loss of trust experienced during the era of Soviet influence. This widespread lack of trust now extends beyond their immediate surroundings, affecting their confidence in family structures, societal systems, and even global actors. Overall, a pervasive sense of stress and distrust not only impacts the local system but also the broader social fabric, leaving women feeling isolated and uncertain about the future.

One of the key findings from my interviews with participants is the breakdown of trust within the Uzbek community in Afghanistan under Taliban rule. Unlike during the first Taliban era, when women could conduct covert classes without fear of surveillance by their own community, the current environment is characterized by pervasive fear. Despite restrictions on girls' school enrollment, women previously (1996–2001) had relatively secure opportunities to establish hidden classes without the risk of being monitored by community members or even students. However, the situation has changed drastically. Women now live in constant fear of surveillance, severely limiting their ability to enroll additional students. This fear directly impedes girls' access to education beyond grade six, posing a threat to the community's future as fewer young girls receive an education. Community members felt comfortable

discussing these issues with me because I had lived outside the country for an extended period and was not perceived as a threat or someone likely to spy on them, as noted in my methodology.

During interviews with teachers in Uzbek communities in other regions, I observed a different situation. In places like Jawzjan, a certain level of trust has enabled local religious leaders and neighborhood representatives to collaborate in conducting secret classes. While these classes are officially centered on religious teachings, they subtly incorporate scientific subjects. This trust is crucial, but in Maimana, it has been severely eroded. The fear of being discovered is overwhelming, with teaching girls beyond grade six now considered a crime by the de facto authorities. Participants expressed intense fear and emphasized the need for extreme caution in handling their information. The atmosphere of fear in Maimana starkly contrasts with the situation during the first Taliban era, when such fear was less pervasive. The difference in fear levels between Maimana and other areas, as I discovered, is rooted in the hierarchical power structure behind the organization of these classes. The 'wakil guzars' (neighborhood representatives/local community leaders) ensure the classes' continuation by offering benefits to the local mosque's religious leader (Mullah Imam), who in turn gains his own advantages. This involvement of both the religious leaders and neighborhood representative creates a sense of security and allows the existence of these classes, which appear to focus solely on religious instruction while also teaching scientific subjects.

The participants expressed deep concern and feelings of depression regarding the situation:

> [M]aliha jan, we are afraid of being spied on. There are now over 30 women in the prison in our city, something that was unheard of before. Everyone fears imprisonment, especially as a woman, which is why it's safer to be cautious and avoid holding these classes. I've seen many women imprisoned under false accusations, while their husbands divorce them to escape the dishonor. It's becoming increasingly difficult to preserve one's dignity in this environment (Bari 1).

Another participant also expressed her concern:

> [P]lease Maliha, be cautious not to mention that I am holding this class to others living here. You never know if someone might be linked to them, and even seemingly innocuous conversations can lead to unintended consequences (Zara 2).

By 'them,' she is referring to the Taliban. Speaking in a lowered voice, she indicated her fear and concern about being overheard. This subtle gesture emphasized the anxiety that pervades her environment, where even the act of naming those in power can evoke feelings of vulnerability and danger.

> [C]urrently, there are over 30 women imprisoned in Taliban jails in Fariab, marking an unprecedented number of women in custody. These women face an exceedingly perilous situation, many detained without any evidence and often based solely on suspicion or accusations of espionage … [O]nce incarcerated, they endure profound stigma; families frequently sever ties, and husbands often choose to divorce them. The looming threat of sexual

> assault by Taliban guards adds to their trauma … [A] friend of mine was falsely accused and imprisoned; as a result, her husband divorced her, and her in-laws took custody of her one-year-old child. This reflects a heartbreaking reality for women in these circumstances (Bari 7).

The atmosphere of horror and stigma in Taliban jails reflects a broader sentiment in Afghanistan. Numerous news articles confirm the alarming conditions, contradicting the Taliban's claims of morality and strict adherence to Islam. One such report by Joya et al. documents the abuses within these facilities. The Taliban's oppressive actions have eroded trust among Uzbek women, who fear surveillance and reprisals.

A recent video depicting the gang-rape and torture of a female Afghan human rights activist in a Taliban jail serves as the first direct evidence of sexual violence against detained women in Afghanistan. The activist was reportedly threatened with the footage's release to silence her opposition to the regime, underscoring the increasing reports of sexual violence inflicted on women and girls in Taliban custody (Joya et al., 2024).

Through Judith Butler's concept of performativity, this act illustrates the Taliban's reinforcement of patriarchal power. Butler's theory suggests that violence is utilized to silence dissent and uphold gender hierarchies. Furthermore, from an Islamic feminist perspective, these actions sharply contradict the principles of justice and dignity inherent in Islam, revealing the manipulation of religious narratives to sustain systemic oppression. Together, these frameworks highlight the urgent need to confront and dismantle the structures that facilitate such abuses (Butler, 1997b; Tohidi, 2003).

In this way, the erosion of trust within this Uzbek community significantly hinders young girls' access to education beyond grade six, which could have profound long-term consequences for the community. A generation of uneducated mothers may emerge, unable to adequately support their children's education or pursue higher education opportunities themselves, even in a post-Taliban era or under future conditions that allow for educational advancement. Thus, the Taliban's impact may continue to exert a detrimental influence on the community, even after their rule ends, by limiting the potential for future educational attainment and socioeconomic development.

Most of my participants expressed feelings of eroded trust, and attributed this to the dire economic conditions, where the Taliban incentivize people to spy on their own friends and family. When I asked about this, one participant responded:

> [Y]es, we understand that trust is a precious thing, but it has become like a toxic drug that is consuming many of our young people, much like an addiction we know is harmful yet cannot escape. In this desperate situation, some feel they have no choice but to spy on their own community to feed their families. This betrayal is like a poison that corrodes not only our dignity but the very essence of our communal bonds. It doesn't just erode trust—it weakens our intellectual and moral foundations. If we continue down this path, we stand to lose so much more than just trust; we risk the destruction of our entire social fabric (Najla 2).

Another commented that:

> [I]t is a deep shame to sit in prison, and doing so would put my family's unity at great risk. The thought of being imprisoned is unbearable, as it could lead to my family's separation and bring dishonor to our name. You must always be cautious that your actions do not undermine your dignity or tarnish your family's honor. I carry the responsibility of ensuring the well-being of my family, not only as a woman but as one who is respected in the community. My actions reflect not just on me, but on my family, and I cannot allow their reputation to be damaged. Preserving our honor and maintaining our dignity are of the utmost importance in a society where the smallest misstep can have devastating consequences (Najla 1).

In examining the situation of Afghan women in Taliban-controlled prisons, Islamic feminism serves as a valuable framework for critiquing the manipulation of cultural and religious discourses that justify the imprisonment, stigmatization, and abuse of women. The concepts of 'honor' and 'family dignity' reflect deeply rooted patriarchal values, which Islamic feminists contend are not inherent to Islam but are instead culturally imposed. These values disproportionately burden women by making them responsible for upholding family honor while simultaneously denying them justice and agency (Tohidi, 2003; Kissane, 2012).

Furthermore, Islamic feminism asserts that genuine adherence to Islamic principles necessitates the protection of dignity, justice, and human rights for all individuals, regardless of gender. The systemic abuses occurring in Taliban prisons—such as the lack of evidence for detentions, the social stigma attached to incarceration, and the looming threat of sexual violence—are in direct opposition to these principles. By applying this theoretical lens, we can uncover how patriarchal interpretations of Islam are used to oppress women, while feminist interpretations call for a reevaluation of these norms to foster justice and equality (Tohidi, 2003).

In conclusion, the plight of women in Taliban-controlled prisons underscores the exploitation of patriarchal norms under the guise of Islam, resulting in systemic injustice and the erosion of trust within Uzbek communities. Islamic feminism challenges these practices, emphasizing justice, dignity, and the restoration of trust in alignment with authentic Islamic values.

The next section will explore Uzbek women's contributions to education and the advancement of economic, social, and cultural (ESC) rights in Afghanistan.

5.3.7. Uzbek women's contributions to education and advancement of ESC rights in Afghanistan.

Uzbek women have played a pivotal role in advancing female education in Afghanistan and have made substantial contributions to promoting women's Economic, Social, and Cultural (ESC) rights. Despite facing numerous challenges, these women have worked tirelessly to expand educational opportunities for girls, recognizing the transformative impact of education as both a fundamental human right and a driving force for broader social and economic progress. It is no exaggeration to say that through their dedication, Uzbek women have empowered future generations, fostered greater cultural participation, and enhanced overall living conditions. Their historic contributions have been crucial in advancing the ongoing fight for gender equality and realizing ESC rights in Afghan society.
The invaluable contributions of individuals such as Bibi Mariam and Mamlakat Banu (Shahrani, 2005 & Amini, 2008), along with many others they inspired, are truly remarkable. They stood alongside Queen Soraya and her circle in the fight for gender equality. Their efforts mobilized women from remote provinces and engaged Uzbeks in the broader struggle for women's rights, encouraging various ethnic groups and inspiring traditionally conservative communities, including the Turkmens, to participate (Education History, 2016). Their leadership in uniting those from diverse ethnic backgrounds underscores the importance of collective action in transforming societal perceptions of women's roles. By promoting widespread participation, they demonstrated the essential role of women as half of the population, paving the way for increased involvement, even among the most conservative groups, in the ongoing pursuit of gender equality.

The involvement of Uzbek women in society, along with the long-overdue recognition of their historically overlooked struggles, benefits not only Afghanistan but also serves as a compelling example for the broader Muslim world. It further challenges the radical interpretations of Islam imposed by the Taliban which restrict women’s rights in society. In today’s interconnected global landscape, this progress holds significance for all. It is vital to support and acknowledge the efforts of the courageous individuals driving change in conservative societies like Afghanistan. By honoring their commitment, we not only recognize their sacrifices but also inspire future generations to pursue even bolder steps toward greater equality and societal transformation.

Lamb (2024) posits that we must critically analyze narratives—particularly those shaped by elites—that portray Afghan women as lacking agency. Although women endure significant repression under the Taliban, simplistic depictions tend to overlook the complexities of their experiences. It is crucial to acknowledge their resistance and resilience in these oppressive circumstances (Lamb, 2024). Women possess a considerable capacity to contribute to Afghanistan's sustainable development and peace-building initiatives. Excluding them from these efforts makes achieving such goals increasingly difficult.

The global imperative for the inclusion of women in the development process is more pressing than ever. According to Goetz et al. (2024), despite a range of international frameworks—including the (CSW) Commission on the Status of Women, the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, as well as advancements through the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)—women around the world continue to face significant disparities. Addressing these systemic inequalities is essential to fully realizing the objectives of both the MDGs and SDGs. There is no credible justification for inaction; decisive measures are necessary to eradicate gender-based discrimination (Goetz et al., 2024) .

According to Misik (2024), contemporary society increasingly perceives both right-wing and left-wing radicalism as global threats to social stability (Misik, 2024). This view is particularly evident in Afghanistan, as demonstrated over the past few decades. In light of this, it is vital for liberal actors to promote solidarity and strive for a harmonious society for all. Over the last fifty years, Afghanistan has encountered significant challenges, making the cultivation of solidarity essential for steering society toward a sustainable and peaceful future. This objective cannot be realized through the influence of radical ideologies from either side (Heath and Zahedi, 2011).

Chalabi emphasizes the significant decline in women's rights and freedoms that occurred after the Taliban takeover in August 2021. This situation illustrates how decades of progress in gender equality can be swiftly undone, exacerbating the challenges to the country's development and diminishing women's presence in public life. This literature serves as a critical reminder that Afghanistan's struggles represent a pressing global concern (Chalabi, 2023).

In the same vein, the article “Women in Afghanistan: Developments over the Last 20 Years and the Return of the Taliban” examines how the return of the Taliban has dramatically reversed advancements in women's development. Afghanistan consistently ranks among the lowest countries in terms of gender equality, with entrenched customs, violence, and discriminatory tribal practices severely obstructing women's progress. Under Taliban rule, restrictions on education, political participation, and employment have intensified, undoing years of hard-won advancements. Furthermore, the healthcare system and public services face potential decline, jeopardizing previous gains. The article underscores the urgent need for humanitarian assistance and long-term strategies to promote gender equality. This includes ensuring the meaningful involvement of Afghan women in discussions with the Taliban and strengthening civil society initiatives to uphold their rights. Education remains a vital focus, as empowering women through education can counteract harmful societal norms and foster sustainable progress (Albrecht, Rude and Stitteneder, 2022).

Issues related to women's rights can hinder a country's development, and such regression also has wider consequences for the global community. The radicalization of Islamic ideology is not just a local issue;

it presents challenges that can affect international relations, social stability, and economic progress around the world. Moreover, the international community must recognize the remarkable resilience of Afghan women. In the face of extreme violence and oppression, Afghan women exhibit not just victimhood but also incredible strength and perseverance. Their courage and steadfast commitment to asserting their rights amid adversity warrant both recognition and support.

UN Secretary-General António Guterres has consistently highlighted the need for practical and global action from member states to effectively combat gender inequality. He points to a wealth of evidence demonstrating that gender equality fosters social cohesion, economic growth, and overall human well-being. Guterres emphasizes that dedicated and effective collaboration is vital for achieving these goals. Afghanistan stands as a critical example where such action is urgently required, given the country's unique challenges related to women's rights and empowerment (Goetz et al., 2024).

A recent survey by Najam, et al. (2024) underscores the significant repercussions of ongoing restrictions on women's education and employment in Afghanistan. Their September 2024 report estimates that these bans lead to an annual economic loss exceeding 1.4 billion USD, which accounts for 2% of Afghanistan's Gross National Income (GNI). Such constraints not only impede social and economic progress but also undermine years of development efforts aimed at enhancing opportunities for women (Najam, Patrinos and Bentaouet K., 2024).

The contributions of women should be recognized and acknowledged, as valuing and appreciating their efforts is essential for human development. Acknowledging women's achievements not only honors their work but also serves as motivation for continued progress and further advancements. Thereby, the enduring struggle of Afghan women, particularly Uzbek women, can be understood in the context of their historical endeavors to advance women's rights.

The contributions of women to society are closely tied to their educational attainment and the roles they can take on, whether in high- or low-skill jobs. In Afghanistan, women's education has played a vital role in the country's socio-economic and socio-cultural development. As noted by Najam et al. (2024), the enactment of compulsory education laws resulted in a 13% increase in wages for women entering the labor force, surpassing the global average increase of 10%. This statistic emphasizes that education not only enhances women's earning potential but also empowers them to make significant contributions to Afghanistan's economy (Najam, Patrinos and Bentaouet K., 2024).

I believe that educated women tend to be more productive, and in the context of Afghanistan, their qualifications can have an even greater impact due to the unique challenges faced by the population. The ongoing conflict has led to many children growing up without fathers, placing the responsibility of family support on single mothers. Moreover, women encounter societal pressures that can impede their

progress. A powerful means of alleviating this burden is through economic and educational empowerment. Therefore, promoting female education is crucial for both individual empowerment and the broader advancement of society.

In conclusion, the resistance to women's education is not as formidable as it once was, it remains perilous, especially under the Taliban regime. Currently many Afghan women, representing various ethnic groups, continue to educate young girls clandestinely within their homes. However, Uzbek women and other ethnic minorities are particularly vulnerable in this regard. Due to their distinct ethnic backgrounds, they are frequently seen as possessing less honor or dignity compared to Pashtuns, particularly by conservative Pashtuns and the Taliban. This perception, although seldom openly voiced, endures in conservative circles, intensifying the struggle for education among these groups under the Taliban regime.

The following section will outline the participants' perspectives on the international community, which they regard as their only hope for effecting change. They underscore the potential for the international community to apply pressure on the Taliban, particularly in light of the serious violations of human rights and women's rights occurring under the current de facto authorities.

5.3.8. Afghan Women's Perspectives on International Community Support

In this research on female education in Afghanistan, with a particular focus on Uzbek women, it is crucial to explore topics that directly affect the country's unique socio-political context, impacting women in general and Uzbek women in particular. Understanding Afghanistan's modern[42] educational landscape requires an examination of the profound influence of the international community, which has shaped various facets of Afghan society, especially the education sector.

The extensive violations of women's rights, especially the right to education, by the de facto authorities have led to growing disillusionment with the role and response of the international community. Initially, there was hope that international actors, particularly the U.S. and its allies who ousted the Taliban regime in 2001, would not tolerate such violations. However, over time, that hope has significantly eroded.

[42] By referring to "modern education," I am specifically addressing the formal education for women introduced as part of the reforms initiated by Amir Amanullah Khan. After assuming power in 1919, he implemented substantial changes, including the establishment of the first female school in 1921. This marked a pivotal moment in the history of women's education in Afghanistan (Heath and Zahedi, 2011).

In this section, I aim to investigate whether any remnants of hope still exist or if they have been entirely extinguished, particularly as the Taliban has now maintained control for over three years, continuing its consistent human rights violations. Many participants in my study have voiced disappointment and doubt regarding the efficacy of the international community's involvement, emphasizing the critical need to incorporate this perspective into the research. In a period of intensified oppression, where the de facto authorities persistently violate fundamental rights, it is imperative to amplify the voices of those who feel increasingly marginalized and silenced.

The participants, who are well-educated, politically aware, and informed about both national and international politics, expressed varied views on the international community's role. Their responses can be classified into three main categories:

1. The positive insights: Those who continue to believe in the international community's potential to intervene and effect meaningful change.

2. The disillusioned: Those who have become entirely skeptical of the international community's willingness or ability to take decisive action.

3. The cautious: Those who hold a more nuanced view, believing that the international community will only intervene when it aligns with their interests, particularly when such interests are threatened by the resurgence of what they term 'terrorism.'

This categorization offers a more comprehensive understanding of the diverse perspectives among participants and highlights the complex relationship between Afghanistan's internal struggles and the external influences shaping its future.

One of the youngest participants, like many others of her generation, is highly ambitious, deeply aware of her circumstances in Afghanistan, and politically astute. Her views resonate with the majority of participants, reflecting a shared sentiment that warrants serious attention:

> [I]t seems as though the international community, particularly those with power, might have had their own reasons for allowing the Taliban to return. Although I do not fully understand the complexities of international politics, I cannot help but suspect that those in power orchestrate events to serve their own agendas. It is disheartening to realize that the values they claim to uphold are often compromised when it is convenient for them (Jam 2).

One another young participant commented:

> [H]owever, I have grown increasingly disillusioned with the idea that the international community truly cares about the universal values of human rights. It seems that their actions are driven more by self-interest than by any genuine commitment to these principles. When it serves their interests, they act decisively, as they did when the Taliban were ousted in a single day after 9/11. But now, as our basic rights are being violated, it feels as though the U.S. and its allies have handed us over to the Taliban. If the U.S. and NATO had remained until our security forces were fully capable of defending our country, this tragedy might have been averted (Shahr 1).

One of the older participants, politically astute and knowledgeable about women's progress in Afghan history, states:

> The events of 2001, including the attack on our country, the establishment of a republic, and the resurgence of the Taliban, are part of a historical pattern of external manipulation and control. This cycle of conflict resembles the interference that has been present since the reign of Amir Amanullah Khan. I believe that these events are driven by international political agendas that have hindered our nation's natural progression. Without such external interference, our society could have developed and progressed in a more stable and independent manner. Consequently, I am skeptical of the intentions behind these actions (Zara).

As per the participants, there is a widespread belief that foreign actors will not intervene to improve the lives of Afghans. This sentiment, particularly pronounced among women, marks a shift from the period before the Taliban's second takeover. Previously, there was greater confidence in the international community's commitment to upholding democracy and human rights, according to some participants.

> Maliha, it's important to understand that relying on other countries can pose challenges as their actions are often driven by their own interests. Therefore, it's crucial for us to build the capacity to be self-sustaining. The ongoing challenges we face, despite numerous regime changes in our country, underscore the limitations of depending on external support. My concern extends to our children, who have endured the same recurring patterns throughout history. We must take proactive steps to bring about change rather than perpetuating the status quo … I always think, that education emerges as a crucial tool in overcoming these challenges. By deepening our understanding of international relations and the motivations guiding other countries' actions, we can better equip ourselves to ensure our security and progress (Jam 6).

Her views on the importance of not relying on others, particularly foreigners—who are often perceived as invaders—as well as on education as a vital tool for empowering people, especially women, are echoed by many participants.

The sentiment is aligned with Spivak's argument in her influential article "Can the Subaltern Speak?" The prevalent disillusionment regarding the international community's commitment to human rights can be critically examined through Spivak's analysis of epistemic violence and imperialism. Spivak suggests that interventions often mask self-interest under paternalistic narratives that disregard the agency of local populations. The participants argue that the actions of the U.S. and NATO appear to be motivated by self-interest rather than a genuine commitment to human rights, a perspective that aligns with Spivak's critique of how imperialism shapes contemporary relationships between the Global North and South. They assert that this neglect is evident in the withdrawal of support for Afghan security forces, reflecting the failure of Western powers to take responsibility for the repercussions of their interventions (Spivak, 1988).

As stated before, this sentiment is often observed among older participants, who tend to be skeptical about the likelihood of receiving a helpful response from the international community. One participant from this group remarked:

> The leaders of the Taliban are foreigners, not our people. They come from places like Pakistan and elsewhere. I genuinely believe they are not Afghans, even though many Afghan Pashtuns hold leadership roles. The control still belongs to outsiders because no true Afghan would be so harsh toward their own country or destroy its fundamental values, such as education. We are not people of the past. We understand how politics work, especially when it comes to politicizing education, particularly women's education (Bara 1).

This sentiment is echoed by another participant, who expressed belief in the ability of Afghans to reflect on their mistakes, learn from them, and develop solutions independently:

> [I] believe that the international community, especially the United States and its allies, often takes a competitive and opportunistic approach towards our country. It is important for us to focus on developing our own strategies for survival and rebuilding rather than depending on external powers … [T]hroughout history, relying on these external actors has proven to be a mistake. Our challenges stem not from a lack of intelligence or diligence, but rather from our vulnerability to external manipulations. It is crucial for us to address this vulnerability, reject detrimental influences, and work towards protecting our children from the negative effects of these geopolitical dynamics (Bara2).

As stated earlier, she, along with some other participants, expressed significant frustration regarding the international community's attitude. However, there are also young women who firmly believe that the international community has the potential to effect change and that such change will occur in due course. When I inquired about when they anticipated this change might happen, one of my participants responded:

> [I]'m not certain, but I strongly believe that the recent developments, such as the rise of the Taliban, are part of a broader political strategy that could ultimately lead to positive changes for society as a whole. Consider how the extremism introduced by the Taliban has provoked reactions from Muslims worldwide. This suggests that better days may be on the horizon. I want to remain I positive about all the changes that are yet to come (Shahr 1)

This perspective was unique, but the hope for better days is shared by others, especially the younger generation.

Moreover, Spivak's concept of "subjugated knowledge" highlights the systematic marginalization of voices from populations such as the Afghan people, particularly when geopolitical interests shift. The erosion of rights in Afghanistan following foreign intervention underscores a disregard for local knowledge and governance structures, leading to a regression to oppressive regimes. Ultimately, this disillusionment can be understood as a manifestation of the systemic issues Spivak elucidates, emphasizing that superficial commitments to human rights often result in decisions that marginalize the realities and voices of those in affected regions (Spivak, 1988).

Despite some reservations, it is evident that numerous stakeholders are wholeheartedly dedicated to advocating for women's rights and human rights, with a particular focus on the right to education, which

they consider a pivotal issue for their cause. Richard Bennett, the United Nations Special Rapporteur (UNSR),[43] consistently emphasizes the crucial role these stakeholders play in addressing challenges posed by other countries and the international community. He frequently stresses, using international platforms, that the right to education is fundamental and essential for the realization of other rights. Bennett has consistently conveyed to the international community that many Afghans he has encountered in various parts of the world and in Afghanistan since the Taliban took over have expressed a deep sense of betrayal.[44] He has emphasized the urgency of addressing these concerns and the need for actionable recommendations in his reports to ensure an effective response.

Bennett's steadfast dedication to upholding human rights and documenting Taliban violations resulted in significant backlash, leading to his ban from returning to Afghanistan. This highlights the limited opportunities available to individuals in this context, further exacerbating their challenges. According to Barr, the Associate Director at Human Rights Watch, the Taliban has also banned the UN's Special Rapporteur on human rights from entering the country. This is part of a broader pattern of repression, including restrictions on girls' education, limitations on women's employment, and the enforcement of strict dress codes. These measures have further marginalized Afghan women and girls from public life, raising serious concerns within the international community. Several UN entities have expressed alarm, stressing that "the rights of women and girls in Afghanistan are being systematically dismantled," underscoring the urgent need for continued advocacy and intervention. (France 24, 2024; TV, 2024).

The international community also has consistently expressed concerns about human rights violations in Afghanistan, which have been further exacerbated by the recent introduction of new Islamic laws by the Taliban. These laws have raised serious concerns among international human rights organizations involved in Afghanistan. Despite ongoing efforts, these actions have had limited impact, as demonstrated by the Taliban's ban on the UN Special Rapporteur from entering the country. Participants in the discussion expressed frustration, questioning the lack of visible progress and wondering what, if any, meaningful changes have been achieved (HRW, 2022; Afg.International, 2024; Bennett, 2024a; France 24, 2024; Human Rights Law, 2024).

One participant poignantly remarked:

> [I]t's always empty words when the world claims to support us, but in reality, they don't. I am truly disappointed that even our people sit and watch instead of taking action (Shah 3).

[43] At a research conference in Turkey on June 5–6, 2024, Bennett emphasized key points on human rights, women's rights, and the international community's role in supporting them.
[44] At the conferences (06/06/2024) the author attended, Bennett highlighted the sense of betrayal felt by Afghans.

She adds:

> [I] mean those of you living outside the country. Please don't rely on empty rhetoric. Unite and take concrete steps to liberate us. Don't let the world watch; please, do something (Shah 3).

Her words reflect the frustration and urgent call for solidarity from Afghan women who are seeking real change rather than passive sympathy.

While this development could signify a significant advancement for Afghan women, concerns persist regarding the lengthy processes of international legal institutions. Some have expressed frustration about the slow pace of international initiatives in advocating for Afghan women. This highlights the pressing need for prompt and effective action, as Afghan women continue to endure severe oppression under Taliban rule. One of my participants expressed her frustration, noting that the ICC and ICJ often take too long to produce results:

> [I]t's a really slow process when international initiatives promise to stand up for us. Our hope is fading now (18-year-old girl).

This sentiment underscores the urgent need for swift and effective action, as Afghan women continue to face severe oppression under Taliban rule.

During the U.N. General Assembly, renowned Hollywood actor Meryl Streep expressed that women and girls in Afghanistan experience less freedom than to a female cat, squirrel, or bird. She called upon the international community to take action and end the ongoing repression of Afghan women and girls by the Taliban (BBC Persian, 2024a; Nichols, 2024).

The perception that Western countries, particularly the U.S., acted as protectors of Afghan women has often been met with skepticism, reminiscent of Spevak's theory about white men protecting black women from black men. Many Afghans, including the women themselves, regarded this 'protection' narrative with caution, viewing it as an affront to their dignity and autonomy. Participants in my research expressed doubts about framing foreign intervention as protective; however, they did seek international support, provided it was respectful of Afghan values and cultural norms.

Afghan women have long been their own advocates, and much of the progress made can be attributed to their efforts. The international community, despite its good intentions, has had limited capacity to effect change without the active participation and leadership of Afghan women. The inability to effectively safeguard women's rights under the second Taliban regime highlights the shortcomings of previous interventions. Nonetheless, the empowerment of Afghan women has always remained within their control. They have persistently worked to expand their roles from the domestic sphere into broader societal contexts, operating within the framework of Islamic law. As education becomes more

widespread and accessible, women are increasingly challenging values that were previously enforced through religious interpretations. Education equips them to understand and assert their rights, illustrating that substantive change originates from within their own society, supported by international allies in ways that respect Afghan sovereignty and cultural integrity.

Bennett consistently emphasizes the importance of including women in peace process discussions and ensuring that their rights are taken into account in Afghan society. He warns that the cost of marginalizing women and allowing the Taliban's radical ideology to persist extends beyond Afghanistan, impacting the region and the world. He has also expressed deep concern, calling for the international community to move beyond empty words and take collaborative, concrete action. He has been a strong critic using many platforms, repeatedly urging global solidarity to address these pressing issues (Bennett, 2024b). All these efforts led to his ban from entering Afghanistan in late August 2024, as he was accused of engaging in propaganda against the government.

In conclusion, the perspectives of Uzbek women regarding the acts of the international community in restoring their rights vary considerably. The younger generation tends to remain hopeful about potential interventions, while older women express significant skepticism, rooted in past unfulfilled promises. These viewpoints can be broadly classified into three categories: the optimistic, who believe in the possibility of meaningful international action; the disillusioned, who have lost faith in external intervention; and the cautious, who view such actions as motivated primarily by geopolitical interests, particularly concerns about terrorism.

The upcoming section will examine the efforts of the international community to promote human rights in Afghanistan, while addressing the concerns raised by participants. It will provide a succinct overview of past actions and future initiatives, including our committee’s role in RWI's Afghanistan program under the UNSR mandate, along with insights from pertinent readings and conferences. This approach seeks to foster a balanced discussion that honors participants' perspectives while delivering an informed analysis of ongoing efforts. Although generational lines do not strictly define these perspectives, a consistent reluctance to fully trust the international community remains prevalent. Nevertheless, many Afghan women continue to nurture hope and display remarkable resilience in their ongoing struggle for rights, irrespective of external support.

5.3.9. Ensuring Accountability in Human Rights Law: A Path to Protecting Women's Rights in Afghanistan

This section addresses my research participants who are questioning the international community's response and accountability concerning the Taliban's violations of international values. The participants are particularly concerned about the potential consequences the Taliban may face if they persist in these violations. In this section, I will provide a brief overview of the accountability process and outline the mechanisms for enforcing human rights. Additionally, I will discuss the actions that the International Court of Justice (ICJ) and other international bodies may take to address these violations.

This section examines accountability within international human rights law and treaties, focusing on violations of women's rights in Afghanistan. It highlights the need for technical support to reinforce justice and accountability. Additionally, it analyzes how treaties, particularly those safeguarding women's right to education, are designed to protect these rights and whether Taliban governance has undermined these obligations.

The right to education serves as a fundamental pillar of both the MDGs and SDGs. Within the MDGs, education is highlighted in Goal Two, which aimed to achieve universal primary education, ensuring that all children, regardless of gender, complete a full course of primary schooling by 2015. The SDGs further develop this theme in Goal 4, which emphasizes the importance of inclusive and equitable education. It also promote lifelong learning opportunities for everyone (Woodbridge, 2015; Goetz et al., 2024).

In light of the study's scope, the discussion will center on three key treaties: the (CEDAW) Covenant on Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, (ICCPR) Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and (ICESCR) Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights. These treaties cover women's rights, minority rights, and the right to education—domains that are central to this research.

Afghanistan has been a signatory party to international human rights law since 1993 and has ratified several crucial international human rights treaties. The CEDAW was ratified on March 5, 2003, and both the ICCPR and the ICESCR were ratified on January 24, 1993 (Sadat, 2004). These treaties have been enshrined in Afghanistan's legal framework, affirming the country's dedication to their implementation. This legal commitment must be upheld by any governing authority, regardless of the prevailing political circumstances. CEDAW encompasses various components, including the preamble, general recommendations, and optional protocol, all of which offer robust protections for gender equality. Article 10 asserts that both men and women should be regarded equally in terms of educational access, explicitly calling for the absence of discriminatory attitudes from the state. Article 14 advocates for equal opportunities for all women, while Article 15 ensures equal access to legal protections for all

individuals. Additionally, Article 16 reiterates the right to education and emphasizes the importance of equal access to educational training for family-related knowledge.

The policies enforced by the Taliban deny women essential educational opportunities, which not only undermines their rights but also adversely affects the educational opportunities by offering madrassa-style education. This situation constitutes a violation of the provisions established in CEDAW. Consequently, it is imperative for the international community to take action and hold the Taliban accountable for these infringements, a topic that will be addressed in further detail later in the next section (Human rights Law, 2024).

The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) encompasses provisions that protect civil and political rights, including the right to equality before the law. As a signatory to the ICCPR, Afghanistan is required to uphold the rights of women in general and particularly their right to recognition and equal participation in both public and professional spheres. The failure to acknowledge women's contributions to education highlights a broader issue of gender-based discrimination, which violates their civil and political rights under the ICCPR and contravenes Afghanistan's obligations under the treaty.

The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) safeguards rights related to economic, social, and cultural dimensions, including the right to education. It mandates that education be accessible, inclusive, and equitable for all individuals. As a signatory to the ICESCR, Afghanistan is obliged to uphold these principles (Human rights Law, 2024).

The ICCPR and ICESCR both emphasize the obligation of states to uphold citizens' rights. ICCPR Article 26 guarantees equality before the law, while ICESCR Article 13 secures the right to education, and Article 15 affirms the right to participate in cultural life. States must provide inclusive and equitable education while recognizing the contributions of those who advance these rights (Human rights Law, 2024).

Global advocacy efforts can pressure Afghanistan as a signatory party to fulfill their treaty obligations and implement necessary reforms that promote and protect women's contributions to education. Failure to do so, particularly in the case of Afghanistan under Taliban rule, raises the issue of accountability. These treaties not only mandate gender equality but also require states and institutions to actively promote and recognize women's contributions to society. Ensuring compliance with these obligations requires comprehensive reforms, advocacy efforts, and accountability mechanisms to hold institutions responsible for fulfilling these commitments. The international community plays a pivotal role in supporting these initiatives to guarantee adherence to treaty obligations. Various international entities, including the UN Special Rapporteur, UN Women, the EU Special Envoy on Afghanistan, UNICEF,

and other UN organizations have consistently address these issues (HRW, 2022; UNESCO, 2023; Human rights Law, 2024; Richard B., 2024; UN, 2024; UNAMA, 2024; UNHRC, 2024).
Currently, the UN is in the process of recognizing gender apartheid (UN, 2024). If this initiative becomes codified and formally recognized, it would represent a significant advancement for Afghan women and serve as an important international achievement applicable in various contexts around the world. Such recognition would honor the struggles of Afghan women and foster a sense of pride and empowerment within the community. Practical steps to implement these changes will be discussed in the following section.

The next section will briefly explore ongoing and planned efforts in this regard.

5.3.10. Global Efforts to Uphold Afghan Women's Rights

This section examines the international community's efforts to uphold human rights in Afghanistan, particularly Afghan women's right to education. Since 1996, the Taliban's policies have systematically excluded women from public life, citing a unique interpretation of Islam that starkly contrasts with broader Islamic perspectives. While their oppressive rule was temporarily ended in 2001 following the international community's intervention after the Al-Qaeda attacks, their return to power in 2021 marked the resurgence of similar actions. These policies have increasingly and systematically restricted women's rights, with escalating measures targeting education and participation in public life (Yaqubi and Mehrnoosh, 2023).

Numerous Islamic countries have denounced the Taliban's misogynistic policies and asserted that contemporary Islam advocates for female education. During a conference on girls' education in Mecca, representatives from various Islamic nations reaffirmed their commitment to this principle. They emphasized that there is no justification for using Islam as a pretext to deny Afghan girls their right to education. (CBBISTS, 2024).

Richard Bennett's (UNSR) recent report highlights institutionalized discrimination and exclusion of women and girls in Afghanistan, urging decisive action by the Human Rights Council. He advocates an 'all tools approach,' utilizing mechanisms like the ICC, ICJ, Universal Jurisdiction, and exploring the codification of “gender apartheid.” Bennett emphasizes the importance of the Women, Peace, and Security agenda and calls for Afghan civil society, particularly women, to be included in all

discussions, including an upcoming UN-hosted meeting in Doha, to address the country's human rights crisis (Richard B., 2024).

Many Afghan NGOs and individuals appreciate the UNSR and global efforts to address gender-based oppression by the Taliban, emphasizing that recent initiatives to classify such actions as additional crimes align with the international community's recognition of these acts as criminal. Female education, a fundamental right, must be prioritized to combat these injustices. However, despite these efforts, Afghan women continue to face increasing restrictions, with Afghanistan being the only country in the world where women are entirely barred from attending high school (Rawadari, 2024; WRN, 2024).

Goetz et al. (2024) stress the urgent need for global initiatives to promote gender equality and women's rights, particularly in countries like Afghanistan, where severe gender-based violations occur. Despite treaties like the Commission on the Status of Women, the Beijing Declaration, and the Sustainable Development Goals, Afghan women continue to face systemic discrimination. However, they demonstrate remarkable resilience and bravery. UN Secretary-General António Guterres emphasizes the importance of collaborative international action, noting that gender equality positively impacts social cohesion and economic development. Decisive measures are necessary to eliminate gender-based discrimination and uphold women's rights worldwide (Goetz et al., 2024).

Afghan women face severe restrictions, including bans on traveling alone, which confine them to their homes. Bennett warns that excluding women from discussions, such as those in Doha, could normalize their dehumanization, perpetuating mistreatment and increasing their vulnerability to radicalization, with security implications beyond Afghanistan (Bennett, 2024; 2024a). The UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) has extended Bennett's mandate as Special Rapporteur on human rights in Afghanistan for another year. On October 9, 2024, the Council adopted a resolution for him to prepare reports for its 58th and 59th sessions, focusing on the human rights situation, the Taliban's "commanding good and forbidding evil" policy, and the protection of Afghan women and girls from systemic discrimination (Etilaatroz, 2024; UNHRC, 2024).

In conclusion, despite international efforts and growing condemnation from Islamic nations and global organizations, Afghan women still face systemic discrimination and severe restrictions under the Taliban. Initiatives like the UNSR's 'all-tools approach' highlight the urgent need to prioritize women's rights and education. However, meaningful progress requires sustained international action and the inclusion of Afghan women in decision-making processes.

The next section will discuss advancements in human rights accountability regarding these issues.

5.3.11. Human Rights Accountability in Progress

As noted before, the participants have expressed their frustration with the prevailing rhetoric and have voiced a strong desire for meaningful international actions to support their cause. This section examines the measures taken by international actors to address human rights violations, particularly concerning women's rights in Afghanistan. Research, including Hudson's "What Sex Means for World Peace" (Hudson, 2012), illustrates the connection between the status of women and national security, health, and stability, emphasizing the critical need to include women in these discussions.

Since the Taliban regained power in 2021, the human rights situation in Afghanistan has significantly deteriorated, with women systematically excluded from public life. This exclusion undermines both the economy and social cohesion. Abbasi F., an Afghan human rights advocate, has called on the UN Human Rights Council to establish mechanisms for documenting abuses and promoting accountability, similar to efforts seen in other crises (HRW, 2024).

Human Rights Watch and several other organizations have strongly condemned the Taliban's restrictive laws, which significantly curtail women's freedoms concerning dress, movement, education, and employment, while also imposing severe penalties. Richard Bennett, the UN Special Rapporteur, has consistently reported on these violations, despite facing a ban from Afghanistan—a move denounced as disgraceful by human rights advocates. The efforts to document these abuses, led by Bennett and organizations such as Human Rights Watch, are crucial for ensuring accountability. Furthermore, calls from the EU and the Afghanistan Freedom Front emphasize the need for increased global attention to this ongoing crisis (HRW, 2022, 2024; France 24, 2024; Kawa, 2024).

The Raoul Wallenberg Institute (RWI) in Sweden is working with Afghan scholars to support the mandate of the UN Special Rapporteur through research and documentation, thereby enhancing international accountability efforts (RWI, 2024). In spite of global calls for action, Afghan women continue to face the denial of basic rights, prompting coalitions to exert pressure on the Taliban to adhere to human rights treaties (GFFO, 2024). The UN has announced its intention to recognize gender apartheid in Afghanistan (Afgh.Int., 2024), while Canada, Australia, Germany, and the Netherlands are pursuing action to bring the Taliban before the International Court of Justice (ICJ) for systemic violations of women's rights. This marks a significant step in addressing gender discrimination (BBCNews, 2024; Reid, 2024).

On October 8, 2024, Richard Bennett emphasized the critical need to hold the Taliban accountable for their systemic violations of women's rights through both legal and political avenues, including the

possibility of prosecution at the International Criminal Court (ICC) for crimes against humanity. He highlighted the necessity of sustained pressure and accountability, along with the important role of his mandate, UNAMA, and treaty bodies in addressing these violations. While acknowledging the slow pace of progress, Bennett underscored that these efforts and their documentation are essential (Londoño, 2024).

Gordon Brown, the UN Special Envoy for Global Education, described the restrictions placed on Afghan girls as a form of "gender apartheid" and called for global solidarity, particularly from Muslim-majority nations, to combat this repression. UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres backed a coalition of 26 countries advocating for the referral of the Taliban's policies to the ICC. These collective initiatives reflect the international community's commitment and the urgent need to address the declining state of women's rights in Afghanistan (BBC Persian, 2024b; Brown, 2024; CBBISTS, 2024).

The Raoul Wallenberg Institute (RWI) actively promotes human rights in Afghanistan through a range of initiatives. Notable effort involves organizing roundtable discussions with 40 experts under the Chatham House Rule, supported by Sida, to formulate strategies for accountability. Furthermore, RWI facilitates educational opportunities for Afghan female students in Indonesia and hosts events to raise awareness and advocate for women's rights. These collaborative initiatives aim to dismantle barriers to education and fundamental rights for Afghan women, thereby contributing to ongoing international accountability efforts (RWI, 2024).

As stated before, in September 2024, Australia, Canada, Germany, and the Netherlands initiated legal proceedings under Article 29 of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), calling on Afghanistan to end its systemic human rights violations against women and girls. This initiative, supported by nations such as Albania, Sweden, and Morocco, demonstrates an increasing global commitment to holding the Taliban accountable for their actions.

This case marks a preliminary step toward engaging the International Court of Justice (ICJ) and represents a significant effort to confront gender-based discrimination. It could position Afghanistan as the first country summoned for such violations. Should gender apartheid be formally recognized, the resilience of Afghan women will receive official acknowledgment, thereby strengthening global advocacy for their fundamental rights (GFFO, 2024; Ochab, 2024).

In conclusion, the international community's legal actions under CEDAW, coupled with efforts to codify gender apartheid, reflect an increasing global commitment to holding the Taliban accountable for the systemic violations faced by Afghan women and girls. These initiatives underscore the resilience of Afghan women and emphasize the necessity for ongoing global advocacy to safeguard their fundamental rights and dignity.

The upcoming section will present a detailed conclusion that encapsulates the key findings and critical issues examined throughout this research. It will consider the significant challenges and contributions identified, emphasizing their implications for the continuing discourse on human rights, women's education, and international accountability in Afghanistan.

1. Conclusion

This research has illuminated the historical and contemporary contributions of Uzbek women to the advancement of female education in Afghanistan, addressing the multifaceted challenges they face due to their intersectional identities of gender and ethnicity. These dual vulnerabilities—stemming from systemic patriarchal norms and ethnic marginalization—intensified the struggles of pioneering figures like Bibi Mariam, whose achievements remain largely unacknowledged in both scholarly discourse and societal narratives.

The **first sub-question** explored how the intersection of gender and ethnicity heightened the vulnerability of Uzbek women. Findings reveal that Uzbek women, such as Bibi Mariam, faced compounded marginalization in a society where power and recognition were monopolized by male-dominated and ethnically stratified structures. Despite their significant contributions to education, the absence of institutional recognition, such as naming educational institutions after figures like Bibi Mariam, reflects the enduring invisibility imposed by these systemic biases.

Addressing the **second sub-question**, the research examined how Bibi Mariam's position as the first female teacher and her connection to the royal family influenced Afghan women's experiences in education and human rights. Her work with both the royal family and ordinary women in Kabul and Faryab laid a foundational framework for female education in Afghanistan, especially in the northern region of the country. However, her achievements, including advocacy for educational equity, remain overshadowed by male counterparts such as her brother, whose name is associated with one of the prominent institutions in the country. This imbalance exemplifies the broader societal tendency to underplay women's roles in history. This reflects the intersectionality of gender identity and societal biases that perpetuate the underrepresentation of women's contributions.

In response to the **third sub-question**, the distinctiveness of Uzbek women as pioneers in advancing female education stems from their cultural emphasis on learning and their access to intellectual resources. Historical madrassa-style education, distinct from the Taliban's contemporary concept,

equipped Uzbek women from privileged families with both religious and contemporary knowledge, fostering a progressive role in education. Families like Bibi Mariam's, with access to extensive libraries, exemplify this tradition of intellectual engagement, which empowered Uzbek women to lead educational initiatives.

The **fourth and fifth sub-questions** focused on the recognition of Uzbek women's roles in academic and societal narratives and the reasons for their historical erasure. Despite their significant contributions, these women have been largely overlooked, reflecting the entrenched patriarchal structure of Afghan society which, as the findings show, continues currently; the Taliban have exacerbated this situation. The absence of these women from institutional and societal acknowledgment perpetuates their marginalization, reinforcing a historical and cultural erasure that has long deprived them of the recognition they deserve.

This study investigates the resilience displayed by Uzbek women in Afghanistan as they confront systemic oppression under the Taliban regime. Despite facing reduced salaries, eroded trust, and unpredictable policies, these women remain steadfast in their commitment to acquiring skills in science, technology, and English to empower themselves and future generations. The Taliban's exploitation of economic vulnerabilities has led to division within communities, forcing many to flee and placing immense psychological strain on female breadwinners who support their dependents with limited resources. These adversities deepen social and economic inequalities, further marginalizing women and obstructing Afghanistan's progress toward the Sustainable Development Goals in education, gender equality, and social cohesion.

Framed by the concepts of Islamic feminism and the theories of Judith Butler and Saba Mahmood, the research explores the intersectional struggles of Uzbek women shaped by their gender, ethnicity, and religion. Their persistent efforts challenge structural constraints and advocate for education and human rights, even when confronted with deeply entrenched societal norms.

International accountability mechanisms, including recent actions by countries such as the Netherlands, Australia, Germany, and Canada under the framework of CEDAW, offer a glimmer of hope. The potential codification of 'gender apartheid' could provide formal recognition of Afghan women's struggles, enhancing global advocacy for justice and equity. Participants in this study emphasized the importance of collective responsibility for education and gender equality, viewing these as moral imperatives for societal change. Despite the profound grief and frustration they experience, their resilience and aspirations for a better future remain evident.

The reflections of the participants highlight the significant challenges faced by Uzbek women under Taliban rule, including severe social and economic marginalization, increased vulnerability, and

systemic barriers to education. A primary concern is the security situation, which has been identified as the biggest obstacle to advancing women's education. Participants expressed strong opposition to madrassa-style education, fearing it could lead to indoctrination.

The troubling conditions in Faryab further exemplify these challenges, where more than 30 women are imprisoned without trial, enduring deplorable circumstances that underscore the systemic oppression they face. Despite these adversities, the participants' skills and advocacy efforts reveal their resilience and potential to contribute to gender equality. Their narratives illustrate how they navigate and challenge structural constraints, shape their identities, and pursue empowerment. This research aims to amplify their voices and shed light on the broader systemic injustices they endure.

In responding to my sub-questions, I identified and classified several additional themes that emerged from my participants' insights. Mothers, in particular, present themselves as complex figures; they can serve simultaneously as agents of patriarchy and as symbols of resistance against oppression, striving to secure better futures for their daughters. Moreover, they hold significant potential as facilitators of gender equality within their communities.

This study, as a feminist endeavor, aims to illuminate the nuanced roles of women, depicting them not as passive subjects constrained by structural limitations, but as active agents navigating cultural discourses. By adjusting and reshaping elements of these discourses, they construct self-identities that are articulated through their own narratives. It has been a profound privilege to bring these narratives to light, and I sincerely hope my participants can see themselves authentically reflected in this work. My deepest aspiration is that this research not only honors their stories but also contributes meaningfully to fulfilling their aspirations.

Having completed the initial phase of my research, which underscores the feelings of exclusion experienced by Uzbek women, I propose that the schools they founded—where they served as the first teachers—be named in their honor. While many schools in Afghanistan currently bear the names of women who have contributed to various causes, including those beyond the realm of female education, it is surprising that these Uzbek women have not received similar recognition. Despite their efforts to establish schools in highly conservative areas, often within their own homes, these institutions are still identified solely by the names of their respective districts.

I contend that this oversight should be rectified. When Afghanistan is able to establish a legitimate government in the future, it should formally honor these women by renaming the schools they created in their memory. Such an action would not only preserve their legacy but also ensure that their vital contributions to female education are rightfully celebrated. By recognizing their contributions, this study promotes a more inclusive understanding of Afghanistan's educational and cultural history. It

amplifies the voices of marginalized women while addressing critical barriers to progress, such as weakened family support and limited advocacy for girls' education.

Based on the data collected, several underexplored themes emerge as potential subjects for research:

The experiences of women with disabilities, particularly unmarried girls, remain largely unexamined, especially regarding the stigma they encounter. The daily challenges faced by elderly individuals in Afghanistan reveal significant gaps in social support, notably the absence of a pension system after a lifetime of work. The dynamics of ethnic harmony and the polarization of tensions among different groups warrant further investigation, as participants suggested that reducing political interference could encourage coexistence. Despite existing tensions, interethnic marriages and shared communities demonstrate a potential for harmony.

Furthermore, it is crucial to explore the struggles of unmarried girls with disabilities and the role of mothers in either supporting or hindering their educational ambitions. Efforts to promote female education in traditional Afghan society must begin within the family.

The next section will outline recommendations based on the outcomes of this research.

7. Recommendations

Based on the findings of this research, which support the mandate of the United Nations Special Rapporteur (UNSR), I will outline recommendations aimed at various stakeholders, including national and international non-governmental organizations (INGOs, NGOs), and policymakers, regarding the Taliban's oppressive policies.

It is essential to amplify the voices of participants, whose rights are often suppressed under the Taliban regime. The recommendations will emphasize the need for inclusive decision-making processes that reflect the aspirations of Afghan women, particularly those from minority groups like the Uzbek community. By enhancing awareness of the specific challenges faced by these women, we can inform more effective policy responses and foster accountability, ultimately reinforcing their claims to human rights and dignity.

A Dedicated Recommendation to Honoring Pioneers of Female Education in Afghanistan

A recommendation for the future legitimate government of Afghanistan is to honor the pioneering contributions of women to education by naming schools in their memory. For instance, the Masturat School in Kabul could be named after Bibi Mariam, and Lise Setara in Faryab could carry the name of Mamlakat Banu. Furthermore, Jamshidi High School should pay tribute to Bibi Zulaikha Wahidi, while Turpakhto High School could be named in honor of Banu Tajwar. Another school in Kabul or Faryab might recognize Suhaila Surkhabi, and Desaidan High School should be dedicated to Sara Surkhabi. This initiative would acknowledge their invaluable contributions to the advancement of female education in their respective regions and beyond.

7.1, Recommendations for the UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights in Afghanistan

If the UNSR has the opportunity, it is imperative to visit women's prisons in Faryab and Jawzjan to assess the conditions and ascertain the number of detainees who are being held without trial. It is essential to observe the living conditions and treatment within these facilities, as increased oversight from human rights organizations can foster greater accountability and lead to enhanced conditions. Given that Faryab and Jawzjan are remote regions, detainees in these areas face a heightened risk of mistreatment due to insufficient external monitoring, which may subject them to further repression.

It is vital to prioritize the documentation of individuals with disabilities, pensioners, and LGBTQ members within Afghan families, as these groups are deeply marginalized. Their needs have been overlooked by both society and the de facto authorities, leaving them without support. Many belong to families facing severe hardships, often with women as sole breadwinners struggling due to the Taliban's restrictive gender segregation policies. Amplifying the voices of these communities is essential for their inclusion in human rights advocacy and policy development.

It is vital to advocate for the recognition of gender apartheid under international law, to hold the Taliban accountable for systemic gender-based discrimination. This codification would establish a legal framework for addressing injustices and empower Afghan women, who are at the forefront of the struggle for equality and human rights. Their resilience in the face of adversity deserves global acknowledgment and support.

Push for an independent mechanism to document and monitor human rights abuses against minority Uzbek groups, particularly women and girls in Faryab and Jawzjan. This initiative will ensure systematic recording and addressing of violations, emphasizing intersectional identities, including ethnicity, gender, disability, and economic status. In regions like Faryab and Jawzjan, many individuals lack access to justice, healthcare, and economic support. Establishing a documentation entity in these remote areas is vital for providing a comprehensive overview that can support advocacy and legal efforts.

International Legal Action: further pressure the UN and member states to bring cases of gender- and ethnicity-based discrimination against the Taliban before the International Court of Justice (ICJ). This initiative will underscore the need for accountability in addressing systemic oppression, and mobilize support from UN member states to enhance diplomatic efforts and promote dialogue between the Taliban and the international community.

Work with Islamic scholars and leaders advocating for gender equality. This collaboration can leverage their influence to challenge the Taliban's interpretation of Sharia and strengthen arguments for women's rights within an Islamic framework. Additionally, incorporate the principles of the Charter of Building Bridges between Islamic Schools of Thought and Sects (CBBISTS) into your report to enhance its impact and legitimacy.

Advocate for tailored support programs focusing on mental health and trauma recovery for women educators affected by the intersection of gender and ethnic oppression in Taliban-controlled regions.

7.4. Recommendations for the Taliban

I recognize that the Taliban's policies are unlikely to prioritize recommendations from a human rights researcher. However, in solidarity with those affected and in alignment with my work, I have identified three urgent and critical issues. I hope that through enforcement and pressure from the international community, these concerns will receive the attention they deserve.

Address economic hardships to improve living conditions for families, particularly female-headed households. If Taliban policies restrict women's opportunities based on their interpretation of Islamic law, alternative measures must be introduced to bridge this gap and protect livelihoods. Social

protection programs for vulnerable groups, including widows and orphans, alongside vocational training, are essential to ensure sustainable livelihoods and economic resilience.

Gender-segregated classrooms could align with cultural and religious values while facilitating girls' education. The **Charter of Building Bridges between Islamic Schools of Thought and Sects (CBBISTS)** explicitly outlines that education for both men and women is an Islamic right for every Muslim. Resisting this principle not only contravenes Islamic teachings but also undermines the legitimacy of the authorities in the eyes of the international community and other states. Ensuring women's right to education aligns with both Islamic principles and international law, making it an essential step toward recognition and legitimacy.

The treatment of prisoners by the Taliban contradicts Islamic principles, which require that women be treated with dignity and humanity. In Faryab, conditions for imprisoned women are dire, with over 30 women confined in a small space under harsh circumstances. According to participants, plans to relocate them to tents during the cold winter must be urgently prevented to safeguard their basic rights and dignity.

Provide targeted assistance to people with disabilities, particularly those in families where women are the sole breadwinners. Given that Taliban policies prohibit women from working, these families face significant challenges in supporting disabled children and elderly members, necessitating urgent intervention to address their basic needs.

Recommendations to International Policymakers

Prompt action is essential to prioritize women's rights, particularly their right to education, with the 2025 academic year beginning in March in Afghanistan. It is crucial to implement concrete improvements that ensure girls have access to education. Failing to take action will only deepen their marginalization. This pressing issue calls for immediate attention and decisive measures.

Advocate for increased diplomatic pressure on the Taliban to uphold women’s rights to education, emphasizing the crucial role of women, particularly from ethnic minorities, in shaping Afghanistan’s future. Support the establishment of safe corridors or asylum mechanisms for Afghan women educators facing persecution, enabling them to continue their vital educational work.

Advocate for the United Nations to formally recognize gender apartheid, in order to acknowledge the systemic discrimination faced by Afghan women. This recognition would honor their contributions to advancing rights in Islamic societies. Supporting initiatives by Canada, Germany, the Netherlands,

and Australia under Article 29 of CEDAW is crucial, and encouraging more countries to join would strengthen collective actions through the International Court of Justice. It is also important to include Islamic countries in these efforts to challenge the misuse of Sharia in violating women's rights. This approach amplifies Afghan women's voices and promotes accountability in addressing systemic gender-based discrimination.

Develop targeted policies to support marginalized groups, including minority communities such as Uzbeks, Turkmens, and others, to ensure equitable access to education, healthcare, and social services. Reinstate fair salaries for female teachers while safeguarding their dignity and security in the workplace.

7.2, Recommendations for INGOs and NGOs

Provide online educational opportunities specifically tailored to women in Faryab, a region that remains significantly underserved compared to other provinces. The remoteness of Faryab has resulted in a lack of access to online education programs widely available in other parts of the country. Addressing this gap is essential to ensure equitable access to education for women in this marginalized area.

Women in Faryab face significant challenges in accessing international support, with many living in dire circumstances. Participants highlighted the urgent need for improved market access for their handicrafts, noting that women in other provinces often have greater opportunities. Establishing a women-centered market in Faryab would bridge this gap, providing economic empowerment and enhancing their capacity to sustain their livelihoods.

Empowering Women Artisans

Equip women artisans with digital and business skills to expand online, connect with fair trade networks, and utilize e-commerce platforms. Support the formation of cooperatives for collaborative production and sales, enabling better price negotiation and reducing competition. Provide small grants or loans for tools, materials, and market stalls, and, if feasible, establish dedicated women's markets in Faryab and Jawzjan to enhance economic opportunities.

Empowering Afghan Women and Enhancing Connectivity in Faryab and Jawzjan

Develop targeted programs to support Afghan women, with a particular focus on including Uzbek women in international educational initiatives. While fostering grassroots activism poses significant risks in the current context of Afghanistan, online initiatives can serve as a vital alternative to bridge the gap. Establishing virtual platforms to connect women in Faryab and Jawzjan to international networks and NGOs is critical, especially as participants noted the lack of such connections. These efforts can provide educational opportunities and facilitate engagement with global support systems, addressing the isolation faced by women in these regions.

Create Support Networks: Collaborate with local organizations to establish support networks for widows and single mothers, offering economic assistance, mental health services, and skills training. These networks can provide essential resources and build community resilience.

Support Secret Educational Classes: Provide direct financial and material support for secret educational classes for girls and women, prioritizing community-led solutions that align with local religious and cultural contexts. Collaborate with local educators to develop discreet, sustainable programs that integrate both religious and secular subjects, ensuring access to knowledge in restrictive environments. Enhance access to online resources in remote areas like Faryab and Jawzjan, promoting inclusivity for all ethnic groups.

Document Gender and Ethnic-Based Violence

Collaborate with local and international organizations to systematically document and report instances of gender and ethnic-based violence, particularly in **Faryab's prisons.** Establish connections with international entities to provide support and amplify the voices of those experiencing critical conditions, as highlighted by participants. Accurate documentation is essential to ensure accountability and advocate for justice using global platforms.

Raising Awareness and Supporting Afghan Women

Launch global awareness campaigns through social media and partnerships with international organizations to highlight the challenges faced by Afghan women, and advocate for pressure on the Taliban to respect women's rights. Collaborate with local organizations to establish support networks

for widows and single mothers, providing economic assistance, mental health services, and skills training to enhance resilience and community support.

Appendix

In this section, I present some of the participants whose contributions serve as the foundation for the first part of this analysis. Their insights, collected through interviews, written texts, and books, have significantly enriched the resources for this study. As they currently reside outside Afghanistan and do not face security risks, their involvement was possible. These distinguished academics are living in exile and have made invaluable contributions to this research. I am sincerely grateful for their support, without which this study would not have been achievable.

Professor Soraya Ahadi: A Torchbearer of women's Education

Professor Soraya "Ahadi," daughter of Abdul Ahad and born in Sayed Ahmad in 1335 AH, hails from a religious and educational family in Deh Azizan village, Maimana city. She completed her primary, middle, and secondary education at Setara High School in Maimana, where she later began her teaching career in 1354 after graduating.

Pursuing higher education, Professor Ahadi earned a bachelor's degree from the Faryab Pedagogical Institute while continuing her teaching. In 1370, she was appointed deputy director of educational affairs at Setara High School and later served as director of Afghankot Women's High School. In 2002, she became the principal of Setara High School, a role she held until her retirement in 2019, after 44 years of dedicated service to education.

Throughout her career, Professor Ahadi was a tireless advocate for the education and empowerment of Afghan youth, particularly girls. She mentored hundreds of students, many of whom now serve in prominent roles as doctors, engineers, and professors. Her efforts extended beyond education; as an active member of civil society, she participated in the 2002 Emergency Loya Jirga and the Loya Jirga for the ratification of the Constitution, earning medals of honor from then-President Hamid Karzai.

Professor Ahadi's leadership was instrumental in having Setara High School recognized as the best high school in the country by the Ministry of Education in 1398. Her contributions were repeatedly acknowledged with commendations and awards for her tireless commitment to education and community development.

From 2011 until the fall of the republican regime in 2021, she served on the provincial peace committee, promoting peace and unity through educational initiatives and public awareness campaigns. Her efforts mobilized thousands of women to participate in peace activities, elections, and empowerment programs in collaboration with the High Peace Council, the Independent Human Rights Commission, and the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan. In 2015, Professor Ahadi was nominated for the UNESCO World Peace Prize in recognition of her dedication to education, peace-building, and women's empowerment.

Today, she resides in Faryab Province with her husband and seven children, all of whom have followed her example in serving Afghanistan as professionals and community leaders. Professor Soraya Ahadi remains a symbol of resilience, dedication, and the transformative power of education.

Saleha Ulker

Saliha Ulker, an Uzbek women born in 1955 in Maimana, Faryab Province, Afghanistan, is a distinguished figure in the social, cultural, and political spheres of Afghan society. Renowned for her unwavering advocacy for women's rights and social advancement, she has dedicated over four decades to serving her community.

Mrs. Ulker graduated with a degree in English from the Faculty of Literature at Rahnavard University in Mazar-e-Sharif. Her commitment to education and awareness-raising has been central to her career, during which she has served as a project manager, consultant, and program supervisor for international organizations, including the United Nations, the International Committee of the Red Cross, and Norwegian Church Aid. Through these roles, she has contributed significantly to education, health, community development, and human rights initiatives.

As an active participant in women's networks, Mrs. Ulker has made impactful strides in promoting gender equality, peace, and women's involvement in social and political spheres. Notably, she established women's peace councils in various regions of Afghanistan and collaborated with religious scholars to advance women's rights and societal roles.

Fluent in Uzbek, Persian, Turkmen, Pashto, and English, Mrs. Ulker has used her linguistic skills to foster effective communication and collaboration in diverse, international contexts. Following the fall of Afghanistan and the worsening political and security conditions, she emigrated to Germany, where she continues to champion human values and advocate for the transformative power of women in society. Her life exemplifies resilience, determination, and a steadfast belief in the capacity of women to drive societal change.

Atefeh Rahin

This information is provided by Anjoman-e Mearef Dostan (Education Lovers Social Association).

The Work and Activities of Atefeh Rahin, Vice President of the Anjoman-e Mearef Dostan.

She has long experience of being teacher in different schools in Faryab and Kabul. Besides education, since 2001, Mrs. Rahin has been actively engaged in charitable activities in Faryab, funding numerous initiatives to support students and improve educational conditions. Her efforts include providing textbooks, study materials, and educational equipment; constructing classrooms; and digging deep and semi-deep wells in schools. She has also financed the purchase of water pumps, drinking water pipes, and reserves, as well as planting both fruitful and non-fruitful seedlings in schoolyards. Additionally, she has supplied clothing, such as jumpers, jackets, and shoes, for needy and orphaned students and offered financial assistance to underprivileged teachers.

Ms. Rahin has further contributed to enhancing the education system by organizing educational competitions among students, fostering healthy development and motivation among schoolchildren. Despite being repeatedly requested by the founders of the Education Lovers Social Association to assume the role of president, she declined, focusing instead on her dedicated efforts to support students and teachers in various challenging circumstances. Her commitment and impact underscore her invaluable contributions to the advancement of education in the region.

Mrs. Sharifa Azimi

Mrs. Sharifa Azimi, the daughter of Al-Hajj Saleh Mohammad Bahmaniyar and granddaughter of the physician Haji Ghulam Hazrat, was born in 1957 into a well-educated and enlightened family in Maimana, Faryab Province. In 1964, she began her education at Setara High School in Maimana, where she completed her primary, secondary, and high school studies. She then furthered her education at the Teacher Training Institute in Faryab.

In 1979, Mrs. Azimi embarked on her teaching career at Afghankot High School and eventually progressed to the roles of deputy head teacher and head teacher. Over the span of 22 years, she dedicated herself to championing girls' right to education and made significant contributions to the education and development of young women in Faryab, Afghanistan. Beginning in 1985, in addition to her teaching duties, Mrs. Azimi took on the role of President of the Women's Urban Council and served as the Representative for the Second District of Maimana City. In these capacities, she worked diligently to mobilize, empower, and support women, furthering her lifelong commitment to promoting women's rights and opportunities.

Her commitment to civil and social activism led to her appointment in 1996 as the Head of Work and Social Affairs for Faryab Province. In this capacity, she took significant steps to organize various initiatives, establish and support kindergartens and orphanages, and empower women to actively participate in the reconstruction of their country.

After the Taliban seized control of Faryab Province, Mrs. Azimi faced personal tragedy with the loss of her husband.[45] Despite the tremendous responsibility of supporting her family and ensuring her children's education, she successfully raised them to attain high levels of academic achievement and

[45] This tragedy was caused by the Taliban.

make meaningful contributions to society. In 1991, she was again appointed as the Head of Women's Affairs for Faryab Province.

Her impressive accomplishments include the development and coordination of literacy and employment courses for women, the organizing of assemblies and circles, and the support of orphans through the distribution of savings booklets and stipends from ministry budgets. She successfully facilitated kindergarten placements for 800 eligible children, hired 100 female teachers, and established vocational training centers to create employment opportunities for women. Furthermore, she constructed a large conference hall for the Women's Affairs Department, participated in both emergency and constitutional loya jirgas,[46] and actively promoted the work of women writers.

Mrs. Azimi's remarkable contributions to education and women's affairs resulted in her receiving an impressive total of forty certificates and letters of appreciation, as well as two distinguished medals: the Malalai Medal and the Medal of Loyalty, both granted by the Presidency of Afghanistan. Additionally, she was honored with the Gonbad Gohar Shad Begum Award from the Ministry of Women's Affairs and the Five-Star Frame Award from the Faryab Provincial Government.

In 2017, she successfully completed her higher education in Administration and Diplomacy at the Faculty of Law at Reshad University. After 39 years of unwavering commitment to her field, Mrs. Azimi retired in 2019, leaving behind a legacy characterized by resilience, advocacy, and transformative leadership that will undoubtedly inspire future generations.

[46] The Loya Jirga is a traditional assembly in Afghanistan made up of tribal elders, community leaders, and key stakeholders. It addresses critical national issues like constitutional amendments, national crises, and peace agreements, serving as a symbol of collective decision-making in Afghan society.

Laila Zary

Laila Zary, the daughter of Salih Zary, a former governor of Faryab province, was born in 1967 in the Arabkhana neighborhood of Faryab, Afghanistan. She graduated from Setara High School and continued her studies at the Higher Education Institute of Pedagogy in Faryab, where she excelled academically.

Laila pursued a career in education, teaching at Arabkhana School and Amir Ali Shir Nawayee High School. Beyond her teaching profession, she is a celebrated writer who has penned numerous poems and short stories in the Uzbek language. Her commitment to cultural preservation is further reflected in her extensive efforts to collect and document Uzbek folklore.

Currently, Laila Zary resides in Virginia, USA, where she continues to be an advocate for education and cultural preservation.

Homayoun Surkhabi

Homayoun Sorkhabi was born on September 21, 1942, in Bagh-e-Nawab, neighborhood of Kabul. He is the son of Ghulam Muhiuddin Sorkhabi and the grandson of Professor Ghulam Mohammad Maimangi. His mother, Mrs. Tahera Sorkhabi, was the daughter of Osmanqul Muharram Bashi, a prominent leader of the Uzbek community in Maimana, who was closely connected to the family of Mariam Sorkhabi. Mrs. Tahera Sorkhabi was a trailblazer in education in Kabul. Her significant contributions to the field and her outstanding guidance of her six sons and two daughters earned her the accolade of "Outstanding Mother of the Year," an honor that included a gold medal presented by Queen Humaira, the wife of King Zahir Shah (1933–1973).

Following the family's relocation to Maimana, Homayoun Sorkhabi enrolled in Abu Obaid Jawzjani Secondary School in 1955, the only secondary school in the city. He completed his high school education there and received his graduation certificate in 1959. In 1960, he returned to Kabul and continued his studies at Ghazi High School, where he graduated in 1962. Subsequently, he passed the university entrance examination and enrolled in the Faculty of Law and Political Science at Kabul University in 1963.

Mr. Surkhabi graduated from the Department of Administration and Diplomacy within the Faculty of Law, but he was assigned to administrative duties at the Ministry of Public Health— a position that did not align with his academic background. In 1970, he traveled to Australia for a year to enhance his English proficiency. Between 1975 and 1976, he pursued management studies in the United States, attending programs in New York, Michigan, and Washington, D.C. He also completed short-term courses in public health management in India, the Philippines, and Thailand.

After the coup on 7 Saur 1357 SH (April 27, 1978), Homayoun Sorkhabi was appointed Deputy Director of Administration at the Ministry of Public Health and subsequently became Deputy Director of Administration at the Kabul State Medical Institute. During Dr. Najibullah's government, he held the position of Director of Administration at the Ministry of Public Health.

In 1992, following the collapse of Dr. Najibullah's government and the onset of civil war, Homayoun Sorkhabi relocated to India, where he spent several months in Delhi before moving to England. Since then, he has settled in London with his family.

Rahmatullah Omid

Mr. Rahmatullah Omid was born on May 29, 1940 (8th of Jawza, 1319 SH) in the Qazi Faizullah neighborhood of Kabul. He is a retired colonel of the Afghan Army and a prominent figure known for his dedication and strong moral character. Mr. Omid is the eldest son of Ghulam Ali Omid, a renowned Afghan artist, and the grandson of Bibi Mariam through her second son.

At the age of five, Omid's family moved from Kabul to Maimana, the capital of Faryab province. He completed his primary education and part of his secondary education at Abu Ubaid Jowzjani Middle School, which was later upgraded to a high school. Upon returning to Kabul, he enrolled at Habibia High School, where he graduated in 1961 (1340 SH).

Mr. Omid pursued further education at Kabul Military Academy (Harbi Pohantoon), graduating in 1964 (1343 SH) as a second lieutenant. Over his 26-year military career, he undertook advanced military education in the United States, the former Soviet Union, and India. He performed successfully in every program he attended.

In 1981 (1360 SH), Mr. Omid was promoted to the rank of Colonel and held this position until 1989 (1368 SH). Despite his exemplary service, he was not promoted to the rank of General. This was primarily due to two reasons: he was not a member of the People’s Democratic Party of Afghanistan, which was a requirement for higher ranks during that period, and his advanced military education in the United States was viewed unfavorably by the pro-Soviet government. These factors limited his career progression despite his qualifications and dedication.

After completing 26 years of service, Rahmatullah Omid voluntarily retired. In 1991 (1370 SH), due to rising insecurity in Afghanistan, he migrated to the United States with his family, where he has resided ever since.

In the United States, Mr. Omid continued to share his expertise by working for 12 years at the Defense Language Institute in Monterey, California. He served as an instructor and authored Dari language textbooks for U.S. military personnel, significantly contributing to cross-cultural and linguistic education. In July 2014, he retired from this role due to health reasons. Today, at the age of 84, Mr. Rahmatullah Omid's life and career stand as a testament to resilience, service, and intellectual achievement across diverse fields and locations.

Masud Omid

A Veteran Artist of Afghan Radio and Television

Masoud Omid was born on June 28, 1962 (Saratan 7, 1342 in the Hijri Solar calendar) in Kabul, into a family passionate about the arts and music. He embarked on his musical journey under the mentorship of his father, Ustad Ghulam Ali Omid, a renowned and versatile artist in Afghanistan. In addition to his love for singing, Masoud inherited a talent for painting from his father.

After completing his education at Ansari High School, Masoud pursued higher studies at Kabul University, specializing in English within the Faculty of Language and Literature. Immersed in a family rich in musical tradition, he was exposed to the captivating melodies of Afghan music from an early age. With the encouragement and support of his father, Masoud refined his singing abilities and began to establish his own identity in the music scene. During his school years, he showcased his talent at various concerts, where his performances garnered enthusiastic appreciation, helping him build a loyal following for his distinctive voice.

Masoud Omid is highly regarded for his considerable contributions to Afghan music, especially for his creative interpretation of the beautiful folkloric song "Ahista Boro" in Afghanistan's three national languages: Dari, Uzbeki, and Pashto. This initiative marks a significant cultural advancement toward promoting national unity and solidarity among the diverse ethnic groups of Afghanistan.

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