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Independent Practitioner Inquiry Capstone

**How Empowerment Processes Manifest for Afghan Women with Different
Levels of Education**

A capstone paper submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for a Master
of Arts in Sustainable Development at SIT Graduate Institute in Brattleboro,
Vermont, USA

2018

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PIM 76

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SIT Graduate Institute

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Dedication

I dedicate this work to Clare Rosenfield, who is my American mom, my mentor and my guide, without her support, this degree would have never been possible. The special dedication goes to Mrs. Rosenfield who inspired me, empowered, and supported my higher education for years, which made it possible for me to continue my education.

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Abstract

Afghanistan has undergone almost 40 years of war and instability and these different wars have had a huge impact on Afghan girls and women as each regime brought new rules for women's opportunities, in particular, their access to education. This Independent Practitioner Inquiry Capstone (IPIC) paper explores the idea of female empowerment in the Afghanistan context in order to better understand the connection with education related to empowerment, education, gender, agency and mentorship. This small-scale qualitative study relies upon a combination of interviews and autoethnographical data and may provide additional insights into how education influences empowerment in the lives of Afghan women and girls. For the purpose of this study, five Afghan women have been interviewed who currently live in the U.S, but have lived most of their lives in Afghanistan. This study provides information about what Afghan women already know about women's empowerment and how they can relate their education with the idea of empowerment. It will also bring out some suggestions from women about what needs to be done in order for them to feel empowered and supported in a country like Afghanistan, where women are continuously struggling to get educated and face different forms of violence. The study findings cover four major themes: the impact of war and gender on women, understanding empowerment, developing a sense of empowerment and agency, and education in relation to leadership and mentorship. Some of the major outcomes of this study is that Afghan women argue that education has a very important role in their lives in terms of empowerment, agency, and how they function in the society. In addition, the study also reveals that besides education, family's support and having mentors who can really encourage women along their development may contribute significantly to feelings of greater empowerment.

Introduction

In this Independent Practitioner Inquiry Capstone (IPIC), I explore the idea of female empowerment in the Afghanistan context in order to better understand the connection between empowerment, education, gender, agency and mentorship. This small-scale qualitative study may provide additional insights into how education influences empowerment in the lives of Afghan women and girls. As an Afghan woman who was born in Kabul, Afghanistan, close to the time when the Taliban took over the country, I have seen the struggle of the Afghan population in general in accessing education, but especially for Afghan women and girls. During the Taliban regime, which was from 1996 to 2001, only men and boys could go to school, but only for certain Islamic studies. Thus, they were also deprived of academic education as they were not allowed to study math, science, and art. Even more concerning, Afghan women and girls were not allowed to go to school or have a job outside of the home which isolated them in many ways.

Moreover, the connection between women's educational opportunities and insecurity and violence warrants further exploration. According to Karuti (2010), "the achievement of girls' right to education can address some of societies' deeply rooted inequalities that disadvantage and expose girls to vulnerability" (p. 1). Similarly, in this paper, I refer to education as either formal schooling or as a structured learning experience that fills in the gaps for individuals who did not have access to formal schooling. In Afghanistan, such non-formal programs take many shapes, including underground schools or programs offered by CBO's and NGOs. The latter may focus on workforce-related skills development but also basic education skills like reading and numeracy (United Nations, n.d).

The civil war in Afghanistan has now been raging for 40 years, and in these years, there have been constant major political and social shifts in the lives of Afghan people. In particular,

Afghan women and girls' lives have been tremendously affected. In each regime throughout the country, Afghan women and girls were restricted from education either by the government, as under the Taliban rule, or by rampant security threats would become a barrier when the government supported women and girls to go to school but that they could not feasibly access educational offerings. This lack of access to education is particularly problematic because, education can help women and girls be independent and take part in society. However, most Afghan women are deprived of education.

This lack of educational access is further compounded by the different forms of violence that many women face in during different phases of their lives in Afghanistan. Some of the most common forms of violence are intimate partner violence (both physical and verbal), sexual harassment in public and private spheres, child marriage, forced marriage, honor killing, and acid attacks. Based on a British government report, 5,132 cases of violence against women were reported to the Human Rights Commission in 2016 alone and among these reported cases, 241 were murder cases (O'Donnell, 2016). These cases involved different forms of the above-mentioned violence. These numbers are very high for just one year, but they show the enormity of the scope of the issue of violence against women. In a country where many women are victims of violence, deprived of education, and lack agency, which will be defined later on in this paper, women and girls' opportunities for empowerment and their sources of motivation are woefully unclear. This present capstone study will allow us to hear directly from Afghan women's voices to better understand how they view empowerment and how they might understand a connection, if any, between empowerment and education. For the purposes of this capstone, I will be defining empowerment as a process which enables human beings to explore their inner abilities

and act upon that to achieve their goals in their lives. A more comprehensive exploration of the term follows in a later section.

Building upon a comprehensive review of the literature, this small-scale qualitative study combines interview data with autobiographical data using an autoethnographic approach. In order to address the issue of empowerment and education for women and girls in Afghanistan, the study seeks to answer one central research question: *How do Afghan women define empowerment and in what ways do they see the connection between education and empowerment?* While “empowerment” is largely a Western term and one rarely used in Afghanistan, the process has great application to the Afghan context and empowerment is closely related to education. This study provides information on Afghan women’s knowledge about empowerment and how they connect education with empowerment. This paper will also address some suggestions made by women regarding what needs to be done in order for them to feel empowered and supported in a country like Afghanistan. The study findings cover four major themes: the impact of war and gender on women, understanding empowerment, developing a sense of empowerment and agency, and education in relation to leadership and mentorship. Some of the major outcomes of this study is that Afghan women argue that education has a very important role in their lives in terms of empowerment, agency, and how they function in the society. In addition, the study also reveals that besides education, family’s support and having mentors who can really encourage women along their development may contribute significantly to feelings of greater empowerment.

In the sections below, I will be presenting the results of the literature review, which includes conceptual framework that frame this inquiry process. The conceptual framework addresses a number of key concepts including empowerment, agency, leadership, and mentorship. I will also introduce the research methods and how the study was conducted including its

limitations. This study finding brings out some really strong ideas about how Afghan women define empowerment and how they relate empowerment with their personal and academic life. Regardless of my interviewees' ages and the different stage of life that they are at, they all had their own struggles, which includes getting educated, having a career, and fighting for their education over their forced marriages. Most of these struggles were that came up during the interviewees were because of my interviewees being women in country that is experiencing war for the past four decades, which had a huge impact on women's persona, social, academic, and personal life. All these major take a ways from the study will be further explained in the data analysis section.

My Positionality

In this present study, my life experiences and my own position are integral to every step of the process. I am an Afghan woman born during the civil war and who experienced immigration due to war. I also had to leave Afghanistan for a second time to pursue higher education. With this background, I am uniquely positioned to perform this research and offer an internal perspective on the important topic of women and girls' empowerment and the relationship to education. Throughout my life, I have seen how Afghan women and girls are out of school because of war, insecurity culture, etc. I firmly believe that education is essential for human development, as I will substantiate with evidence below in the literature review. I am one of many Afghan women who had to make the hard decision to leave Afghanistan for Bangladesh at the age of 18 for higher education., since a good quality education was not accessible in Afghanistan.

Although girls were again allowed to go to school after the fall of the Taliban in 2001, insecurity was still a major problem (see Background section for more information). Many girls

in Kabul started going back to school after the fall of Taliban but going to university and pursuing higher education remained a major problem even in the capital city Kabul. Within the city, there was only one university which was just not enough as it could not accommodate all the qualified high school graduates. Therefore, I had to get my higher education in Bangladesh with the help of my supportive family. Nevertheless, not all Afghan women and girls are lucky to have a supportive family and one with the resources that would allow them to pursue tertiary education. During my undergraduate studies at an all-women's school in Chittagong, Bangladesh named Asian University for Women, I witnessed my own and other women's growth and felt empowered. In my case, empowerment meant that I was able to share my opinions, speak up, and be myself. The responses I always received from my professors showed me how valued my opinions were, which helped me to further value myself. These supportive responses led me to choose to study further; as I was taught that I can dream and achieve my dreams through higher education. Therefore, I was able to start my Masters at the School for International Training in Sustainable Development, to further develop my skills and knowledge in order to do something for society.

In addition to my own experiences, my interest in women's empowerment stories related to education grew during my practicum phase when I joined Women for Women International (WfWI) as a Program intern in the Global Programs' Unit (GPU) in Washington, D.C. While I conducted the interviews for the present capstone paper independently from WfWI, the program served as an inspiration and provided additional background that informed the study. I provide a brief overview of WfWI in the next section.

Inspiration from WfWI

WfWI was founded in 1993 by Zainab Salbi to help women in conflict-affected countries to become economically self-sufficient, come out of poverty and violence, and feel empowered and supported (WfWI, 2018). Salbi is “an Iraqi-American humanitarian, entrepreneur, author, and media commentator who has dedicated herself to women’s rights and freedom” (Salbi, 2018, p. 1). The main office of WfWI is located in Washington, D.C. but it has offices in eight other countries: Afghanistan, Bosnia, Rwanda, Kosovo, Nigeria, Iraq, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and South Sudan. WfWI finds women in war zone countries who want to develop business skills and get some financial support including a small loan and a monthly stipend. WfWI is a nonprofit organization based on people’s donations and support. The main goal for WfWI is to educate, empower, support, create a safe space for women to come together in and to feel supported by other women in the community, and become economically independent and be educated on different topics (WfWI, 2018). Each woman who participates in WfWI is sponsored by someone in the U.S. or another country who pays a monthly amount of \$35, which covers the training’s cost and the monthly \$10 stipend for the women who participate in the program. Each woman enrolls in a 12-month training program, and each month besides the training, she receives a \$10 stipend for her own personal investment. The training that these women receive focuses on sustaining an income, health and wellness, family planning, gender discrimination, women’s rights, social networks and safety.

WfWI has been serving Afghan women in Afghanistan since 2002 and the average age woman that they serve is between 18 to 24 years old. Ninety percent of the women that they serve are illiterate (Women for Women International-Afghanistan, 2018). Many consider Afghanistan to be one of the worst places to be a woman on earth, so providing Afghan women with trainings

that allow them to better understand their rights, learn about different topics such as health, economy, and social life, as well as different skills, is a wonderful way to help women escape a discriminatory and dependent life (WfWI-Afghanistan, 2018). According to WfWI (2018), “[WfWI’s] foundational training helps women know and defend their rights, influence decisions at home and in their communities, initiate activities that generate income... contributing to economic self-sufficiency in their lives and for their families” (p. 2). Since 2002, 10,900 Afghan women have enrolled in the yearlong training program of WfWI and after the training program almost 110 women were able to take out microfinance loans to set up their own small businesses (WfWI-Afghanistan, 2018).

The example of Zarghuna is relevant because it illustrates a woman whose life was changed through a year-long non-formal education program through WfWI (Women for Women International, 2018). Zarghuna is a 38-year-old woman who is a survivor of child marriage and domestic violence and whose life was completely ruined when she was given to a family to marry their son to resolve a conflict that was created between these two families when she was only 6 years old (WfWI, 2018). She went to her in-laws to serve them as daughter in-law at the age of 6, got married at the age of 15 and became a widow when her husband was killed by her own family members at the age of 18 in order to free her from him (WfWI, 2018). She did not only become a widow and a mother of a child but underwent more violence by her in-laws since she remained with her husband’s family after her husband was killed. As in Afghan culture, once a woman is married to a man, there is a belief that she should leave her parents’ home alive, and she comes back only if she is dead, which basically means that there is no way for a woman to rejoin her parents’ house after she is married. Therefore, Zarghuna remained with her in-laws after her husband was killed. Zarghuna found WfWI and joined its training as a way to deal with the

depression she was going through. In a publication of WfWI (2017), Zarghuna commented on what happened after joining WfWI by stating,

I succeeded in finding a job in embroidery and handicraft. And I was always thinking about how I could build my own business. Eventually I decided to take a micro-loan of \$500. From there I started selling my embroidered products and my business grew quickly. I am so proud to be able to tell you that I have \$30,000 in the bank. And just a month ago, I was able to purchase machinery for \$18,000 to improve my business (2017, p. 12).

Zarghuna is one example of the many women who have highly benefited from having access to education through WfWI later on in her life. WfWI educates women not only how to read and write, about their health and their rights, but it also educates women to become self-sufficient in terms of their income by setting up their own small businesses. Zarghuna's story is very inspirational as it tells how much education can change a woman's life even if she was forced into a child marriage and she survived domestic violence from her in-laws. Her education is very powerful in-terms of how she can stand on her own feet and is, moreover, now helping other women in the community. This is certainly a story of empowerment through education. According to Zarhghuna "I am so happy that I am providing employment to 120 women, women who once suffered a lot. It's not only women that I hire. I also have men as employees and helping us with the sales" (2017, p. 12). Education did not only empower Zarghuna but made her independent both socially and economically and now she is helping other women to go through this process by working for her.

My responsibility to value stories

Moreover, besides being so passionate about this study, this study itself has helped me to grow as a person through observing how the research develops and how interviews are conducted. It is difficult to find academic research written by Afghans, particularly Afghan women. I wanted to understand reasons other than war that explained this. My field interviews shed some light on this question, highlighting two specific possibilities: the necessary strength of relationships between interviewer and interviewee, and the need for empathetic interview methods, specifically around interview logistics and the time spent with each interviewee. First, I realized the insecurity women feel when sharing their points of view, even if their opinions are anonymous. Most people that I spoke with about the research would pause for a moment, then ask me what type of questions I would ask. In their silent pauses, I began to understand that these women might feel very insecure when asked to share their opinions, even if they currently live outside of Afghanistan and in the U.S. This hesitancy demonstrates how insecurity and fear perpetuates in Afghan women's minds, and these anxieties follow them out of Afghanistan. When I asked some of the women why they did not want to participate, they shared that they just did not want any problems to be created in their lives. This idea that sharing an opinion could create a problem in one's personal life made me question the sense of freedom to which we are all entitled. It made me wonder how it might be that educated women could still be afraid of sharing their opinion, and I concluded that this might be one of the reasons it is hard to find academic sources written by women as well as Afghans in general.

Many women are afraid to share their opinion, trying instead to reduce their risk. Again, this seems connected to the gender gap. Another explanation of the lack of Afghan women's voices in academic writing could be the necessity of building a strong relationship with the women who

participate in conversations around women's issues and women's empowerment. As I got past the initial questions of participating in my research, I saw how women started to feel comfortable as I introduced myself and my stance on women's issues and empowerment. As a researcher, I felt a responsibility to share my personal story with my interviewees in order to make them more comfortable in sharing their stories. When I talked about myself, how much this topic means to me, and what impact this topic has in my life, the interviewees would open up more and more. I also tried to empower the women I spoke with during the interviews by valuing their experiences and their stories. Each of the interviewees had her own unique tale, so pausing to value her story helped us to build a relationship. I shared with each interviewee how inspired and amazed I was to see how such strong women built their lives in the midst of war and against many challenges in Afghanistan. I also told them how important it is for us and for the rest of the world to hear our stories and struggles so our stories can serve as examples to inspire people and make us all better. Valuing each woman's story was not only my priority, but my responsibility, as their stories could positively influence many women and men. It is very important for all women to recognize and share our struggles, no matter which country and culture we belong to, and that we do not struggle alone. Therefore, personally being connected to this study and going through the process because of my positionality was a fulfilling experience.

Background

To provide an adequate understanding of the complicated setting for this study, in the next sections, I provide an overview of Afghanistan, the ensuing conflict, women's lives, and education in Afghanistan.

Overview of Afghanistan

Afghanistan is located in south-central Asia, surrounded from the north by Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan, on the northeast by China, on the east and south by Pakistan, and by Iran on the west (see appendix C for the map of Afghanistan). Afghanistan was a monarchy and was ruled by Mohammed Daud Khan during the 1950s; however, Afghanistan was invaded by Russia during the 1970s. Daud Khan was the reason why Russia got interested in Afghanistan since he asked for economic and military help from Russia in 1953 (BBC, 2017). During the Soviet Union's invasion in Afghanistan in 1979, more than 1.3 million Afghans were killed, Russia lost 13,833, and more than a third of the Afghan population became refugees and many of those refugees still did not return yet (Jalali & Lester, 1999). This was the beginning of instability in Afghanistan. While the Russians were defeated by the Mujahedeen during the 1980s to the 1990s and the war and losing lives continued as the war is still going on (Khan, 2011). The Taliban began ruling the country in 1995 which lasted until 2001 (BBC, 2017).

In the next paragraphs, I provide additional information on the Mujahedeen and the Taliban. The group of people who arose as Mujahedeen in the first place were a group of Afghans who were somehow seen as leaders of their communities, who mostly did not have any background in the army, and were young Afghans who were asked to join in order to protect the country from the foreign influence (Jalali & Lester, 1999). The Mujahedeen's main agent, or outside actor, that helped them get together to plan their attacks in Kabul was Pakistan and that is where they formed their alliances with the countries that were supporting them with war tools and money. These countries include the U.S., Pakistan, China, Iran and Saudi Arabia (BBC, 2017). These countries' involvement in supporting the Mujahedeen with weapons and money, empowered the Mujahedeen to stay and defeat Russia, and then stay in power even until now in Afghanistan as some of them

hold positions in the current government. Thus, what sustained the Mujahedeen economically was getting money and armed support by the above-mentioned countries as well as their idea of selling weapons into the markets in Afghanistan as a means of income generation for their families (Jalali & Lester, 1999). The rising of the Mujahedeen and Russia's constant loss both in terms of the army and money made Russia want to voluntarily leave Afghanistan after signing the peace agreement with the U.S and Pakistan in 1988 (BBC, 2017). In order to understand this complex war and the Mujahedeen empowerment, one has to dive deep into analyzing the major interest of each country as well as the political economy that was created by the illegal economy which was selling the weapons that will be discussed further in the paper.

Continuing the story, I would note that while the Mujahedeen were fighting in Afghanistan, another group arose by the name of the Taliban, which claimed to be religious and have an understanding of the Quran (Johnson & Chris, 2008). The Taliban took over Afghanistan in 1995 and ruled in Afghanistan until 2001. The Taliban introduced a "hard-line version of Islam, banning women from work, and introducing Islamic punishments, which included stoning to death and amputations" (BBC, 2017, p. 18). At first, when the Taliban came to Afghanistan, they were welcomed by the people. The Taliban were officially recognized as a government by Pakistan and Saudi Arabia and like the Mujahedeen, they were given various kinds of support by these two countries (BBC, 2017).

When civil war started in Afghanistan, the "education system fell completely apart in the ensuing civil war. Kabul University closed, its faculty members dispersing to Pakistan, Iran, or the West. Children were either taught at home, in the local mosque, or not at all" (Razia's Ray of Hope Foundation, 2017, p. 4). In addition to education, women's rights were challenged by all means. Women lost the right to work outside the home, they were no longer allowed to step out of the

house without their male guardians, and they were no longer allowed to go to school or university (Women of Afghanistan, nd). While women's literacy rate was already low in Afghanistan, during the Taliban regime, it was even lower (Women of Afghanistan, nd). As illustration, during the Taliban regime boys received religious education, but girls were not allowed to go to school and even religious education was banned to them. By religious education I mean to clarify that secular education subjects such as science and arts were not allowed in schools even for boys as well. The reason why I am only focusing on the Taliban regime is because it was one of the last regimes that formally banned schools on girls' and did not allow women to go appear in public places alone without a male guardian. Despite the fact that women and girls could at least go to school in Kabul after the fall of Taliban, but the insecurity which will be discussed later on in this paper remained a main problem.

The Taliban were attacked by the U.S. after Al-Qaeda's attack on the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001. The United States was aware that the Taliban and Al-Qaeda were gaining power in Afghanistan prior to 9/11, however, these two groups only became their enemies after the U.S. was attacked (Goodson & Thomas, 2014). The main aims for the United States' involvement in Afghanistan were to:

- 1) Contain or prevent the threat of terrorist attacks on the homeland or American interests abroad;
 - 2) Prevent the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction from the region;
 - 3) Ensure regional stability; and,
 - 4) Forestall rising peer competitors in the region.
- Finally, they conclude by offering a broad three-part strategy or post-2014 Afghanistan: 1) Finish destroying al-Qaeda; 2) Continue rebuilding Afghanistan; and, 3) Regionalize strategy. (Goodson & Thomas, 2014, p. 5)

However, none of these aims were achieved in Afghanistan, and the war is still going on. During this period of time, the U.S lost “over 2,200 lives, and over U.S. \$650 billion” and thousands of Afghans lost their lives (Goodson & Thomas, 2014, p. 15). This background information about the war as well as the history of the country provide the necessary grounding for understanding the major insecurities that women and girls need to deal with in Afghanistan, which is a focus of this paper. Having the knowledge about the war’s current status can also help us understand how insecurity remains a big challenge to Afghan women’s daily efforts to carry out their personal, academic, and professional life. In this next section, I delve deeper into the conflict’s impact on Afghan women.

Afghan Women

As is clear from the above, these wars had a huge impact on everybody’s lives; however, Afghan women have been particularly affected. Women are some of the most vulnerable citizens of Afghanistan as they often face different forms of violence and cruelty including domestic violence, sexual harassment, rape, forced marriage, and child marriage. A study shows that 87.2% of Afghan women face at least one type of the above-mentioned violence (Domínguez, 2014). These forms of violence are political as well as social, and are associated with patriarchal power (Bunch, 1990, p. 491). Afghan women not only face violence on a daily basis, but they are also deprived of having agency and control over their own lives.

After the fall of the Taliban, schools were open to girls again, however, the literacy rate in Afghanistan, especially for women, is currently very low. As of 2013 and 2014, the literacy rate among women above 15 years old was 20.3%, while for men it was 50% (The World Bank, 2017, p. 28). At the national level, the literacy rate above 15 years old was 35.4% (The World

Bank, 2017, p. 28). Even after the 16 years of U.S. invasion in Afghanistan, “two thirds of girls still do not go to school,” which is due to the high insecurity in the country (Human Rights Watch, 2017). Insecurity is one of the main reasons, for the low literacy rate, especially in rural which has mainly affected girls’ schools (The World Bank, 2017). According to the United Nations, as reported by CNN, at least 185 attacks happened on schools and hospitals in Afghanistan in 2015 and most of the attacks were by the fundamentalist groups who are against girls’ education (Torgan, 2016). Girls’ schools have been a target of the insurgents for many years in Afghanistan. Currently, 40% of the total country is controlled by the Taliban, and those are the most insecure and dangerous places for girls due to different kinds of threats such as “sexual harassment, kidnapping, acid attack, and threats against girls’ education” (Human Rights Watch, 2017, p. 10) (See Appendix C for a map that shows the area controlled by the Taliban). In addition to all the insecurity, 40% of all schools in Afghanistan do not have buildings and those that exist are not very accessible due to the far distance from students’ homes (Human Rights Watch, 2017). Having no buildings means that the students are either studying in an empty space on the side of the road, tents, pavements, or any other inconvenient open space on the ground with no chair or even a mat on the floor. As further illustration, according to provincial education officials of Jalalabad, 395 schools do not have buildings in the province, which is a great barrier for girls, as not having proper walls and studying in an open area make parents less likely to send their daughters to schools (Human Rights Watch, 2017). When there is insecurity and many threats towards girls for going to school, the rate of girls attending school is very low. Moreover, some of the other problems are embedded deeply within society such as prioritizing boy’s education over girls’ and forced child marriage. Based on Human Rights Report, a third of girls marry before the age of 18, which often results in girls dropping out of

schools (Human Rights Watch, 2017). One of the most harmful results of child marriage is being deprived of education in addition to the other kinds of adversity women have to face.

Afghanistan has undergone almost 40 years of war and instability and these different wars had a huge impact on Afghan women as they were deprived of education and working outside of the home. In each regime, women have been the victims of massive violence, were deprived of their rights, and were prevented from being active members of the society in terms of being educated or being part of the workforce. Therefore, in a country where women are victims of violence, deprived of education, and lack agency, how can they feel empowered and motivated? According to the World Bank agency means, “an individual’s (or group’s) ability to make effective choices and to transform those choices into desired outcomes” (2011, p. 1). This is a problem because education has the potential to empower and help women to have their space in society. As Beteille (1999) says, “empowerment is seen by many politicians, publicists, social activists and a growing section of the intelligentsia generally as the only effective answer to oppression, exploitation, injustice and the other maladies with which our society is beset” (p. 589). Therefore, the focus of this present study will be identifying some of protective and detrimental factors that impact Afghan women’s lives in Afghanistan in terms of empowerment and agency. The main focus will be on how educated Afghan women define empowerment and how they may relate empowerment with education. Additionally, finding out what makes Afghan women feel empowered or not empowered and how Afghan women develop the sense of empowerment and agency is another primary factor.

Conceptual Framework

For the purpose of this capstone study, I have identified the main concepts that guide this small-scale qualitative study, particularly in relationship to empowerment and education for Afghan women. These concepts include gender, empowerment and leadership and mentorship. This section provides an overview of each concept along with a related review of the literature. In many parts of this literature review, I have used the U.S as an example as my interviewees are currently living in the U.S, and because most of the women who will be interviewed are in the U.S currently. I also draw upon the literature from a few other countries. However, I would like to acknowledge that while the study takes place with Afghan women currently in the U.S, that this context is very different from Afghanistan because the USA is considered to be resource rich, offers stability, and is a different cultural environment. Thus, while it is possible to draw some parallels and inspiration, it is likely that direct application would not be fully appropriate. Each of the next sections explores gender, empowerment and mentorship respectively.

As mentioned in the introduction, the academic literature on Afghan women's empowerment related to education, specifically resources that highlight women's voices, are very sparse. Though studies have been done in Afghanistan and on Afghan women, most of these are by foreign researchers. In addition, the current security situation has further complicated the development of academic literature about Afghanistan. Therefore, for the purpose of this study, the literature specific to empowerment and education will draw across experiences worldwide. To find resources, I utilized the SIT database, Google Scholar, JSTOR, and Google itself. The keywords for finding these resources were "women empowerment in Afghanistan," "women empowerment," "violence against women," "role of leadership and mentorship in women's lives," "education and empowerment," and "role of gender in women's education and empowerment."

Knowing how much education can offer, in the next section, I present an overview of the existing literature related to different aspects of education that best serve the purpose of this study. This information provides the grounding that will help us understand the data collected from the interviews.

Gender

In general, gender has a complex impact on the education sector. Johnson and Repta (2012) mention that notions of gender are both produced and shaped by institutions such as the media, religion, education, medical, and other political and social systems, creating a societal gender structure that is deeply entrenched and rarely questioned, but nonetheless hugely influential. This means that gender is a social construct that is created by the people of society. Gender is highly influential in how one acts based on their differently based on how social norms are set on men and women to be in the society. And based on gender, many women around the world are deprived of necessary rights in the society such as education, which negatively impacts their lives. Being disadvantaged educationally often subsequently results in difficulties entering the workforce and being active members of society. Worldwide, “two-thirds of the 774 million illiterate people” are women (UNESCO, 2013). Women being deprived of education and being illiterate is a form of gender-based discrimination. For this paper, I will provide examples of some countries in which women face obstacles in accessing education. Some countries in which women face obstacles in accessing education includes Nigeria, where there are five and half million girls out of school, Pakistan where there are three million girls out of school, and Ethiopia where there are more than one million girls out of school (UNESCO, 2013). The above-mentioned countries are all considered developing countries where women have a hard time accessing education.

To compare, I will now give an example a developed country: the U.S. While in some countries/societies gender discrimination prevents girls from attending schools, in some societies such as the United States, most women and girls receive good quality education; they attend school and continue their education more than boys/men, however they still struggle in the workforce. Jacobs (1996) mentions in his article that women's access to college in the U.S. focuses on the percentage of girls going to school, college, and university and talks about how women attend schools and continue their education more in the U.S. His article is dated in terms of data, however, his argument and his claim that women are seen more in the educational sectors compared to men is still valid today. More women have bachelor's and master degrees compared to men in the U.S.; in "1992, 54.2% of bachelor's degree recipients were women. (Jacobs 1996, p. 155). According to a survey done by CRDC in 2009-2010, 57.4% of girls' would receive their bachelor degrees and 62.6% of them would receive their masters (2012).

Even though more women seem to have more access to education in the U.S., many struggle to compete in the workforce and in their professional lives with men. Women are paid less than men and they mostly do not get jobs that involve a leadership role and management skills (Institute for Women's Policy and Research, n.d). According to the statistics, women are paid 20.4% less than men in the U.S for the same job (Institute for Women's Policy and Research, n.d). This shows how women are paid less because of their gender, which contributes to gender inequality in the education sector as well as in the workplace (Jacobs, 1996, p. 162). This is not just something that happens in the U.S., but it happens around the world. Women are paid less than men and are seen less in some types of job that are considered male dominated.

The problem of gender-discriminated pay crosses over into many other countries. It is not only in Afghanistan but also in other countries such as India where women are absent in "top

management teams.” They do not work in most decision-making positions and they are less visible in most of the “senior position in the universities” (Chanana, 2013, p. 82). Seeing something like this is not unique in India or the U.S., but it is something that is applicable in most countries around the world. Chanana (2013) says, “male academics [who] join colleges and universities have the advantage of seeing men in positions of leadership, decision making, and authority” (p. 84). Seeing men in higher authorities and positions creates a safe space for men to think men always end up in key roles having a good job that pays well.

The idea of not hiring women in the management roles, often demotivates women and makes it harder for them to compete in the job market. For example, based on my own experience, I worked at the Ministry of Counter Narcotics as Policy Analysis and Formulation Coordinator in 2014 in Kabul Afghanistan, where women made up only 5% of the totally employees. There was only one woman who was director and one woman as an officer, so the other women did not have any key roles and most of them were working as cleaners. Women were hardly seen in any of the leadership roles as a director, officer, or manager so out of those 5% women who were working at the ministry, only two of them were in leadership roles. Whenever there was a higher management team meeting, there was only one woman in the meeting among more than 20 men, which indicates that women are not given key roles and it was very obvious in the ministry in which I worked. I have talked to some other women who were working as assistants and have asked why fewer women were in the leadership roles. Most of them would answer that they persistently do not hire woman in higher management team. According to my own observations, this is an obvious gender discrimination to see that woman are purposefully not hired in key roles and this applies in many countries around the world.

When we talk about women having no access to education or job, we need to understand the role that gender plays. Afghan women continuously face discrimination, violence, restricted access to education and the job market, and these things are happening to them largely because of their gender. The massive violence and the deprivation of education that Afghan women face shapes what women and girls do with their lives in Afghanistan and the decisions they make. Moreover, the problem becomes much more complex when combined with war and other present ideologies. For example, after the fall of the Taliban, while girls and women can go to school, they have to face security issues and many forms of violence when they try to go to school or join the work-force.

Niloofer Rahmani is the first Afghan female who served in the Afghan Military as the fixed wing pilot after the fall of Taliban and she is an example of a strong Afghan woman who fought against gender barriers (Jones, 2017). Niloofer is one of the few Afghan women who had the courage to join the male-dominated Afghan, but like many other Afghan women, she could not continue serving in Afghan military as her life was in danger in Afghanistan (Jones, 2017). Due to her work, Niloofer used to get threats from her colleagues' relatives, and extremists groups of people and as a result, she had to flee Afghanistan (Jones, 2017). Niloofer's story further illuminates the gender gap within the work-force and the implications for security. The price for challenging the gender gap in Afghanistan mostly results with putting one's life in danger no matter if it is in the education sector or workforce. The price that women and girls pay for getting educated and having a job does not come free in Afghanistan, but it comes with serious threats to one's life.

Empowerment

After looking at how gender impact's women's ability to access education as well as a career in male dominated workplaces, it is really important to look into the empowerment aspect of their education as well as other aspects of their lives, but I will be focusing on education for the purpose of this paper. Empowerment is shaped by different factors within society such as gender and class. Prior to further investigation, we need to explore the definition of empowerment a bit more deeply. Beteille (1999) identifies that, "empowerment is seen by many politicians, publicists, social activists and a growing section of the intelligentsia generally as the only effective answer to oppression, exploitation, injustice and the other maladies with which our society is beset" (p. 589). Looking into this quote we can see that empowerment is a means to fight against oppression and injustice; therefore, it is "context driven rather than theory driven" (p, 589), which means that the manifestation of empowerment changes from context to context.

Moreover, it is significant to see what kind of role empowerment plays and how it may enable women/girls to continue their education. Empowerment deals with "social transformation; it is about radical social transformation; and it is about the people - ordinary, common people, rather than politicians, experts and other socially or culturally advantaged person" (Beteille, 1999, p.590). Furthermore, empowerment has "exciting possibilities," which could be seen in how women and girls' lives are changed after they are empowered (Beteille, 1999, p. 589). Empowerment in the education sector for women means that it opens up different options in their lives, and they feel empowered through their instructors, teachers, and what they study. It seems obvious that women who do not go to school may suffer much more than those who do not. In Afghanistan, for instance, according to Conge and Kanungo (1988),

if we consider empowerment in terms of this rational dynamic, it becomes the process by which leader or manager shares his or her power with subordinates. Power, in this context, is interpreted as the possession of formal authority or control over organizational resources (p.473).

Earlier, I mentioned that empowerment is a process and it is the leader who needs to help his/her followers in this process. Within schools, instructors, principals, and educators play this role as they transfer their knowledge and passion to their students. When this process functions well, it may be empowering and women's education would help them find their passion in their learning, dream big, and be able to speak up for their rights, such as equal treatment and equal pay in the job market. As I indicated in the Introduction, for me, empowerment is a process which enables human beings to explore their inner abilities and act upon that to achieve their goals in their lives.

Education has the potential to serve as an empowering mechanism. Women's empowerment is introduced as a process, which may happen for women when they are able to access the education sector. In a more instrumental way, education can serve as a means to an end, as is espoused in the theory of human capital. According to Kubow and Fossum (2007), human capital theory, "like modernization theory, adopts structural-functionalism's overarching commitments, reflecting a direct and functional relationship between education and development" (p. 11). The word "capital" deals with economy (Kubow & Fossum, 2007) and when it is linked with education, it refers to how education can be considered an investment like many other things such as the societal and personal human development. The word 'Human' being previously had failed to recognize education as an investment at the societal level, but now education is seen as something that has a power over an individual's and in a society's' wealth

(Kubow & Fossum, 2007). As human capital shows, the level of education can determine how a person can get a good job and can be beneficial in the personal and societal economy (Kubow & Fossum, 2007). In this way, human capital theory articulates a functional justification for women being involved in education as an entrée into the job market. Paired with the argument above on gender and access, it follows that when women are out of school and are not part of the workforce, their sense of empowerment maybe affected as education opens up the doors of opportunities and give a sense of self-steam for women.

Leadership and Mentorship

Leaders and mentors play key roles in moving towards gender equality and women's empowerment. A mentor is someone who supports students by giving them advice and guidance (Paterson & Wasekeesikaw, 1994). Paterson and Wasekeesikaw's (1994) research addresses higher education specifically and they describe mentoring as a way to increase students' gratification. They show that some women find it hard to develop a mentorship relationship with their faculty. However, building a relationship with mentors is a critical component in the women's empowerment process as it allows them to get more support and assistance from their mentors to be successful in their academic lives (Paterson & Wasekeesikaw, 1994).

People usually look at mentors or faculty members in a very traditional way, which is, the teacher is the one to give all the knowledge to the students as a "banker" as it is referred to by Paterson and Wasekeesikaw (1994, p.72). This way of looking at the mentor or instructor is arguable since nowadays mentors and faculty members are considered as the ones who motivate, empower, and help the students to be able to nurture their own qualities and develop based those qualities. hooks (1994) describes,

To educate as the practice of freedom is a way of teaching that anyone can learn. [It] ... comes easiest to those of us who teach who also believe that there is an aspect of our vocation that is sacred; who believe that our work is not merely to share information but to share in the intellectual and spiritual growth of our students. To teach in a manner that respects and cares for the souls of our students is essential if we are to provide the necessary conditions where learning can most deeply and intimately begin (p. 13).

hooks sees educating as a process, which empowers the learners to think and believe that they have the capacity to grow and develop both mentally and physically and the role of educators are to make things accessible to the learners (1994). In this process, the mentors who can be the educators play a huge role in how this process is carried out in a students' learning which helps them to learn and feel empowered. Therefore, we always have to reflect upon the extent to which women may or may not be supported in their schools and their learning environment. In addition, mentors should pay close attention to setting up the learning environment in a way that frames mistakes as learning opportunities rather than failures (Paterson & Wasekeesikaw, 1994)

For women to get enough support from their mentor is very crucial as they do not only learn, but they also fight against social norms in which they have to deal with gender differences; both in the learning environment and professional environment. Women's learning as well as their careers are shaped by gender and that is one of the reasons they need support to feel empowered and motivated in what they do. According to Cherney, "women and men approached planning future careers in different ways. Women tended to consider the responsibilities of having a family in addition to their personal aspirations" (Marini & Greenberger, 1978, as cited in Cherney, 1994, p. 714). Most women have different learning methods and ways of planning due to the constructed gender role that they have, which mostly results in how they learn and how they make decisions

for themselves. Finding the reasons that motivate women's learning and finding ways to help women to feel supported enough to tackle such issues is one of the main jobs of instructors or mentors in the higher education sector. For example, in Afghanistan, like many other countries, many people believe that women are the ones who need to take care of the family and look after everybody in the family; therefore, how they choose to study, have a job, and feel supported is different than men because they have different responsibilities.

In conclusion, identifying the relationship between social norms, schooling, and mentorship provides insights into the support women may obtain through the education they receive and the potential for empowerment. Women and girls' enthusiasm and long-term effects of empowerment relies on their learning process that make them capable to learn and feel powerful. However, there are many factors that contribute to women's limited access to education and subsequently, their access to the workforce in many areas of the globe. As I've indicated above, gender differences is one of those factors that mostly has a negative impact on many women's lives as many are deprived of resources such education to feel empowered. As mentioned above, gender, empowerment, and mentorship all provide the conceptual framing for the study, which will help us to understand how women see empowerment in Afghanistan.

Research Methods

For this present study, I used qualitative research methods to answer the research question that examines how empowerment processes manifest for Afghan women with different levels of education. A qualitative approach aims to improve understanding of social issues and problems by asking participants specific questions regarding their ideas about the world (Hesse-Biber, 2017). According to Hesse-Biber (2017), qualitative research focuses on the "social meaning people

attribute to their experiences, circumstances, and situation, as well as the meanings people embed into texts, images, and other objects” (p. 4). Qualitative research methods focus on people’s points of view, letters, and pictures instead of gathering numbers and offering a hypothesis, as is the case with quantitative methods (Hesse-Biber, 2017). For this capstone study, I used two specific qualitative research methods: in-depth interviews and autoethnography. Within the following paragraphs, I provide an in-depth overview of these methods.

According to Mack, Macqueen, Guest, and Namey (2005), an “in-depth interview is a technique designed to elicit a vivid picture of participant’s perspective on the research topic” (p. 29). In-depth interviews are categorized in three different types, “the informal, conversational interview; the interview guide or topical approach; and standardized, open-ended interview” (Marshall & Rossman, 2016, p. 151). For this research, I used standardized or semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews use specific questions to guide conversation but are flexible enough to allow the interviewer to deviate to pursue emerging topics (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). In order to address the research question, I asked a sample of Afghan women questions related to their lives, mostly about their experiences with empowerment, and I listened to their ideas and perspectives (see the interview guide in the Appendix B for more information). In the interviews, I explored what empowerment means to Afghan women. I also asked my interviewees to share some of their experiences in order to give me, and the readers of this study, a better understanding of their experiences as Afghan women and how they see the relationship between education and empowerment. Furthermore, as I conducted interviews, I focused on women’s suggestions regarding how Afghan women could feel empowered (see interview guide in Appendix B). As all of my participants are currently residing in the U.S, I also aimed to compare and contrast how their sense of empowerment has changed since they came to the U.S.

I conducted the interviews in person, which allowed me to not only focus on their opinions but their gestures as well. As every method has its strengths and weaknesses, the strengths and weaknesses of in-depth interviews should be acknowledged as well. One of the biggest strengths of this type of research method is that it is not time consuming, so the research can be done within the short period of time (Mack et al, 2005). Other strengths of interviewing are the sense of closeness or involvement that is developed during the research and the ability to address sensitive issues (Mack et al, 2005, p.29).

The sampling method in qualitative research is usually a “convenience sample, theoretical sample, or a judgment sample” (Marshall, 1996, p. 523). For this capstone study, I used a combination of “convenience” and “judgment samples,” the latter of which is also known as “purposeful sample” (Marshall, 1996, p. 523). According to Marshall (1996), in this method, the “researcher actively selects the most productive sample to answer the research question... This is a more intellectual strategy than the simple demographic stratification of epidemiological studies, though age, gender and social class might be important variables” (Marshall, 1996, p. 523). Convenience sampling refers to working with participants who are more readily available. Using a combined judgment and convenience sampling approach in this study allowed me to choose the interviewees most appropriate for the topic and in light of resources available, including my location. In order to qualify to take part in my study, participants had to have a good sense of the situation and education system in Afghanistan and they must have lived in Afghanistan at some point in their lives. Interviewing those who really had some experience in the country helped me find answers to my questions based on their own personal experiences and observations. Therefore, I included those Afghan women into my research who lived in Afghanistan, studied there in an Afghan school and university, and recently moved to the U.S. For the purpose of this study, to

escape the war, or for work purposes. I also was looking for women who were well-informed about the situation in Afghanistan. In accompaniment of the semi-structured interviews, in the next paragraphs I will address the second main method used for this small-scale qualitative study: autoethnography. I will also provide greater details about selection and recruitment of interview participants.

The second method that I used is autoethnography where I, the researcher, added my own experience and observations of experience with the process of women's empowerment to the research. According to Pace (2012), "Autoethnographers reflexively explore their personal experiences and their interactions with others as a way of achieving wider cultural, political or social understanding" (p. 2). Drawing on my experience helped me to critically reflect upon women's experiences with empowerment in relation to their education and I weaved my story through my analysis of the interviews. Thompson (2010) argues that there is a connection between the researcher/author's personal knowledge and experience and their research. She points out that researchers are not outside the social world they study and their experiences are valuable resources in making sense of the world (1992). Thompson defines this process as the constructed knower. According to Thompson and Linda (1992):

Constructed knowers weave together what they know from personal experience with what they learn from others. They move beyond academic disciplines and their methods as the sole source of authority, and reclaim themselves as sources of knowledge... They mingle the procedural knowledge of their discipline with their personal knowledge of themselves ... Constructed knowledge requires reflexivity. That is, knowers have to reflect on their own thoughts, moods, desires, and judgment. (p.10)

Therefore, knowing that the researcher's experience is a valuable source, I drew on my own experience of empowerment, mainly through education, to critically analyze women's situation in Afghanistan. Combining my own experience with empowerment and education with my interviewees' experiences helped me to further develop a strong connection between the researcher and the topic. As I mentioned in the Positionality section above, I believe my own personal experience and attachment to the topic is helpful for both the readers and the participants as this will help them to understand my point of view. My intention for this autoethnography was that it would allow me to conduct even more valid research as my own thoughts will be more overtly shared and my experiences be acknowledged. In the next paragraphs I will provide a more detailed description of my sampling and recruiting protocols for interviews.

Selection of site, participants and recruitment for interviews

There are many Afghans who moved from Afghanistan to different parts of the U.S. and a good number of these Afghans are now living in Washington D.C and Virginia. Many of them lived most of their lives in Afghanistan and relocated recently. I also currently live in Virginia and work in D.C. so I have conveniently chosen these areas as the site for this capstone study. More specifically, I interviewed five Afghan educated women above 20 years old, who have attained a high level of formal education up to the undergraduate or masters level. In order to protect the confidentiality of participants, I assigned pseudonyms. Table 1 provides a description of interviewees and relevant characteristics.

Table 1: Overview of Interviewees

Interviewee's Information				
Name	Age Range	Education	Occupation	Marital Status
Parwana	45s	Bachelors from Afghanistan	News Reporter and Anchor	Widow
Fariha	30s	Masters from Afghanistan	Social Employee and Counselor	Married
Nooria	20s	Has a masters from the U.S	Women Advocate	Single
Maryam	30s	Currently Masters Student in the U.S	MA Candidate Student	Single
Alya	30s	Currently Masters Student in the U.S	Counselor	Single

In terms of recruitment, as an Afghan woman, I already knew many families who live in the Greater D.C. area so once my proposal got approved by the IRB at SIT, I reached out to different individuals by using their home address, phone numbers or LinkedIn accounts in order to invite them to take part in my study. Most of these women were introduced to me through a mutual contact so I talked over the phone with my participants once I decided who would be interviewed. The participants decided where to conduct the interviews since I did not want them to face any problems or disturbances. The location of the interview was completely up to the participants so based on their own preference, I interviewed them in their house, a quiet café, or a restaurant, which ever they said they were comfortable at. However, I also made sure that the place they

suggested was not too far from me so that I did not have a hard time getting there and also, to ensure my own safety. The participants lived as close as 15 minutes to an hour away from me. I contacted my interviewees before the interviews so that I knew their preferred place for the interview as well as to make all the arrangements beforehand. Having a fixed time and being organized was what I planned, but in reality, most of my interviewees cancelled at the last minute so I had to reschedule even though I was at the site of the interview already. I also had to replace some interviewees as some of them turned my request down after they accepted and one of them turned it down because she was a bit scared to talk about Afghanistan while she was in the U.S. So as it was a voluntary interview, the interviewees were interviewed according to their own will.

As I began the interviews, I reviewed the interview process and clarified the participants' rights through an informed consent discussion (see Appendix A for more information). All the interviews were recorded in my phone and during the interview I took notes of some of main concepts, background information and some numbers that they had mentioned as I wanted to remember everything better. After I was done with each of my interviews, I transferred the data in my computer and started listening to them over and over and made some notes. After knowing that I was very familiar with my data, I started to transcribe, each interview took 6 to 8 hours of transcribing. It was a very joyful moment as I was learning a lot about my topic from my data and I was able to analyze my data thematically as I was transcribing.

Upon reflection, I realized that it was very important to my process to have allowed more than two hours or three hours for interviews.. This was true when I went to the field; two of my interviews took an entire day. My first interview was with a woman who kindly took me to a café. We talked for an hour before the interview, as that was the first time we met and we wanted to get to know each other. After talking for an hour, I began the interview, for which I allotted a few

hours as her story was engaging and powerful. At some point, I felt like each word that she said would inspire me, so I listened to what said without interrupting. I enjoyed listening to her during the interview, and I enjoyed it even more when she asked me to join her in a meeting with other women, which extended our interview even further. Even though I had only blocked one to two hours for her interview, I agreed to go with her and canceled my other plans. Spending additional time with her was yet another learning process for me. I understood her even more in this second meeting because there was even more to learn about her life. After spending the entire day with her, I told her that I noted some of the things that she mentioned in the later conversations, and she was agreeable to that. After this interview, we became friends and we are in regular contact. With the first interviewee, and again with my second interviewee, it was reinforced for me how important it is to take the time to connect together before we began the interview formalities. Sharing our stories and then having the interview was the best choice that we unconsciously made as I got to have a very rich data that would explain me her life in the best possible way. Therefore, I realized that taking longer time to understand your interviewee is one of the best ways to build a relationship with your interviewee that could last after the interview. This relationship can go beyond the hierarchy of researcher and interviewee.

Limitations

As every other study, this study has its limitations as well. As I mentioned earlier in my paper, one of the biggest limitations of this study is the difficulty in finding academic literature about Afghanistan written by Afghans, and also finding literature about women's empowerment and education. In addition, empowerment itself might be hard for my participants to understand as it is a foreign concept that is not really discussed among Afghans.

Furthermore, the other limitation of this study was not interviewing women who lived all their lives in Afghanistan and were never exposed to any other culture and country. If I had only interviewed women who lived in Afghanistan, their ideas would likely be totally different, as some of them might have never heard the word “empowerment” itself. Women who only lived in Afghanistan and grew up there may have very different mind sets from the women living in the U.S as having lived in the U.S might have influenced their thoughts and ideas. At the same time, I should acknowledge the fact that I still interviewed women who live in the U.S. now and who are exposed to another culture, which might already give them a better understanding of empowerment just by living here.

One of the other limitations that identifies the need for further research is the absence of men’s voices in the study. As having men’s voices can diversify or enrich the data in many ways. In this study, I am talking about women’s empowerment, thus the things that are discussed in this paper are about gender, violence against women, women’s education, and men versus women. Therefore, if I could have some men’s voices in this study, especially to lend their perspectives about social norms, the results of the study would likely be much more inclusive. Men’s voices could allow me and my readers to hear from both sides and to hear how different or similarly men think about women’s empowerment.

Moreover, the multilingual context of Afghanistan and Afghans living in the US constituted another limitation of this study. Moreover, the multilingual context of Afghanistan and Afghans living in the US constituted another limitation of this study. Most of the interviews most of the interviews were conducted in English rather than the Afghanistan’s national languages that are Dari and Pashto as I am more comfortable with English than Dari or Pashto because my higher education was all in English so I feel more comfortable to use English when it comes to academia.

The time was very limited for this research; therefore, I wanted to conduct the interviews in the language that I was mostly familiar with academically and socially. In addition, most Afghans who come to the U.S with the special immigration visa who worked with Americans, student, and work visa; therefore, they know English. However, I realized that speaking in the local language could have been much more helpful in connecting with the participants. On the other hand, I was able to conduct the interviews in Dari when the participants had a hard time understanding or speaking English. Despite the fact that I wanted to conduct all the interviews in English, I ended up having two interviewees who were not very familiar with English so I had to interview them in Dari.

Lastly, qualitative research, by nature, looks at a small sample and the findings of the proposed study cannot be generalized to a larger population. Despite this limitation, small sample sizes, like the one for this study may reveal critical information (Rossman & Rallis, 2011). With this in mind, this study may make a significant contribution in elevating the perspectives of Afghan women, voices that we do not see much in the literature. For this reason, this study may make a significant contribution to the field.

Research Findings and Data Analysis

The findings from this study reveal how Afghan women themselves define empowerment and see its process in relation with education and life in Afghanistan. These women's stories are best understood through concepts that are used in my literature review. In addition, my own views and reflections on the topic combine with women's narratives and life experiences. The research findings are organized thematically based on the answers that my interviewees provided with and they address the topics of the impact of war and gender on women, empowerment, and developing empowerment and sense of agency. As a reminder, I managed to interview five Afghan women who currently live in the U.S and have established or on their way to establish

their career and personal life once again after leaving Afghanistan. When I refer to the women whom I interviewed, I use the pseudonyms, Parwana, Fariha, Nooria, Maryam Aliya (see Table 1 above for more descriptions).

Impact of War and Gender on Women

The impact of war on Afghan women was one of the issues that was really evident from analysis of data. Earlier in the literature review, I addressed the impact of war on Afghans and mainly on Afghan women and how the violence that women go through are both political and social (Bunch, 1990). In my interview process, it emerged that two of my interviewees had undergone arranged or forced marriages because of different wars and insecurity. Previous to the interviews, I heard about single Afghan girls being kidnapped during different wars, them being used as war weapons. I had also heard about parents marrying their daughters at a very young age because education was not accessible to women. Two of my interviewees provided examples. For instance, Nooria was 15 years old when she was forced to marry someone whom she did not know, who was from another city and ethnicity Her in-laws brought a gun to make her parents agree to marry Nooria to their son . Therefore, her family had no other option than saying yes because the situation was bad. They thought marrying could secure their daughter's life as single girls were often a targets, but also because they were scared of the gun. If we think about Nooria's early forced child marriage, we can see an illustration of how war had an impact on women's lives in Afghanistan. During the war and post war, Afghan women faced different forms of violence such as forced marriage, child marriage and girls being deprived of education. When Nooria was talking about her forced marriage, she did mention that neither her parents nor her in-laws are bad people as her parents wanted her to get married in order for her to be safe and

her in-laws thought she would be a good daughter in-law. Although the families did not know each other, the community talked highly about Nooria's so her in-laws were interested in having her as their son's wife. . In a country where war has been experienced for more than four decades, forced marriages seemed socially normal and using a gun to force acquiesce into a marriage was politically correct.

Nooria is a widow now who has six kids as her husband was killed by the Taliban. After she got married, her in-laws and her husband turned out to be very supportive of her and her dreams so she continued her schooling. She went to university and ended up having a job as an anchor and news reporter, which was her childhood dream. I think it was only a coincidence that her in-laws turned out to be good people who supported her education, but what if they were not supportive? Another woman's life, and aspirations would have been drowned in the shadow of forced child marriage that despite its seemingly preposterous process to outsiders, was actually socially and politically accepted and was seen as something normal.

Similarly, Fariha, is also another Afghan woman who started getting marriage proposals at the age of 12 and she remembers that her father did tell her mother that he accepted one of the proposals because there was nothing else for her to do. Fariha has uneducated parents and was the only daughter of the family who had five brothers. Fariha would receive many proposals, but one of the elements that made her unique is that she would always speak up and refuse the proposals. However, her parents would always emotionally challenge her that the situation of the country made it dangerous for her to be single; therefore, even though she was 15 years old, she accepted to marry someone under the condition that she would be saying yes to somebody whom she think might be good for her. Fariha is one of the very few women who convinced her parents it was ok for her to say yes or no to a proposal, but like many other women, it was never

without consequence. She would be yelled at or threatened to be beaten by her brothers, but she stayed strong even if she was very young and said yes to a marriage that she thought would turn out to be good. One of her conditions of marriage she laid out was, she would continue her education no matter what and her in-laws and mainly her husband, who was years younger than her, accepted her request. Nonetheless, she was forced into marrying someone at that young age and it did not matter to her family who would marry her. They were most concerned about her having protection in the name of marriage.

Again, this is a social pressure that girls needed to carry the burden of forced marriage at the age of 15 year old. At this young age, they cannot even think about who could be a good choice and who could be bad, but Fariha was put into this situation because society might be harmful to her if she did not marry at that young age. Fariha's story makes me think about social pressure that is put on women because of their gender. This way of thinking is questionable because child marriage, forced marriage, and not allowing girls to get educated may all be forms of violence. These are considered as violence because at the age that girls should be going to school and playing, they are given the momentous responsibility of marriage, which might lead to marital rape or any other forms of violence. These stories are even more complicated by the statistic that even now 87% of Afghan women are victims of different forms of violence (Domínguez, 2014).

The above-mentioned stories illustrate the impact of war and insecurity on women and leading them towards forced marriages among other difficulties.. Having no access to education further complicates the idea of forced marriage. All five women, Parwana, Fariha, Nooria, Maryam and Alya, were all born at different time periods in Afghanistan and their ages are between 20 to 40, which means that each one of them at least witnessed a few regimes in

Afghanistan. It is really heartbreaking to hear that each one of them experienced the issue of lack of education differently. Parwana is in her 40s and she recalls how security stations would not allow her to go to school, while her parents did not have any problem in her attending school. Fariha also mentions the security issues and war during the Taliban time where schools were shut down for girls (BBC, 2017). In contrast, Maryam, Nooria and Alya are in their early 20s or their 30s and they explained that they immigrated to Pakistan or Iran for schooling. In addition, all three women, Nooria, Maryam, and Alya are all single and they never married, but they left Afghanistan to go to the U.S. for the purpose of pursuing their Masters degrees. and continuing their education and again this was a decision based on not having access to higher education in Afghanistan due to security and societal issues.

I can relate to their story as well because my family had to move to Pakistan when I was two years-old, because the security situation was really bad, and my older sisters could not go to school. We moved to Pakistan so that we could be safe, as well as for us to have access to formal schooling of various levels depending upon our age: primary, secondary and even university levels. We returned to Afghanistan after the Fall of Taliban in 2002 as girls were allowed to go to school again (as discussed in the literature review section of this research paper) (BBC, 2017). After returning to Afghanistan, girls, at least in the capital city of Kabul, could go to school, but the quality of education was poor. In 2002, at this point, I was 11 years old, we did not have any classrooms, chairs and tables to sit on and each class had about 60 students. We could only go to school for two hours because the school needed to accommodate all the classes and operated on a shift schedule. Therefore, learning was really difficult in such an environment. I was still lucky as my school had at least a building, but even until now 40% of schools in Afghanistan do not have buildings (Human Rights Watch, 2017).

Having to deal with a lot of school problems, I still graduated from high school in 2009 at a time where we had only one university in Kabul, which was Kabul University. Only having one university for the entire population, was very hard because there would be people like me who would not be able to get. In 2009, many of us and my friends could not join the university. As my family always believed in the power of higher education and I also wanted to continue my education, I accepted a five-year long scholarship that was offered by Asian University for Women for the first time for Afghan girls' who had really high test scores, but yet could not enter the university. As there was only one university in the entire Kabul for all the high school graduates. The number of the graduates were way more than the university' capacity; therefore, many high school graduates could not enter university. My father did not hesitate for a minute and asked me to apply for this scholarship as he said if education is not accessible in Afghanistan, then I had to move somewhere else. Therefore, I went to Bangladesh for five years and now I am completing my masters in the U.S. Again, I was very fortunate to have a supportive family and having the option to pursue bachelor degree outside of Afghanistan, but there are many Afghan women who do not have supportive families or opportunities

Going back to my interviews, two of my interviewees were victims of child marriage and three of my interviewees including myself had to pursue higher education outside of Afghanistan. Education for us, Afghan women, was also a dream that was always hard to fulfil without sacrificing something for it. If higher education was available in Afghanistan, I would never leave my family and leaving my family to pursue higher education is a sacrifice. In addition, besides the issue of access, there are many more barriers to women's education such as gender norms, security issues, marriage, and prolonged conflict which were highlighted in the literature review.

Empowerment

This section provides an overview of the findings of the study related to empowerment. As the ensuing paragraphs note, the responses that interviewees shared in regards to defining empowerment differed from one person to the next; however, the general idea is all the same, that is, that empowerment can help women and girls to have a better place in the society. The woman participants highlighted various elements of empowerment in the interviews, including the connection to family, education, society, employment, social, political and economic-power, and one's own-self-esteem.

Family is one of the first institutions that any human being experiences. Nooria, for instance shared that her family always supported her and her sisters to pursue an education in Afghanistan and abroad because girls also deserve to fulfill their dreams (Interview). Similarly, recognizing the how valuable familial support may be, Fariha's says,

A lot of empowerment for women comes from her parents and empowerment is related to educated parents. If parents are educated, men and women both can be equal in the society and there will be equality at home. Empowerment starts from a very small place, which does not require a good government security, or having so much money.

(Interview)

This quote demonstrates how Fariha connects empowerment to having equal opportunities at home and with society, which could be promoted by the help of having educated parents. When Fariha says that empowerment starts from a very small place and small things, for her, empowerment is rooted in having parents that view boys and girls of the family equally. She underlined the importance of parents reinforcing the idea that their children are capable of doing anything in society regardless of their gender. Growing up, Fariha explained how she always

wanted her parents to encourage her so that she could continue her education and achieve her goal of becoming a lawyer. Unfortunately, she did not have that kind of support from her family as her parents were uneducated and did not value education. Here there were two issues at work: firstly,) Fariha was a girl so they did not think that education was so necessary for her, and secondly, her parents did not know how valuable and important education could be for her personal growth as a human being. As I mentioned above, opposite to Farina's parents, my parents were very supportive of my education and my siblings' education and that is because they believed in the power of education. Therefore, having parents who went through school and who support school seem to serve as factors that may promote a girl receiving an education herself.

Parents' support is important to women's sense of empowerment. For example, Parwana mentions what this support looks like to her. She explained that when it comes to women's empowerment "empowerment means standing still and strong with women and girls and letting them know that they can do anything they dream of". When we hear Fariha's way of looking at empowerment we can see that empowering her would mean that supporting her ideas and saying that she was capable of doing things that is what Parwana mentions empowerment means supporting a woman. To me, empowerment also means that I have people in my life that could tell me that I could do anything I wanted to do and I have the potential to achieve my goals. Even if I had a very supportive family who always believed in me, much of my empowerment came when I started studying at Asian University for Women after 2009. At this university, I came across many people who always encouraged me and let me know that I can be very successful and accomplish all my dreams. They helped me to believe in myself and in my dreams, which I consider as an empowerment and the process allowed me to be empowered was education.

Therefore, I see education one of the most aspect of women empowerment as education could help me to find my voice stand for women whenever I needed to, and to break the stereotype that education is not for women. With the help of education, I felt empowered enough to do my undergrad in a foreign country and continue my higher education to increase my knowledge and be able to work better for women in future.

As identified above, Beteille (1999) mentions that empowerment is a social change and in the education sector, this means opening up different doors of opportunity for human beings.

Thinking about the notion of social change, Alaya says,

empowerment is through education and employment. I do not believe in giving money to people and call it empowerment because that never empowers anyone for a long-term.

Empowerment is when we educate individuals and groups. That is a long-term solution to all sorts of problems).

Education is one of the other ways that can empower women and girls and as Alaya mentions, she views education as a long-term solution for societal issues. Alaya also mentions employment besides education, which could be connected to the idea of human capital (Kubow & Fossum, 2007, p. 11) as I presented in the literature review section above. I want to further explore the “human capital” concept, which refers to as seeing education as an investment in social and individual’s economy (Kubow & Fossum, 2007, p. 11). Education has the potential to bring many opportunities to women and one of the opportunities besides cognitive development is helping women develop the necessary credentials to get a job. So, educating women and girls may create employment opportunities for women, which may empower women. When women get a job, in addition to feeling empowered, they may be able to contribute to the economy of the society as well as their families. According to Nooria,

[Empowerment] is a such loaded word because it can mean so many different things, but still empowerment means women having more share in social economic and political power, so that includes have having control over assets and resources and equal measured way, but it also means women have a political voice and women being able to exist in public space. (Interview).

So here what Nooria seems to suggest is that increasing women's capability to have control over money may also lead to a better share in political and social power, women have a better position in society. Nooria mentions that

feeling of empowerment can come from different things, some people feel empowered when they have income, some people feel empowered when they have education, some people feel empowered when they run for political office, so it's different of every woman I am sure and for some people it's the combination of all those things. But I think it is really important to feel empowered, because it's true that there are many social and structural barriers to women's empowerment, but sometimes there are psychological barriers, there is a woman lack of beliefs and lack of confidence that they can do things that they can accomplish things, so I think feeling empowered, knowing that you can do something and having confidence to push yourself and to stand up and challenge the communities and equality is equally important.

Nooria's idea that empowerment may mean different things to women is something important and is a point that many of the interviewees identified.

Another consideration that came up in my interviews was being introduced to empowerment as a feeling, as Nooria indicates above. Empowerment is a feeling that could be nurtured by the people or the society that we are connected to. For example, Fariha said,

sometimes she felt very empowered when her mother said she is the only beautiful girl in the world, even hearing the word 'beautiful' made her feel strong and different from others. For me, empowerment was a feeling that was further nourished at my university by an instructor saying that I was capable enough to do anything that I wanted to do in my life. Therefore, empowerment is a process that can be nurtured at different stages of a person's life by society as well as the family.

In addition, the way Maryam looks at empowerment is very similar to the other four women interviewed and her comments summarize many of the points above. Maryam says, empowerment to me, means ability to make informed decision on shaping one's life and participating in larger efforts to shape the society. Empowerment is multi-dimensional and includes economic, educational, social and political empowerment. Individuals are economically or financially empowered when they are able to earn an income to support their needs or when their non-paid contribution to the household or economy in general is valued and counted. By educational empowerment, I think of receiving at least basic education and ability to continue to receive a quality education if one desires. Individuals are socially and politically empowered when they are given the voice and ability to engage in social affairs for making decisions about the society.

Maryam took us further in developing the idea of empowerment as a way for women to be able to make decisions. If Parwana and Fariha had been empowered to the point that they could say "no" to a child marriage, then perhaps they would be having fewer problem in their lives. They did not develop enough of a sense of empowerment to be able to say "no" to marriage to continue their education. Empowerment, for Parwana and Fariha, in Afghanistan would be having the ability to make decisions and the right choices for themselves if their families were

supportive of them. Decision-making abilities is the focus of the next section that addresses agency and its meaning for the women interviewed as well as myself.

Developing sense of agency and empowerment

As a reminder, in this capstone paper, agency is referred to as “an individual’s (or group’s) ability to make effective choices and to transform those choices into desired outcomes” (World Bank, 2011, p. 1). Women are enabled to increase their sense of agency if they are empowered as agency is all about being able to make decisions and acting upon their own free will. Having a sense of agency is as important as empowerment because to me empowerment and agency cannot be separated. Having agency at some point itself is a source of feeling empowered. My interviewees’ views on agency were somewhat similar even if they look at agency in different ways. Their general idea about agency is that, even if we think women are not empowered and their voice are not heard in the society and home, they still may have the potential for agency, which they could use to make decisions for the betterment of their families or society.

The women participating in this study had much to say about how they view agency. According to Parwana, agency is taking “healthy decisions,” which indeed most women have in themselves, but the way they exercise and to what level they exercise is different. Fariha and Parwana both provide good examples of how their child marriage turned out into something that helped them achieve their goals. While Parwana put the condition on her in-laws that she would continue her education after marriage, Fariha asked her parents to let her say “yes” to the proposal that she thought might let her to continue her education. They both exercised agency and they indicated in interviews that they believe that each woman has agency to some extent

even though they use it differently. As further illustration, Maryam commented in the interview that,

Each individual should have agency because they have different needs, goals, dreams, taste, and demands and they should be able to express it freely and independently. When women do not have agency, they are ignored or misrepresented, and we end up with policies and programs that do not truly address women's issues or we see women who's daily life decisions are made by others.

Fariha also says that "most problems start when women say that they do not have power to change or make decisions." Here Fariha seems to indicate that women need to identify areas where they may have a voice and to assert agency in those areas because women do have some limited power even if we think they do not.

In addition, findings from the interviews and reflections upon my own experiences suggest that when women do not have agency, they could be deceived by others and that is what is happening in Afghanistan. So having the sense of agency is highly important in women's lives. According to Nooria,

Agency is the ability to make decisions, you know it's not always loud, it's not always very strong. I have seen examples of agency where it's very very small things, very quiet and silent things, but it makes really a big difference. For example, when I was working in Badakhshan in Afghanistan, I was doing research, I saw how mothers would save food from the night before and pack it for their daughters to go to school next day. Right, it's very small thing, but it's an example of a mothers agency to support her daughter's education. I have heard of women who stole food from their own household to support their daughter to go to school, women who weave carpets and they tell their husbands, they

made 3000, but they actually made 3500 and they keep 500 for their daughters or for themselves to be able go to literacy class. So, there are many ways to be agentic [sic.], you can be an agentic [sic.] in attend a protest, but you can also be agentic [sic.] right upon. Right, but initially it's that decision, I think that it makes one agentic [sic.] to be able to take that decision to do what you think is right.

In this quote, Nooria says that agency starts from a very small scale as just saving a bit of money or saving some food for your daughter to be able to have something for lunch. And I believe this is how women and girls' slowly build sense of agency and empowerment.

The process of how women find agency and become more empowered was also a subject of my investigations with study participants. These conversations also resonated with my own experiences. For me, empowerment was something that did not happen overnight, it happened slowly as I went to school and mainly when I went to Bangladesh for my undergraduate studies, and now I feel more empowered as I am getting my Masters degree. Therefore, higher education may play a huge role in one's life the way it did in my life. While I felt very empowered at home, I needed to feel be confident and contribute to my surroundings outside home and that was supposed to happen when I was in getting educated at school and university. My education made me feel much more empowered, the more I studied, the more I felt empowered and I noticed that as my knowledge was increasing my self-esteem was also increasing. My knowledge and self-confidence were increasing by the encouragement that I was getting from my instructors. While conducting the interviews, I sought to understand if the five participants had similar experiences. The data demonstrated that all five of my interviewees went to university for their bachelors and some even completed or going to completed their masters, so similar to my idea, they think their education made them feel empowered and have more influence over decision making. Nooria, for

instance, mentions that education was a key factor in her feeling empowered, and she thinks this could be true for many women. She also says that for many Afghan women, war was one of the main factors that reduces the chances of women to feel empowered. Adding on to Nooria's point of view, Parwana commented that the way she built a sense of agency was,

My education, my personal skills, my social network, my work experience, my income, and my independence to use my resources for living a better life. My conservative society and countless obstacles for growth of woman sometimes make me feel less empowered. For instance, whenever I went for a walk in my neighborhood in Kabul, I was constantly harassed and it made me tired because I couldn't fight with every single Afghan man on the street. Or I could not travel alone to a lot of places because I was a woman and it was insecure. I think these factors are different for each woman depending on the environment they live in. But in general, the patriarchal culture and society that consider women as inferior and weak limits women's opportunities for development and progress. Dogmatic and strict understanding and interpretation of religion also suppress women's rights and freedom to choose and lead their own life.

What Parwana mentions here gives us a holistic picture of different factors such harassment, not being able to move around alone, and in general seeing women as less. Above in the introduction, I mentioned that there are many factors that lead Afghan women to feel less empowered, it is either society, their families, or a general idea because of how women are seen based on their gender. It gets much more complicated as we further analyze what are the other things that affect women's empowerment and agency. It seems to be a combination of many factors including social norms, war, stereotypes about women and all contribute to challenge

women's sense of agency and their access to good education. According to Nooria beside social and security barriers, another

big barrier to empowerment is illiteracy. Even now in Afghanistan less than 20% of women are literate and less than 20%, so that is a really small percentage, that is 2 out of 10 women and the majority of those literate women are based in the cities, so woman in rural areas where there is less school, less opportunity are less likely to have literacy, which then contributes their lack of empowerment and lack of opportunities.

In the conceptual framework above I argued that education is one good source of empowerment, so when women lack education, it is difficult for women to feel empowered or be fully part of the society. Thus, we can say that a deficiency in empowerment and/or education results in a vicious cycle as one leads to the one. For instance, not having access to education could contribute to early marriages and having limited access to a job which, in turn, may likely mean that women may remain socially and economically dependent on the male members of their family.

Education in relation to Leadership and Mentorship

In this capstone, I have been arguing that developing a sense of empowerment is very important for a woman in order for her to have a better place in the society. Referring back to the conceptual framework and my interviewees responses, most of the time, women's empowerment comes from the education they get and from people around them who could be good mentors for them. In Afghanistan, 20% of women are literate and 40% of the entire country is still controlled by the Taliban (Human Rights Watch, 2017, p. 10), it does give a sense of why 87% of women are victims of different forms of violence and how gender plays a huge rule in that regard (Domínguez, 2014). Besides women having limited access to education, what they often lack in

the education sector is having some good mentors and leaders that could guide them in their journey of learning. Education comes with learning as well as being surrounded by those who deeply care for ones' growth, but often times, women are unable to have that in and out of their homes. For the past 40 years, the education system has not been able to meet the needs of most students in their learning process. It is either that students do not have access to education or if they can access schooling, that is not very complete. After my family returned to Afghanistan in 2002, I started going to public school. At that time, since it was just after the time when all girls' were deprived access to schooling education, there was high demand and 50 to 60 girls were in one classroom and the school time was only for 3 hours, which still is the case. Besides' having so many so many girls' in the same classroom, the school did not have any chairs, tables so all the students would set on the ground. The school also did not have any laboratories, library or anything that most schools have to better facilitate the learning process. These conditions remain the case in public schools even until now. How important it was for all of us was to learn and have our teachers as our mentors! However, most of the time, the teachers could never learn our names or even be able to recognize us outside of the classroom since there were many students in one class. Therefore, I almost did not have anybody at school as a leader or mentor who would encourage me and support me. My school experience is not unique as all Afghan girls' experience that which basically being in an environment that you are not supported. Before I go more into the idea of mentorship, I would like to focus on what my interviewees say about education and then will move on to the idea of leaders and mentors.

Similar to my experience, all my interviewees' mentioned that their school system was not setup in a way in which their teacher's could be their mentors. They mentioned that the students and the teachers did not bond really well because there were lots of students in one

classroom so they never feel encouraged by their teachers. As Fariha says, “most of the school teachers in Afghanistan do not know their students, their learning styles, and they do not connect so the students do not have mentors or leaders that nurture their qualities, which is problematic.” Having no mentor is problematic because those school teachers could be great guides who could empower and nurture the girl’s ability by helping them to identify their qualities.

Similarly, in my review of the literature above, I mentioned that two-thirds of the 774 million illiterate people are women and Afghanistan seems to be one of the countries that has a high number of women illiterate women (UNESCO, 2013). According to Parwana, “education enables human beings to differentiate day from night.” If we think more deeply, uneducated women are living in darkness, which is one of the reasons why women may be victims of violence. When women do not have access to education, they are often underprivileged and do not have a place within society, so not having access education is start of the problems that many women face in their lives.

As discussed above majority of Afghan women do not have access to education, and the rest that have access to education in Afghanistan is not a quality education. Nooria says,

For woman in Afghanistan education is hard, because there is lack of infrastructure, so within the 34 provinces in the country, female teachers make less than 10% of the teachers. So, in a vast majority of the provinces of the Afghanistan, there are only 10% of the teachers are female. And if we don't have female teachers, families are less likely to support their daughter's education. In addition, schools don't have safe bathrooms, don't have safe buildings and that also prevents girls from going to school. Imagine going to school without toilet, right. Right. It's not easy and you don't especially women after they hit puberty, so many girls stop going to school after puberty, because there is no toilets.

As these excerpts from interviews demonstrate, many Afghan girls are not going to school for various reasons right now even when the Afghan government promotes women and girls' education. There is a really less percentage of Afghan women that attend school; therefore, it is very important for at least this percentage of women to feel supported by their teachers at their school; however, this is not the case in Afghanistan. In my literature review I discussed that it is important for women and girls' to be guided in their learning as that is one way for them to feel supported (Paterson & Wasekeesikaw, 1994). My own experience testifies to the importance of such a mentor. When I was in university, I had one mentor, whom I consider a mentor for my life who was one of the people who was always there for me and who supported me throughout my education and guided me. It was her who made me think that I could be a woman advocate and she identified my capabilities before I even could think about them. She made me believe that I can speak up and help others to speak up and use my education to help other women; thus, it is due to her encouragement that no matter how hard life gets I always try to help women. In this way, after graduating from university, I, along with a friend, was able to organize an anti-sexual harassment campaign at the Ministry of Counter Narcotics in Kabul, where only 5% of the total employees are women. When I worked at that ministry, I always remembered her saying that, "you can do this" even now, every time I think I cannot do something, I tell her and she reminds me. She is a mentor that basically helped me to be where I am today; therefore, it is very important for Afghan women and girls to have such mentors that help them to identify their qualities so that they feel empowered.

However, most girls lack such mentors in Afghan schools and most women lack having such mentors and leaders in their life who can empower them, guide them, and support them throughout their lives. Paterson & Wasekeesikaw (1994), talk about how mentors and schools

were seen as “bankers” who only insert knowledge (p. 11). Nevertheless, women need more than that, they want to feel supported and guided. As Fariha commented during an interview, there is a hierarchy in Afghan schools, teachers think that they are the only people who have all the knowledge and the students are afraid of them. When girls’ do not have mentors or leaders at home as Fariha described that she did not have, the school should be a place where students are able to have that mentor who can guide them, but most of the time school teachers are not like that in Afghanistan. Parwana and Nooria also pointed out that it is hard to be close to the school as teachers in general, both male and female, often act like dictators. My own experience in Afghan schools was the same. The vast majority of teachers are not trained. They do not see their role as helping students to guide them or to feel supported, which is one of the reasons why students have less desire to go to school. I believe that school should be a place where girls should be able to even discuss their family issues as that is one way to help girls to achieve their dreams when they do not have support at home.

Furthermore, my own experiences and comments from study participants indicate the importance of mentors. All five interviewees mentioned that they had a mentor in their lives. These women are still considered lucky as their mentors were supportive of them because if they did not have mentors at school, it would have been hard for them to find such mentors elsewhere. Talking about different mentors that women have, it did make me think that having a mentor outside school is also possible if there are supportive people around them. Most of my interviewees mentioned that their families have been a good support to them, especially the ones who left Afghanistan for the purpose of education and those are Maryam, Nooria, and Alya. Fariha also mentioned that her husband is a great mentor to her as he is so supportive of her studying further even if she already has a Master’s degree. Additionally, Parwana mentioned that

her husband was actually the one who really encouraged her to get educated and become a news reporter on TV, which was also a taboo for an Afghan woman to appear on TV. My interviewees also mentioned that along the way of them getting educated, most of them were facing difficulties, but there were always some people who supported them and believed in them, which made their journey easier. Therefore, we can say that having the right mentor who can help women and support them in their academic, career or life journey may be very empowering in itself.

Recommendations for strengthening empowerment

As demonstrated by narratives shared by Afghan women, women's empowerment is a continual process that is achieved at various points during women's lives and is influenced by different, shifting factors. My own experiences as well as the data shared by the interviewees in this capstone study highlight a number of recommendations that may help to continue the process of empowerment for women. Economic self-sufficiency is a key step towards full empowerment and a stronger place in society. Similar to Zarghuna's story, (WfWI, 2018), Nooria also suggests that,

Increasing the economic opportunity for women to earn income, not through the same embroidery, sewing and tailoring. I think through creating innovative ways that slowly opens the way for the women in the society as well. For example, in Kunduz, I saw a group of women that made a bakery, so they have their own bakery, the women set in the bakery and sell food and they make the food, things like that slowly make it normal for women to be outside the house and also allow a woman to earn income. It helps to mainstream women in public.

Helping women own small businesses and generate income can support them as they find their place in society. Financial independence increases a woman's empowerment and decreases her dependence on others. A woman's income can also be a great help to her family, so increasing a woman's capacity to own something which generates income is one viable way to empower women.

Continued, consistent education is a second path to empowerment. Thinking about how education can empower women based on women's narratives and based on my interviewees' lives, Fariha mentioned that as she was growing up, she always looked for a teacher or mentor at her school to encourage her and tell her that she was capable of things that she wanted to do. Fariha mentioned how difficult it was to have uneducated parents who thought that only primary education was enough for a girl, and who could not identify their child's aspirations for her future. Fariha shared:

It always bothered me emotionally when I heard that there is something I cannot do; therefore, no matter in what position a girl is, a daughter, a student, a wife, or daughter-in-law, she needs a counselor or a mentor. Therefore, every school should have a counselor accessible at schools that girls' can share anything with them. The education system is very weak in Afghanistan so there is not any student centered approaches, therefore, every school should have at least one counselor that one student can reach out to at the time of crisis, I mean when they feel emotionally down. Girls are very emotional and there are girls that do not even have parents or they have step mother at home, so they should have somebody at school who can emotionally support them and help them to find qualities in themselves.

As Fariha described, schools in Afghanistan do not have any services which help students feel emotionally supported; therefore, having someone who is an emotional support for girls can help them to feel empowered as well as supported. The third aspect of female empowerment in Afghanistan is recognizing and promoting the vital network of sisterhood women share. Parwana summarized her thoughts on this concept of empowerment:

One of the first institutions for human beings is family so if a woman can be a good woman, a good mother, and a good wife and identifies her own qualities in herself; then she can do a lot. I also want to encourage women to not make themselves a weapon of any kind especially in the politics of Afghanistan. There are lots of people who want to use women to gain their political power to sustain their power, so I encourage women to think deeply when they want to do something in the society as women have their own identity and they can do more. In the current situation in Afghanistan, women are used by others and that is how their unity is questioned. Therefore, even if they work, they should forget about ethnic issues and other problems and support one another and help empower each other.

As an Afghan woman, I relate to what Nooria mentions above as I have also experienced women in our society who hold power yet refuse to use that power to lift up other women. Unity among women is another important aspect of empowerment. Women's struggles are real and to some extent they are shared; thus, women should celebrate and support each other.

The fourth piece of empowerment that arises from this study, which was also mentioned by Maryam, is the importance of raising awareness among the religious leaders (Mullahs) to talk about violence against women and the importance of women empowerment in religious settings. Because Mullahs are one of the biggest influences on people and their behavior in Afghanistan,

their discussions of violence against women and the respect women deserve both in society and at home is one way to significantly improve women's empowerment in Afghanistan. In addition, mullahs could be great mentors as in a society like Afghanistan where women's public presence is quite weak, male advocates/allies can be very effective in supporting women and challenging discriminatory norms. As most Mullahs are those who people who are most often looked up to, then having them as mentors or guide could really help women to fight against social pressure and norms.

The fifth and final recommendation to support women's empowerment in Afghanistan is the involvement of local women in empowerment programs. Maryam also suggested this through having educational programs that build and sustain women and girls' empowerment that are planned, run, and evaluated by local women. After all, who knows better than local women themselves what they want or what is best for them and offer feedback on systemic improvements. Having women's voices and women's presence in empowerment implementation programs will help the programs to be effective and sustainable. Organizing education programs formally or informally, like WfWI does through 12-month trainings, are great ways to empower women (WfWI, 2017). Through increasing economic opportunities for women, women participating in supportive networks, making counselors accessible for girls in schools, asking religious leaders to talk about women's issues in the religious gatherings, and involving women in women's empowerment programs, these programs may become stronger, more effective, inclusive, and sustainable.

For further study, I would also recommend future research that would expand upon this study, adding more voices and stories in it including men's voices. As men's voices could give us a different perspective on how they see the process of empowerment for women and what is

their idea about the topic. I believe that while there are many men who do not support women empowerment and they do not even acknowledge it, there are many men that support it; therefore, adding their perspective could give us a more holistic view of the topic. I think also adding the voices of women who are completely illiterate might make this study much stronger as it would be very powerful to see how not having education might impact their lives and what knowledge they may have of empowerment. Therefore, the future potential research topics might address adding more women's voices as well as, including men's voices and illiterate women's voices for having a better understanding women empowerment process through different levels of education.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Afghan women have been facing a plethora of difficulties as barriers to feel empowered, supported, and encouraged. The forty plus years of war have had a huge impact on women's social and political welfare and, in general, simply forced women to make choices that were not really what they wanted to do in their lives. Bringing narratives of participants in this study forward helped me to illustrate the idea that Afghan women in one way or another often make sacrifices and for various reasons. Many women sacrifice their education at a very young age and get married due to the country's security situation. At the same time, some other women even have to sacrifice being with our families because education was and is still not readily available where we lived together. In this case, women leave their families and the security of the familial institution in order to pursue education. How we make our life decisions is greatly influenced by our country's situation and what we have access to, which itself is a compromise in life. When women marry at that young age, they have to give up their childhood and yet have to become good wives, good mothers, resulting in that women sacrifice their lives

for others. Life for Afghan women is a roller-coaster as many women have to play different roles at the same time. Each of these factors may contribute to women feeling more or less empowered.

All my interviewees talked about the power of education and how becoming more and more educated could help them to feel more empowered and be less under social pressure. Also having mentors or guides that help women to find the strength in themselves is very important when it comes to women empowerment and agency. As the study data shows, women do have inner strength and agency within themselves, but it needs to be celebrated and further developed by their surroundings in order to help women to gain the confidence of feeling empowered. One of the best ways to help women in the empowerment process is having access to education as it is a powerful tool that could fight oppression and help women and girls' to feel empowered to face any situation that arises in their lives.

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APPENDIX A

Informed consent form

Study Title: How Empowerment Processes Manifest for Afghan Women with Different Levels of Education

Researcher: Fatima Sabri

Before agreeing to participate in this research, I strongly encourage you to read the following explanation of this study. This statement describes the purpose and procedures of the study. Also described is your right to withdraw from the study at any time. This study will contribute to my thesis as part of my Masters program at the SIT Graduate Institute.

Explanation of Procedures

This study is designed to examine the ways in which Afghan women may participate in empowerment processes and how they experience these processes. Participation in the study involves an interview that asks you basic questions about yourself and your personal insights about this topic. The interview will last for approximately one to two hours depending how well we can go through all the questions. The researcher will record and later transcribe interviews for the purpose of data analysis. Once transcribed, the interviews will be stored on my personal computer in a password protected folder where I would be the only one who would have access.

Risks and Discomforts

There are minimal risks or discomforts that are anticipated from your participation in the study. Potential risks or discomforts include possible emotional feelings of sadness when asked questions during the interview. We can pause or stop the interview at any time. You are also free to end your participation at any time or to ask the researcher to not include your information. If you make this request, the researcher will stop the interview immediately and destroy the data collected.

Benefits

The anticipated benefit of participation to you is also minimal but may include the opportunity to discuss feelings, perceptions, and concerns related to the experience of empowerment, and to contribute to understandings of agency, gender, relationship building, and mentorship.

Confidentiality

The information gathered during this study will remain confidential. This means that the information gathered will not be connected to your name or other identifying information in any way. All the interviews will be recorded on my phone and will be transferred to my personal laptop as soon as the interviews are done. The data will be password protected and accessible to only me.

Withdrawal without Prejudice

Participation in this study is voluntary; refusal to participate will involve no penalty. You are free to withdraw consent and discontinue participation in this project at any time without prejudice or penalty. You are also free to refuse to answer any question I might ask you.

Further Questions and Follow-Up

You are welcome to ask the researchers any questions that occur to you during the interview.

If you have further questions once the interview is completed, you are encouraged to contact the researcher using the contact information given below.

RESEARCHER’S CONTACT INFORMATION

If you have any questions or want to get more information about this study, please contact me at fatima.sabri@mail.sit.edu or 617-800-707 or my advisor Karla Sarr at Karla.Sarr@sit.edu

RIGHTS OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANT – IRB CONTACT INFORMATION

In an endeavor to uphold the ethical standards of all SIT proposals, this study has been reviewed and approved by the SIT Institutional Review Board. If you have questions, concerns, or complaints please contact the Institutional Review Board at:

School for International Training Institutional Review Board
1 Kipling Road, PO Box 676 Brattleboro, VT 05302-0676 USA
irb@sit.edu
802-258-3132

I, _____ (name; please print clearly), have read the above information. I freely agree to participate in this study. I understand that I am free to refuse to answer any question and to withdraw from the study at any time. I understand that my responses will be kept anonymous.

Participant Signature Date

Check those that apply:

- I would like a copy of my interview transcript
- I would like information about the study results
- I would be willing to be contacted in the future for a possible follow-up interview questions that might come up later on in the process of study

Consent to Audio-Record Interview

Initial one of the following to indicate your choice:

- (initial) I agree to being recorded for the interview.
- (initial) I do not agree to being recorded for the interview.

If you have checked any of the above, please also provide an email address if you have one so that I may follow up.

Email address:

APPENDIX B

Interview Questions:

1. How do you define empowerment?
2. Is it important for women to feel empowered?
3. What are the characteristics of empowered women?
4. In your own experience, what makes you feel more empowered? Less empowered? What do Afghan women consider to be the main factors that affect their empowerment and agency?
5. What is agency in your own ideas?
6. Why is it important for women to have agency?
7. Do you see women developing a sense of empowerment and agency? If so, how?
8. From your own experience, can you provide any examples?
9. Is Education a source of empowerment for women?
10. How education makes Afghan women to feel more empowered?
11. Can the level of education help women to feel more or less empowered?
12. What is the role of mentorship and guidance in feeling empowered?
13. Why is the mentorship important?
14. Is there anybody in your life who makes you feel empowered and supported?
15. What do they/person do that makes you feel empowered?
16. What is the role of gender in women's empowerment?
17. Is there anything you could suggest to help Afghan women to feel more empowered?

Appendix C

Figure 1: Afghanistan's map with its surrounding countries,



<https://qph.fs.quoracdn.net/main-qimg-d86d1dc4e01d1d6b594179bb57556eea>

Figure 2: Afghanistan's map that shows areas that are still controlled by the Taliban,



<https://afghanhindsight.files.wordpress.com/2016/08/control-nov2007resistance54pct-45.jpg?w=590&h=439>