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## Afghanistan Women Perceptions of Access to Higher Education

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### Keywords

women in higher education, higher education in Afghanistan



## Afghanistan Women Perceptions of Access to Higher Education

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### **Abstract**

This qualitative, phenomenological study was conducted to explore the lived experiences of 12 Afghan women enrolled in higher education institutions in Afghanistan. The objective was to develop an understanding of the participants' perceptions of the factors that led to their enrollment in higher education and the factors that inhibit Afghan women from participating in higher education. Data were collected through a demographic questionnaire; one-on-one, face-to-face interviews; and an open-ended questionnaire. The interview and questionnaire data were analyzed using Moustakas's modified van Kaam method. The following themes were identified through the data analysis: (1) Barriers inhibit Afghan women from obtaining higher education, (2) Afghan women perceive benefits of obtaining higher education, (3) Afghan women who enter higher education institutions have similar characteristics, and (4) educated Afghan women have opportunities to improve Afghanistan. These themes indicate that Afghan women may face many barriers to obtaining higher education; however, the barriers can be penetrated when Afghan women have financial stability and middle-class status, a responsible and supportive family, self-motivation, support of religious leaders, support of higher education leaders, and belief in the value of higher education. When Afghan women overcome the barriers and obtain higher education, they are more likely to feel capable of improving their lives and the lives of family members. Through obtaining higher education, Afghan women may also feel empowered to assist in Afghanistan's reconstruction process.

### **Introduction**

Education is an important part of life and people need to understand the value of education. Understanding the value and importance will help people make better decisions for themselves and others. In America, children have great opportunities to be educated. They have the opportunity to obtain public education up until twelfth grade. Even if they cannot afford college, they are offered financial aid, loans, and scholarships. With these advantages all children should be educated in the United States but they are not because many do not understand the importance and value of Education.

In third world countries, especially Afghanistan, the people who understand and value education, do not have the opportunity to become educated. They cannot afford an education because they have to worry about surviving the day without food. Afghanistan is a great example of people suffering daily and many not becoming educated. There are many reasons why children are not educated in Afghanistan. One major reason is that the country has suffered from war and famine for decades. When schools were built, they were destroyed through the battles. Even now the people of Afghanistan are suffering in many different ways, especially the

women of Afghanistan. They are not given their rights, specifically women obtaining a higher education.

Women's voices have been silenced for decades because of the opinions of various leaders of the country. Women's rights, such as the right to education, have been taken away and the quality of women's lives has been affected because of the lack of educational opportunities, isolation from family, forced marriages, domestic violence, and torment (Pourzand, 1999). Afghanistan has been unstable because of the lack of political strength, poverty, security, human rights, and education (Sigsgaard, 2009). Research indicates that in countries with severe social and political problems, when women were granted educational and other rights, society improved, indicating both males and females are needed in the effort to increase the peace, economy, health care, and other aspects (Hazarika, 2011; Izabiliza, 2003; Nagashetty & Fatima, 2009).

### **Methodology**

This is a major problem in Afghanistan so the researcher decided to conduct a qualitative, phenomenological study to explore the lived experiences of 12 Afghan women enrolled in higher education in Kabul, Afghanistan related to factors that led to their enrollment in higher education and the factors that inhibit Afghan women from participating in higher education. Data were collected through a demographic questionnaire; semi-structured, audio recorded, face-to-face interviews; and an open-ended questionnaire. The focus of the study was on twelve Afghan women enrolled in universities in Kabul. The data were analyzed through using Moustakas's (1994) modified van Kaam method and NVivo 10 software. The study led to an understanding of the characteristics and lived experiences of female students at Kabul universities and how educated females can improve Afghan society. The findings may encourage other Afghan women and women in other countries to become educated and make positive changes in their countries.

The following was the central research question for the study:

What are women's experiences in obtaining higher education in Afghanistan?

The following sub-questions were used to guide the study:

RQ1: What are the barriers that inhibit Afghan women from obtaining higher education?

RQ2: Do cultural factors hinder Afghan women from obtaining higher education?

RQ3: What are the perceived benefits of higher education for women in Afghanistan?

RQ4: What are the characteristics of Afghan women who enter higher education institutions?

RQ5: What opportunities exist for educated women to contribute to Afghan society?

The research questions were designed to elicit rich descriptions and identify themes and patterns in the data. Using the research questions as a guide in the study led to insight about the beliefs, perceptions, and experiences of Afghan females who have attended higher education institutions.

### **Research Findings**

The findings from data collection resulted in four major themes and subthemes.

Theme:1 Barriers inhibit Afghan women from obtaining higher education.

Subtheme 1: Entrance exam and admittance barrier

Subtheme 2: Finances

Subtheme 3: Higher education leaders and professors

Subtheme 4: Religion

- Subtheme 5: Threats to Safety
- Subtheme 6: Culture
- Theme 2: Afghan women perceive benefit of obtaining higher education
  - Subtheme 1: advancing the country
  - Subtheme 2: Enhanced knowledge
  - Subtheme 3: rights to make decisions
  - Subtheme 4: Peaceful and safe society
  - Subtheme 5: better job opportunities
- Theme 3: Afghan women who enter higher education institution have similar characteristics
  - Subtheme 1: Responsible and supportive family
  - Subtheme 2: Self-motivation
  - Subtheme 3: support from religious leaders
  - Subtheme 4: Support from higher education leaders
  - Subtheme 5: Belief in value of higher education
  - Subtheme 6: Financial stability/middle class status
- Theme 4: Educated women have opportunities to improve Afghanistan.
  - Subtheme 1: Jobs and financial stability
  - Subtheme 2: Reconstruction

### **Implications**

**Theme 1: Barriers inhibit Afghan women from obtaining higher education.** The findings of the study indicate that Afghan women enrolled in Kabul universities may experience many barriers to higher education. These barriers include entrance exams and admission, financial status, higher education leaders and professors, religion, threats to safety, and culture.

**Subtheme 1: Entrance exams and admission.** Participants reported that entrance exams to Kabul universities are difficult. All of the participants in the study were educated from an early age, suggesting they should be able to pass college entrance exams. Nevertheless, the majority failed the entrance exams and had to retake the exams. This finding is a relatively new idea in the literature. The only previous literature with mention of entrance exams in Afghan higher education institutions was a study conducted by Aziz (2008), in which a male leader indicated that women had taken entrance exams in Kabul but had failed the exams. The male leader stated that females need to be prepared for the exams. The results of this study indicate that Afghan women may often need to work hard for a long time to prepare for the entrance exams and that exam preparation courses may not always be enough to prepare females to succeed on higher education entrance exams.

The findings of the study show that even if entrance exams were not a problem, enrolling in Kabul universities is still difficult because of the limited capacity at the universities, which prevents motivated, qualified individuals from obtaining higher education. The difficulty in gaining admittance into higher education institutions (or at least the desired major) is often demoralizing to female Afghans, according to the results of this study. One participant explained that a friend who was not admitted into a university committed suicide as a result. This situation aligns with other research that indicates many women commit suicide because of repression (Winthrop, 2003), which may include the inability to obtain education.

**Subtheme 2: Financial constraints.** The findings of the study indicate that Afghan women may also experience challenges in obtaining higher education because of financial

constraints, even when they have middle-class status. Afghan females as well as their families often work hard to earn enough money to pay for higher education for the female family members. The expenses begin even before entrance into a university; many women take expensive courses to prepare for entrance exams, which unfortunately are not always enough to help Afghan females pass the exams.

Participants in the study noted that Kabul University is the only public university in the city; the other universities are private and very expensive, which is likely a large reason most participants tried to enroll in Kabul University first. Some Afghan females who do not pass Kabul University's entrance exam or who are not admitted decide to enroll in private universities as a second choice, despite the higher costs, which can cause even more financial strain. All of the participants in the study were from middle-class families; if their families had difficulty paying college expenses, lower-class families may have even more difficulty paying for higher education costs for female family members.

The financial barrier to higher education for Afghan women has not been addressed in previous research; thus, this finding adds to the body of knowledge on the struggles Afghan women face when trying to obtain higher education. Understanding the financial situations of Afghan women is important because without proper financing or additional public universities, women will continue to have difficulty obtaining higher education.

***Subtheme 3: Higher education leaders and professors.*** Participants also reported that higher education leaders and professors are a barrier to higher education for Afghan women. Participants reported that some higher education leaders accept bribes from students to obtain college admission, favor individuals from specific tribes, and are biased against females. Azizi (2008) similarly found that higher education leaders have ethnic biases. The results of the study also indicate that many professors may not be qualified to teach the assigned subjects and that some professors behave inappropriately. Most of the professors are men, and some do not believe that females should obtain higher education; they therefore give female students lower grades or are disparaging to the female students. Other researchers have likewise found that higher education institutions in Afghanistan lack resources, such as qualified faculty and an adequate number of faculty, including female instructors (Moreno, 2005; Sawahel, 2009). Zoepf (2006a) asserted that the lack of enough professors and knowledgeable professors is the result of the lack of education over the years.

***Subtheme 4: Religious views.*** Participants reported that inaccurate views of Islam can be a barrier to females obtaining higher education, particularly because some Afghan men assert that women should not become educated, basing their argument on their interpretation of Islam. This finding is supported by the previous literature. Karlsson and Mansory (2009) and Zalman (2004) reported that ulemas, mullahs, and the Taliban are examples of groups that state they follow Islam and that Islam principles (the Hadith) indicate women should not have educational rights.

Though the Koran indicates that all people should be educated (Karlsson & Mansory, 2009) when the Taliban seized power in 1996, they enforced strict rules based on their interpretation of the Islamic religion ("Afghanistan Overview," 2009; Karlsson & Mansory, 2009). The Taliban have prohibited women from obtaining an education, working, and even going out in public without being accompanied by a male (Ahmed-Ghosh, 2003; Povey, 2003; Zulfacar, 2006). The Taliban have destroyed many girls' schools and have threatened to kill females who went to school (Baba, 2003). Other researchers agree that the Taliban are largely to

blame for female's lack of education (Karlsson & Mansory, 2009). Dexter (2009) stated that 80% of female Afghans are illiterate because of the Taliban and individuals who accept bribes from the Taliban. Based on the findings of the study, the Taliban and religious leaders who oppose women's education may not be fully aware of or do not understand the Islamic religion. The uneducated perspectives of religious leaders can negatively affect family members' decisions to support women's education.

An inaccurate interpretation of Islamic principles regarding education may also be a barrier in the higher education classroom, according to the results of this study. The study findings show that some professors insult female students who do not wear a burqa and award them fewer points on assignments. These findings correspond with previous literature. Emadi (2002) explained that in certain regions of Afghanistan, women are allowed to go to school if they cover up by wearing a scarf or burqa. Kehoe (2008) explained that even though women are not required by law to wear burqas, women are harassed, threatened, and raped if they do not cover up. Emadi (2002) asserted that when women choose not to cover up, men use it as an excuse to prevent women from accessing their educational rights.

***Subtheme 5: Threats to safety.*** According to the results of the study, threats to safety are another barrier to female Afghans' ability to obtain higher education. Largely as a consequence of inaccurate interpretations of Islam, men and boys harass women, particularly women attending school. Gall (2006) and Jorgensen (2005) likewise reported that women in Afghanistan are not safe and are afraid to exercise their rights. The findings of this study indicate that women who attend class at night are particularly concerned about using transportation services after class. Aliprandini (2010) supported this finding, stating that the transportation system has not been given proper attention. Azizi (2008) likewise noted transportation is an issue for students.

Threats are not limited to minor problems that occur while commuting to and from school, however. Afghan women have also been burned with acid, raped, and killed because of their desires to obtain education (Nemtsova, 2010). The results of this study indicate that concerns regarding safety lead some families to discourage female family members from enrolling in higher education. This finding aligns with Zoepf's (2006b) description of a female who was afraid her father would not let her become a doctor, not because he was against education but because he was afraid that something might happen to her. The findings of this study indicate that security may be better in Kabul than in other provinces, suggesting that the fear regarding safety might be an even bigger barrier for women living in other areas of Afghanistan.

***Subtheme 6: Cultural barrier.*** The three significant cultural factors that are obstacles to obtaining higher education are harassment, societal beliefs, and restrictions. The findings of the study indicate that many men believe females should stop their schooling after 12th grade because their duty is to marry, have children, take care of the family, and do house chores; women should not leave the house. Because of this belief, men harass females who pursue higher education, ridiculing them publicly. Many of these females are negatively affected by the men's comments and actions. Alvi-Aziz (2008) supported these findings, asserting that women face obstacles to becoming educated because of gender harassment and traditions.

The male-dominant culture and some of its consequences have been documented in the literature. Brodsky (2004) explained that women are considered to be less valuable than men.

Afghan culture includes traditions about the roles of men and women. Men are the decision makers and are responsible for financially supporting the family (Moghadam, 2002). Kehoe (2008) stated women are responsible for cooking meals, cleaning the home, and watching children. Vorgetts (2002) asserted that though the constitutions of 1964, 1976, 1987, 1990, and 2002 indicate Afghan men and women have equal rights, including the right to obtain education, many fathers and husbands do not allow their female family members to exercise their educational rights.

Another pervading belief in Afghan culture is that females will “turn bad” (Participant 7) for attending classes with males. This perspective is interesting considering the cultural belief that women are not as valuable as men (Brodsky, 2004). This belief is related to the religious barrier, specifically the belief that women should not be around men.

The study results show that an additional aspect of the cultural barrier is that families may not want to be looked down upon, talked about, or argued with because of their support for female higher education. Kehoe (2008) explained that family honor is of great importance in Afghanistan, and men in particular do not want to hurt their families’ reputations or for their families to be threatened. According to this study’s findings, many women are hindered from obtaining higher education because their families are not educated. Mujtaba (2007) likewise found that uneducated family members are a barrier to becoming educated. From this study, it appears that when family members are not educated, they are less likely to value education and more likely to continue to follow the cultural traditions.

**Theme 2: Afghan women perceive benefits of obtaining higher education.** Many Afghan women enrolled in higher education believe that the benefits of higher education include advancing the country, enhancing knowledge, obtaining better job opportunities, working toward a peaceful and safe society, and exercising the right to make decisions.

**Subtheme 1: Advancing the country.** Participants reported that women who obtain higher education perceive that they can make a greater contribution to the society they live. Riley (2009) similarly found that economic expansion can be achieved in Afghanistan if Afghan women are given the opportunity to obtain an education. Educating women will help improve agriculture, health, manufacturing, and banking (Riley, 2009).

Though limited research has been conducted on educated women’s role in the reconstruction process in Afghanistan, research on other countries supports the finding of this study that women who obtain higher education may be an asset in improving Afghanistan. Nagashetty and Fatima (2009) studied how educating undergraduate male and female students in Karnataka, India, from 1965 to 2004 affected economic growth. The researchers found that educating women was the most significant factor in improving economic growth, advancing technology, and building a prosperous country. Hazarika (2011) likewise found that the increase in the percentage of females in India’s higher education institutions has positively affected economic growth in India.

Ball (2009) explored the experiences of Ugandan women who obtained education and how they positively influenced their communities. Ball found that these women had the knowledge needed to teach other women skills that would benefit themselves and their communities; for example, they applied conservation strategies, planted diverse food crops, served in political positions, and helped establish peace.

***Subtheme 2: Enhanced knowledge.*** Participants reported that enhanced knowledge may be a significant benefit to Afghan women who obtain higher education. The new knowledge can benefit these women in their classes, at work, at home, and in society. With their increased knowledge, Afghan women may be better able to help others and to make effective decisions regarding their lives. They also may be better able to increase their independence and gain a better understanding of society. They likewise may feel more empowered to use their knowledge to improve the country. These findings parallel Azizi's (2008) assertion that knowledge is needed to increase the prosperity of Afghanistan. Romanowski et al. similarly (2007) concluded that with a functional higher education system, Afghans will develop the knowledge needed to rebuild the country.

***Subtheme 3: Job opportunities.*** According to the results of the study, the perceptions of the women were that obtaining higher education often leads to better job opportunities with better salaries. With better salaries, Afghan may be better able to support themselves financially and also help others. Through working in their fields of study, Afghan women also have opportunities to make a difference in society. Educated women may have opportunities to work in governmental jobs and influence policies, according to the findings of the study. Women who become doctors and nurses can help increase women's access to health care (females are not allowed to visit male doctors) (Catani et al., 2009; Panter-Brick et al., 2009). Povey (2003) stressed that women believe they can obtain their full rights to higher education if women leaders are in charge and more women are involved in Afghan society. In alignment with this study, Manzo (2002) found that some Afghan families want females to be educated so that they can have better employment opportunities and lifestyles. Drevitch (2010) claimed that educating women and allowing them to work outside of the home will increase employment opportunities and decrease poverty.

***Subtheme 4: Peaceful and safe society.*** Another important benefit of higher education for females, according to the study findings, is that educated women feel empowered to work toward establishing a peaceful and safe society. Many Afghan women who pursue higher education want to be free of the fear of fighting, suicide bombs, and attacks. Through becoming educated, Afghan women may have greater abilities to work toward eliminating corruption, bribery, poverty, pollution, illiteracy, and tribal discrimination, which will help advance the country and lead to a happier society. Izabiliza (2003) studied the role of women in reconstructing Rwanda and found that educating women can increase peace. Sigsgaard (2009) supported these findings, stating that enabling individuals to become educated will lead to peace.

***Subtheme 5: Right to make decisions.*** Participants reported that the right to make decisions is another benefit of obtaining higher education. Pursuing higher education may help female Afghans become more independent and confident in making effective decisions for themselves, thereby decreasing their reliance on others, and exercising their rights. Based on the study's results, though Afghanistan has a long history of limited rights for women, once women enroll in higher education, they often become more aware of their rights and how to use their rights, including to make decisions. This benefit of higher education relates to Margesson and Bockman's (2003) assertion that women need to be aware of their rights, which in return may encourage more women to obtain higher education. Trilling (2007) stated that Afghanistan's leaders need to protect people's rights. The findings of this study indicate that one method may be to help women obtain higher education.

**Theme 3: Afghan women who enter higher education institutions have similar characteristics.** The results of the study indicate that Afghan women enrolled in higher education institutions share several important characteristics: financial stability and middle-class status, a responsible and supportive family, self-motivation, support of religious leaders, support of higher education leaders, and belief in the value of higher education. These characteristics are helpful in overcoming the barriers to higher education that Afghan women face.

**Subtheme 1: Financial stability and middle-class status.** The characteristic of financial stability and middle-class status is often an important factor in obtaining higher education. Though the findings indicate that higher education for females is not limited to individuals from rich families, being poor is a significant obstacle to obtaining higher education. Mujtaba (2007) similarly noted factors that inhibit people from completing higher education include poverty and other financial issues.

**Subtheme 2: Responsible and supportive family.** Having a responsible and supportive family can also be a significant factor regarding whether Afghan females enroll in higher education institutions, according to the findings of the study. Family members often provide financial assistance, without which, female Afghans would not likely be able to afford the costs of higher education. Afghan females enrolled in higher education also appear to have family members who encourage the females to achieve their academic goals. Often, one reason family members are supportive is that the parents are educated. Previous research also indicates that family support is important in helping individuals obtain education. Oates (2009) found that when Afghan men support gender equality, they encourage female members of the family to be educated, which establishes a tradition in the family for women to obtain education. Oates's findings are similar to those of Bagguley and Hussain (2007), who reported that South Asian women are more likely to obtain education when they receive family support.

**Subtheme 3: Self-motivation.** Self-motivation is also an important characteristic because it helps female Afghans overcome the significant barriers they face in their pursuit of higher education. The study's results show that Afghan women may be self-motivated because of the benefits they believe will result from becoming educated, such as obtaining additional knowledge and opportunities for a better job and lifestyle. Self-motivation may also come from knowledge that obtaining higher education gives Afghan women more opportunities to improve Afghan society. Some Afghan women are also motivated and empowered to obtain higher education because they are aware of their educational rights. The study findings indicate that other ideas related to self-motivation include high self-esteem, intelligence, courage, good manners, and respect.

The connection between self-motivation and higher education has been addressed in previous research. Izabiliza (2003) reported that obtaining higher education is related to increased self-motivation and greater empowerment. Izabiliza found, for example, that Rwandan women who obtained higher education were empowered to contribute to the reconstruction process in their country. For people to accomplish their goals, they need to believe they are able to do so (Meece, 2002); therefore, self-confidence and self-motivation are important. As the findings from previous research and this study indicate, when women are self-motivated, they

are better able to overcome the barriers to higher education and are better able to assist in the reconstruction process.

***Subtheme 4: Support from religious leaders.*** Another important characteristic, according to the study's findings, is having the support of religious leaders. The results of the study show that though religious leaders can be a barrier to education when the leaders do not correctly understand Islamic principles and consequently denounce women's education, when religious leaders understand the benefits of higher education for women and support educational attainment, women are often more successful in obtaining higher education. Therefore, the views of the religious leaders determine whether the leaders have a positive or negative impact on higher education for women.

At various times in Afghanistan's history, the majority of religious leaders have been supportive of women's education; during these periods, Afghan females have found it easier to obtain education (Tariq, 2010). When religious leaders, such as the Taliban, have not supported higher education for women, Afghan women have faced significant challenges (Tariq, 2010). Based on the findings of this study and the literature, religious leaders who support women's education have been correctly educated in Islam and understand Islamic principles, whereas religious leaders who do not support women's education have either not been appropriately educated in the religion or have misinterpreted the religion's principles. Significant literature is available on the value of women in Islam. Khan (2010) asserted that according to Islamic principles, women and men have the same status. The Prophet Muhammad stated that all Muslims, meaning both males and females, should acquire knowledge (Azizi, 2008). Kehoe (2008) added that education is an important precursor to learning the Koran; people must know how to read, write, and interpret the Koran so they can follow its teachings.

As more Afghans become educated and understand the importance of education for all people, Afghan culture may shift, placing more emphasis on ensuring females have the opportunity to obtain higher education, which the findings of this and other studies (Daxner, 2009; Hazarika, 2011; Kirk, 2004; Sorensen, 1998) indicate will improve Afghan society.

***Subtheme 5: Support from higher education leaders.*** Just as support from religious leaders is important, so too is support from higher education leaders, according to the findings of this study. Similar to religious leaders, higher education leaders can be a barrier to obtaining higher education but can also be a critical link to women's achievement of higher education. In 2008, Aziz reported that higher education leaders were not interested in women obtaining higher education. In contrast, the findings of this study indicate that some higher education leaders are beginning to take steps to facilitate higher education for women. These higher education leaders have allowed females to retake entrance exams, increased the admittance rates for females, offered scholarships to females, and made speeches on TV to promote education for females. One participant identified two leaders she felt were particularly supportive of women's education: Obaidullah Obaid, the minister of higher education, and Amir Shah Hassanyar, the minister of telecommunications and technology. These leaders were interviewed by Azizi (2008); during their interviews, they stressed the importance of making a positive change in Afghan society, which can be achieved, in part, by promoting women's education.

Previous literature indicates the importance of government leaders, including higher education leaders, in supporting women's education. King Amanullah, for example, who reigned from 1919 to 1929 (Zulfacar, 2006), encouraged female education as part of his efforts to transform Afghanistan into a modern society (Pourzand, 1999). In 1973, Prime Minister

Muhammad Dauod established a Ministry of Education and initiatives to increase literacy among females (Rostami, 2007). Katsuma (2004) asserted that to empower women through education, government officials must support gender equality; without government support, other efforts are ineffective. Roshan (2004) emphasized that government leaders must punish individuals who injure and kill women and prohibit women from obtaining their constitutional rights.

***Subtheme 6: Belief in the value of higher education.*** Participants reported the final characteristic of Afghan women who have enrolled in higher education is belief in the value of higher education. The results of the study show that many Afghan women enrolled in Kabul universities believe higher education is important because educated individuals improve their status in society, increase their knowledge, obtain better jobs, are more independent, have greater financial stability, improve their lives and the lives of family members, and have opportunities to improve society and increase peace.

Various researchers have addressed the value of higher education. Catani et al. (2009) highlighted the correlation between education and health care, showing that if the number of females obtaining higher education increases, so will the availability of proper health care for women because more females will be trained to be nurses, midwives, and other health care personnel. Though previous research shows the importance of higher education, this study adds to the literature by indicating that Afghan women's belief in the value of education helps Afghan women obtain higher education.

#### **Theme 4: Educated Afghan women have opportunities to improve Afghanistan.**

Participants reported that Afghan females enrolled in higher education believe they have many opportunities to contribute to Afghan society. These opportunities can be categorized into two overall areas: reconstructing the country and obtaining job and financial stability.

***Subtheme 1: Reconstruction.*** Participants reported, through obtaining higher education, Afghan women may feel empowered to participate in reconstructing the country. Educated women may have opportunities to contribute to the reconstruction process in many ways. Through obtaining higher education, they are better able to educate their children and ensure their children obtain appropriate education. In this way, educated women can improve the futures of their children, which will affect society in general. The findings of this study align with the assertion of Anderson and Kooij (2007) and Coleman (2004) that educated women can improve their families' conditions by providing foods that are more nutritious, increasing the household income, and educating their children.

The study results show that Afghan women enrolled in higher education believe that obtaining higher education will enable them to support the development of Afghanistan so that it can become advanced like other countries; without education for males and females, advancement opportunities are limited. These findings align with previous literature. Kofi Annan, the United Nations secretary-general, stated that educating females is vital to the success of the country ("Afghanistan: Educating," 2002). Educated women contribute greatly in leadership roles, take full responsibility for initiatives, and overcome challenges (Izabiliza, 2003). Reavill (1996) explored the experiences and perceptions of Hmong women who completed higher education. Reavill reported that the women expanded their visions through completing their education, developing a desire to serve the community and improve the lives of others. In a study on higher education in India, Hazarika (2011) found that as more women complete higher education, economic growth increases and women are empowered to contribute

to society. The study's findings also show that educated Afghan women believe they can increase the peace in the country. Izabiliza (2003) likewise found that educating women in Rwanda led to increased peace.

***Subtheme 2: Jobs and financial stability.*** Another way educated Afghan women can contribute to Afghan society is by securing better jobs and financial stability. The study results show that through obtaining jobs with good salaries and thereby achieving financial stability, educated Afghan women may have opportunities to improve Afghanistan's infrastructure and economic stability. Through obtaining good jobs, such as in the medical field and government positions, Afghan women can also help others in society.

This finding is consistent with previous research indicating that when women obtain higher education, they have increased employment opportunities. Through their careers, they can contribute to society. Povey (2003) reported that when women have leadership positions, they can help other women obtain their full rights to higher education. Catani et al. (2009) highlighted the correlation between education and health care, explaining that if the number of females obtaining higher education increases, women will have more access to health care.

### **Model for Women's Education and Reconstruction in Afghanistan**

Analyzing the data led to the development of a model that can be used in Afghanistan to help women overcome the barriers to higher education and thereby contribute to the reconstruction process in Afghanistan. The six major barriers to higher education can create an impenetrable wall preventing women from obtaining higher education, much like the glass ceiling many women face in corporate America (Ayman & Korabik, 2010). When women are unable to obtain higher education, they have limited opportunities to improve Afghan society. Despite the barriers, when female Afghans have (a) financial stability and middle-class status, (b) a responsible and supportive family, (c) self-motivation, (d) support of religious leaders, (e) support of higher education leaders, and (f) belief in the value of higher education, these women are equipped with the tools needed to break through the barriers and to obtain higher education. By obtaining higher education, Afghan females are better able to improve Afghan society. The six factors mentioned above can therefore be considered a model for improving Afghanistan through increasing the number of women who obtain higher education.

The model may be used as a cornerstone to open up doors and opportunities for women to enter higher education institutions in Afghanistan. The six characteristics that were evident from the data analysis can become the basis for strategies to create a path toward higher education for women in Afghanistan. Obtaining a higher education in Afghanistan will increase the opportunity for women to achieve these six critical factors and to become important contributors to the reconstruction efforts in the country. These women will become models for younger women by demonstrating that the barriers can be overcome through higher education. Becoming financially stable and gaining the support of family members, religious leaders and higher education leaders will allow women to move into positions where the barriers to higher education can be effectively addressed.

**Recommendations for leaders.** Because of decades of war, Afghanistan is broken down and education is limited (Azizi, 2008). The findings of this study indicate that women who obtain higher education may have greater abilities and opportunities to help reconstruct Afghanistan by creating a peaceful, prosperous, and well-educated country. Educational leaders, political leaders, and others may use the findings from the study to better understand Afghan

women's perceptions of the barriers to higher education and the support Afghan women need to overcome the barriers. Leaders can also learn from the study that educated women often feel empowered to assist in the reconstruction process and should therefore be a critical component of reconstruction strategies. To increase the number of women who obtain higher education and thus become empowered to assist in the reconstruction, leaders should develop strategies to increase Afghan females' financial stability, self-motivation, and belief in the value of higher education, as well as to encourage families to support higher education for female family members and to increase the support of religious leaders and higher education leaders.

**Recommendations for higher education leaders.** In addition to facilitating the six methods of breaking through the barriers to higher education, leaders could develop strategies to reduce or eliminate the six barriers to higher education. The entrance exam and admittance barrier, particularly in regard to Kabul University, can be addressed by increasing the admittance rates. Females who obtain lower scores on the entrance exams could be admitted into the university and required to complete remedial courses before moving on to other courses. To increase the capacity to educate Afghanistan's citizens, more universities—especially public universities—could be established. Currently, the only public university in Kabul is Kabul University; one public higher education institution is not enough. Public universities are particularly important for Afghans interested in higher education because the tuition and fees at public universities are lower than at private universities and the cost of higher education is a barrier to Afghan women's enrollment in higher education. The financial barrier could further be alleviated by offering more scholarships to females.

Online education may be another viable option to solving the issue of enrollment and safety of Afghan women in Afghanistan. However, the internet access is limited in many areas of Kabul. Certain people who can afford and pay for internet access still have a problem of accessing the internet. Even when they access the internet, the service is extremely slow, which becomes problematic in having online education. Online education may be a viable resolution but the circumstances eliminate the option of online education.

To address the barrier created by some higher education leaders and professors, regulations should be established and strictly enforced so that women have equal opportunities to attend universities and so that they feel safe and respected while on campus. Professors should be hired who are experienced in the topics they will be teaching. Review processes should also be implemented to ensure they are providing quality instruction.

**Recommendation for government leaders.** The religious and cultural barriers can be alleviated by teaching Afghans that based on Islamic principles, women have equal value to men and have the right to obtain education. Leaders can inform Afghans of these Islamic principles through various media outlets, such as newspapers and TV broadcasts, as well as through community programs, such as seminars. Once Afghans, particularly males, understand the importance of education in Islam, Afghans may be more supportive of higher education for women.

Leaders also should use various media outlets to emphasize the benefits of higher education, particularly in regard to enhancing knowledge, obtaining better job opportunities and financial stability, advancing the country, and fostering peace and safety. Leaders should particularly focus on instilling the value of education in uneducated families, since the results of the study indicate uneducated families are often more resistant to female education. Teaching these families about the importance of education for males and females will likely prompt them

to view women's education more favorably. Methods to instilling the value of education could include having educated citizens conduct seminars in their communities, sharing how higher education for women has positively influenced their families, the community, and the country. These seminars should be advertised in public places and through visiting homes in the community. Incentives could be offered to encourage people to attend the seminars. Government leaders should also continue to give speeches (broadcast on TV and through other media) on the importance of higher education for women.

Leaders should also implement policies prohibiting males from harassing females for obtaining education. Punishments should be strictly enforced if the policies are violated, thereby providing motivation for males to adhere to the policies. Afghanistan's leaders should additionally give women more opportunities to work in meaningful careers, including in leadership positions. Uneducated women who see women influencing society in leadership positions may feel increased motivation to obtain higher education themselves so that they can assist in the reconstruction process. As more women obtain higher education, more improvement in Afghanistan may be achieved.

**Recommendations for community leaders.** Many of the participants in this study emphasized they wanted Afghanistan to obtain the progress achieved in other countries and were motivated to assist in achieving this goal. Leaders should help educated women gather together to develop strategies to help uneducated women and improve the country. These women can become leaders by making speeches in weekly or monthly seminars and by being examples to other women in the community. Educated women should also stress how obtaining higher education has had a positive influence on their lives and their families. These women could ask their family members, especially men, to discuss the importance of education in mosques during prayers and other community events. As more discussion on the benefits of female higher education occurs, society overall may become more accepting of higher education for women, which may eventually lead to a greater percentage of Afghan women obtaining higher education.

### **Suggestions for Further Research**

The study led to new information regarding the experiences and perceptions of Afghan women enrolled in higher education. Additional research should be conducted to expand on this study to obtain a greater understanding of the phenomenon of women's higher education in Afghanistan. A similar study could be conducted with women enrolled in higher education in different areas of the country to understand whether different factors have more influence outside of Kabul and what actions leaders should take to encourage women's education throughout the country.

Research should also be conducted to explore the experiences and perceptions of uneducated women in different provinces of Afghanistan, especially the ones who are under Taliban control. The findings from such a study would add more information regarding the perceptions of women who were not able to overcome the barriers to higher education. The information could be used to expand on the model proposed in this study to help Afghan women obtain higher education.

To further investigate perceptions of women's education in Afghanistan, researchers could interview family members, leaders, the Taliban, and other Afghans, who may have different perceptions or experiences to offer. Conducting this type of research may lead to a deeper understanding of the overall perceptions of Afghans regarding higher education and how to decrease resistance to higher education for females. Another recommendation is to study each

of the four themes in a separate study to gain an even deeper understanding of the theme and methods that may increase Afghan women's access to higher education in Afghanistan.

### Summary and Conclusion

The four major themes emerged from the data: (1) Barriers inhibit Afghan women from obtaining higher education, (2) Afghan women perceive benefits of obtaining higher education, (3) Afghan women who enter higher education institutions have similar characteristics, and (4) educated Afghan women have opportunities to improve Afghanistan.

The findings of the study indicate Afghan women may face many barriers while pursuing higher education. The findings of the study show, however, that the barriers can be penetrated when Afghan women have financial stability and middle-class status, a responsible and supportive family, self-motivation, support of religious leaders, support of higher education leaders, and belief in the value of higher education. When Afghan women overcome the barriers and obtain higher education, they may feel empowered to assist in Afghanistan's reconstruction process. They are better able to improve their own lives, the lives of their family members, and Afghan society. Some of the factors needed to penetrate the barriers are internal (self-motivation and belief in the value of higher education) or related to the female's family (support and financial stability and middle-class status), while other characteristics are external and are less in the female's control (support of religious and higher education leaders). As more women obtain higher education, they may be able to increase their influence on the factors that are not internal.

These women understand the value of education and through the circumstances in Afghanistan; they are making a difference for themselves, their families, and the society. Hopefully if other women understand the importance and value education as much as these women do, they may become empowered and obtain an education.

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