



Women's Education in Afghanistan

Disparities in Education Under the Taliban affecting Women's
Capabilities Development

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ABSTRACT: The endless wars and political turmoil in Afghanistan has left the country teetering on the brink of a collapse. Resultantly, women and other marginalized sections of society are particularly worse off. Discrimination against women's education, under the current regime, is profoundly common. Restricting women's access to education via distinct barriers, social, political, and physical, is widespread with adverse ramifications for the country's human rights.

Women's education can help transform the Afghan society and ensure the state's survival as a modern nation-state. Women's education can help with the capabilities development of Afghan women, which in turn can enable them to play their part in the country's development.

KEYWORDS: Women's Education, Gender Discrimination, Capabilities Development, Human Rights, Taliban

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

“Education is both a human right in itself and an indispensable means of realizing other human rights regardless of gender” according to the United Nations (Lee, 2013:1). Schultz (1961) was one of the pioneers to have identified education as a form of investment central to economic development. Additionally, an extensive set of research has found education to have measurable and non-measurable; economic and non-economic returns of education to society (Tilak, 2006; Lewin, 1997). McMahon (1999) identifies and maps areas of human welfare, monetary as well as non-monetary, at the economic level. The positive influence education plays in such areas includes a drop in the infant mortality rates, a positive uptick in the life expectancy, a reduction in fertility rates, promotion of democracy, human rights, political stability, and lowering of crime. Therefore, the cost of denying females the right to education as a result of gender discrimination is highly significant. Klasen & Lamana (2000), in their study, find a correlation between the gender gaps in education with regional economic growth and prosperity. To Klasen and Lamana, (2000), this increased gap due to gender discrimination harms the economy by enhancing inefficiencies in the deployment of human capital as well as by increasing fertility rates within a population. Gender discrimination in education, thus, becomes an economic liability as well as a blatant human rights violation.

In terms of society changes, access to education without discrimination transforms societal norms and promotes meritocracy (Dore, 1984). The promotion of merit thus negates all forms of discrimination linked with gender, lineage, race, or religion.

Moreover, in a strictly business context a higher employment gender gap diminishes the talent pool for businesses and companies and thus adversely affects the overall competitiveness and productivity within the economy (Klasen and Lamana, 2000). The World Bank, thus, estimates the global cost incurred due to gender discrimination in education to be somewhere around \$15 – \$30 trillion in lifetime lost earnings and productivity (The World Bank, 2022).

The issue of gender discrimination in education within Afghanistan attains enormous significance and urgency as the country falls back into Taliban control. Fragile developments in female literacy in Afghanistan prior to the Taliban's comeback are under duress as the country descends into a quasi-tribal-religious theocracy. Access to education, a human right in

itself, is the center of all human rights that stems from education and capabilities development. Understanding the issue of gender discrimination in education in Afghanistan under the present Taliban regime offers useful policy insights as well as an understanding of the issue and the inherent challenges it portends. Insights from the research can also provide useful policy guidelines for any external help, bilateral or multi-lateral, in promoting female literacy within Afghanistan.

Moreover, by using extensive and extant research within the field of gender discrimination worldwide, the study aims to discover any research gaps within the study area for further research. It also aims to build upon any previous research within the area and compare and contrast any previous findings. Taking into account the perceptions and understandings of Afghan women, the insights generated from the study might have useful policy implications as well as promote our theoretical understanding of the issue at hand.

The purpose of this study is to investigate the challenges the Taliban regime poses to female literacy in Afghanistan. By examining the issue of gender discrimination in education in Afghanistan through the experiences and understanding of Afghan women, the study aims to highlight the various challenges ahead.

Additionally, limiting the views and aspirations of the Afghan women to a certain set of capabilities development, as a result of access to education, the study intends to provide an outline map depicting the potential loss the country might incur due to gender discrimination in education. It will also highlight the secondary and tertiary tangible and non-tangible benefits education might promise in the context of Afghanistan as a result of women's education.

1.2 Statement of the Problem / Human Rights Relevance

According to Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Eriksson et al., 2010: 7), “everyone has the right to education. Education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages. Elementary education shall be compulsory. Technical and professional education shall be made generally available and higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit”. However, the case of educational discrimination in Afghanistan is in direct violation of this universal declaration.

On its own, the issue of gender discrimination in a developing country carries significant research promise. There appears to be a research gap in examining gender discrimination in education in Afghanistan especially when viewed through the lens of Afghan women, the firsthand sufferers of such discrimination. Additionally, the issue of gender discrimination in education in Afghanistan, a poverty-stricken country, with huge social and economic challenges can less afford to restrict access to education to half its population. Moreover, unlocking the huge potential in human capital through education appears to be the only way forward for Afghanistan.

Afghanistan has taken center stage in global policymaking. Global powers have put in enormous sums of money and blood in order to transform Afghan society. The country has become a focal point in terms of policymaking for all the major powers across the globe. The emphasis has been to promote education so as to trigger a societal change that can gradually transform this tribal society.

A great deal of effort has been made to educate Afghan women. As a result, female literacy has seen a significant rise before the country has fallen back into Taliban control. As the Taliban consolidates power and restricts opportunities for women in education the issue becomes highly significant. Women's education no more remains a female literacy problem albeit one that carries enormous implications for global peace and geo-strategy.

Women's education was non-existent when the Taliban first ruled from 1996 – to 2001 (NYT, 2021). However, after the fall of the Taliban, according to a UNESCO report, female literacy climbed to 30 percent by 2018 (UNESCO, 2021). After the US withdrawal female literacy is once again restricted as women are barred from resuming their studies (Walt, 2021). Only 33% of teenage girls in the country have basic literacy skills compared to 67% of the boys of that same age bracket (Human Rights Watch, 2022). The rural-urban divide within female literacy is even starker with 70% of girls enrolled in primary education in the urban areas compared to only 40% within the rural areas (Center for Global Development, 2022). No amount of western pressure appears to hold sway as the Taliban consolidates their power in Afghanistan. At a time when Afghanistan needs a higher literacy rate among its entire population, women's education appears to be restricted by the Taliban regime.

Women's education in Afghanistan under the Taliban has ample research scope. In the case of Afghanistan under the Taliban, women's education is confronted with many challenges. Moreover, these numerous hurdles to female literacy are deeply embedded in the country's history and society, economics, and culture. It is important to mention that female literacy and women's education are used in the broader sense within the project and do not discriminate on account of age and include females of all age brackets.

1.3 Theoretical Framework

- **Nussbaum Capabilities Approach**

Martha Nussbaum's capabilities approach is deeply rooted in the understanding and enhancement of human quality of life (Vashist, 2010). The theory of capabilities is firmly embedded in the Marxian/Aristotelian notion of 'truly human functioning', an absolute justification of human universalism and freedom (Nussbaum, 2000). It highlights the bare minimum attributes essential for human dignity and offers a philosophical underpinning for all governments to adhere to respect human dignity (Young, 2011). The theory demarcates a minimal threshold for every capability, which in turn enables a human into a worthy or a truly human (Stewart, 2013). The presence of these capabilities above their minimal threshold transforms freedom from a mere theoretical concept into a living/breathing entity. By realizing and exercising these capabilities can humans truly feel and enjoy freedom, a birthright cherished and celebrated in the United Nations (UN) charter.

Nussbaum & Amartya Sen are both the proponents of the capabilities approach as a better marker for development and to a degree of social justice and human rights (Nussbaum, 2003). Nonetheless, there is a fundamental difference between the two when it comes to the listing of capabilities as the former opines that since capabilities vary in accordance with their importance it is best to have a definite list of the more significant ones. Sen, on the other hand, thinks by listing capabilities we risk narrowing the context and falling into a trap of a 'one size fits for all' notion in a diversified world differentiated by varying contexts and social settings (Amartya Sen, 1999). Nussbaum's defense, however, steps from Sen's desire for freedom in the selection of these capabilities and argues that this very freedom brings vagueness to the very concept and can thus prove counterproductive to the spirit of the capabilities approach in the realm of social justice and human rights (DeHaan et al., 2016). Human rights after all are only truly enforceable if they are absolutely clear in their definition and mandate.

Nussbaum's capabilities approach can be best understood in a critical manner if investigated in comparison with Amartya Sen's work on the capabilities approach as a basis for human development (Clark, 2005). Sen's fundamental idea of capabilities significance in relation to functioning comes down to 'genuine' choices with extensive options (Sen, 1992:41). This very idea of the *extensive options* is what Nussbaum considers turns the capabilities approach, as envisaged by Sen, into a vague concept. Nussbaum's listing of the capabilities distinguishes between capabilities and neatly classifies them into basic, internal, and combined capabilities (Nussbaum, 2000: 84-6).

Nussbaum's capabilities approach is by and large derived or at least takes into consideration the basic entitlements of the human rights movement. Some of these rights include but are not limited to the notions of political freedoms, liberty to associate, freedom of choice of occupation, and several other social and economic liberties (Nussbaum, 2003). Here again, both Amartya Sen and Nussbaum agree on the close connection between the capabilities approach and the notion of human rights (Nussbaum 2001a; Amartya Sen, 1999).

Nussbaum's capabilities approach has its limitation and thus cannot be taken as an exhaustive list. Nevertheless, given its universal appeal and interest, the theory takes into account local and cross-cultural considerations so as to ensure its validity and reliability across different cultures and locations. Yet, the capabilities list along with their definition and conceptualization are central to the idea of human freedom and development (Mitra et al., 2015). Nussbaum's approach thus consists of the following list of capabilities (Vashist, 2010):

- I. *Life*: Living a normal and useful life devoid of any physical limitations that might reduce its worth or cut it short.
- II. *Bodily Health*: Enjoying a well-nourished and well-sheltered healthy life, which also includes reproductive health as well.
- III. *Bodily Integrity*: The ability to have freedom of movement; security against all sorts of violence – physical and sexual; and have the freedom to reproduce.
- IV. *Sense, Imagination, and Thought*: To have the ability to use all human senses so as to do or experience life in a truly human way. This capability encompasses numerous human traits that are a direct result of human imagination, thought, and reasoning. It is rather the use of this very capability that truly distinguishes humans from every other living mammal.

- V. *Emotions*: Have the ability to get attached to anything other than us. To be able to experience all human feelings.
- VI. *Practical Reason*: To have a living conscience.
- VII. *Affiliation*: Be mindful of other humans' concerns; Be non-discriminant to others in any way, form, or shape.
- VIII. *Other Species*: Be mindful of all non-human species.
- IX. *Play*: Have the ability to enjoy recreational activities.
- X. *Control over one's Environment*: Be part of a political process; Have full property rights as anyone else.

Nussbaum's capabilities approach list in itself is far from being exhaustive. However, given the study's limitation and the scope of its research question, it is only practical to *briefly* examine all these capabilities while focusing more *extensively* on the six primary ones. The selection of these capabilities takes into account the peculiar case of Afghan women and their right to education along with the fact that these six capabilities are more primary than the rest of the list, a feat relevant and convenient to our case in point. Hence, in accordance with the study research question, the following six capabilities would be examined within the context of this very research study: *Life, Bodily Health, Practical Reason, Affiliation, Sense, Imagination and Thought, and Control over one's Environment*. A deductive research framework would be used to investigate these different capabilities in the context of women's education in Afghanistan under the Taliban.

Using the theoretical framework based on Nussbaum's theory of capabilities, the aim is to explore the study's research questions. By investigating the role of women's education and the presence of women's discrimination in education under the Taliban, the study will attempt to find answers to capabilities development for women in Afghanistan. Given those six capabilities within the framework are inherently linked to education, it would be interesting to examine how educated Afghan women, the study participants, perceive the role of education in the development and promotion of these very capabilities. Moreover, their understanding of women's discrimination in education under the Taliban in Afghanistan and its impact on women's capabilities development would not only provide useful insights into the issue at hand but will also highlight areas with policy implications. Women's capabilities development within the study may be linked directly to education and the promotion of gender equality.

However, these capabilities development within Afghan women have the potential for the formation of a more open and inclusive Afghan society. It would transcend individual development often associated with personal economic and material prosperity into a more humane and just society with a particular emphasis on respect for human dignity, laws, and rights.

1.4 Research Questions

The study intends to find answers to the following research questions:

- *What are the barriers to female education in Afghanistan under the Taliban?*
- *How can the promotion of women's education in Afghanistan enhance women's capabilities development?*

2. Literature Review

The literature review section will consist of relevant and recent research studies so as to provide a theoretical background to the study. All pertinent research work included in this section would also serve a dual purpose of embedding the study firmly within the area's extant research. It will highlight the prior research undertaken within the area and will make a ground for the study's own research undertakings. All of these undertakings will strictly revolve around the study's research questions as they inevitably provide the necessary impetus and motivation.

2.1 Barriers to Female Education

Around 129 million girls are out of school (UNICEF, 2022). This incredible lack of parity between boys and girls in terms of access to education is multi-faceted. Poverty tends to be one of the primary reasons for girls staying out of the classroom (UNICEF, 2022). Households below the poverty line, across the globe, tend to adhere to this gender discrimination-based policy. Costs in terms of school fees and transportation though a major concern is not the only stifling factors for female education. Moreover, girls tend to buttress their family's incomes with meager housekeeping jobs. Investment, on the contrary, in male education is considered safe and lifelong (World Bank, 2019). Hence, girls' access to education is the first casualty of poverty in under-developed societies (Rodriguez, 2019).

Societal attitudes and cultural behaviors tend to be biased against women when it comes to education (Alice, 2016). Culturally across many societies, household chores are considered to be female-oriented. Girls spend around 40% more time doing unpaid housework than boys (Rodriguez, 2019). Such societies and cultures exhibit a strong inclination towards early marriages and thus keeping girls out of school and grooming them in household work and childcare seems a natural extension of their life ahead and a necessary preparation as well. According to a UNICEF (2017) report, around 700 million women were married off as girls.

Gender-based violence is another barrier to women's education (Rodriguez, 2019). Such violence includes physical and sexual harassment and abuse. Resultantly, such abusive measures adversely affect women's participation and enhance absenteeism and dropout

percentages. Due to parents' sensitivity towards gender violence girls' travel to school is readily discontinued.

Conflict is another major barrier to girls' education. Around 39 million girls are the direct victims of conflict when it comes to education (Rodriguez, 2019). Refugees' girls, another direct result of conflict, are half as likely to go to school than refugees' boys. In Afghanistan, around 70% of the 3.5 million out-of-school children are girls.

Lack of Girls specific facilities, especially sanitary and water facilities, in schools tends to discourage and discriminate against girls. Across Africa, 10% of the girls miss out on 20% of their school days due to such obstacles (Albright, 2016).

The lack of qualified teachers and staff appears to be a stumbling block when it comes to women's education. Qualified teaching not only encourages and motivates girls to continue with their studies but also serves as role models (Albright, 2016).

Distance from school has a direct impact on women's education. Schools closer to communities often facilitate women's enrollment rates (Plan International, 2022). On the contrary, schools farther from communities are prone to gender-based violence and can thus discourage women's educational aspirations. The issue of safe distance is also a case one of the overlapping dimension of accessibility as defined by the United Nations Economic and Social Council (1999). In its definition, especially in the case of the vulnerable groups, which includes but is not limited to women, the educational facility has to be within a "safe physical reach" (UN, 1999: 3).

Another peculiar barrier to education for women has a more psychological makeup in nature than the socio-economic ones we discussed above. Prevalent gender stereotypes in less developed societies negatively impact women's educational opportunities by devaluing their educational and professional potential (Mollaeva, 2017). Gender stereotyping and the ensuing harm it causes in discouraging women's education and development is one that comes in direct confrontation with international human rights. The United Nations Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights in its non-discrimination clause 2 of Article 2 obligates nation-states to, "remove gender and other stereotyping which impedes the educational access of girls, women, and disadvantaged groups" (United Nations, 1999: 12).

2.2 Gender Discrimination & Education in Afghanistan

When it comes to gender discrimination in education, Afghanistan is no different from any of the least developed countries. However, unlike most of the least developed nations, Afghanistan has suffered greatly as it went through different wars, occupations, and civil wars (Alvi-Aziz, 2008). As a result of these high magnitude geo-political upheavals, Afghanistan has been globally relegated to the bottom of all socio-economic indicators. Gender discrimination in education is fairly widespread. Far from being isolated examples of discrimination against women in education, the country appears to have a policy of ensuring women's access to education is blocked. In order to understand Afghanistan's situation vis-à-vis women's education or the lack of it, we need to investigate the situation of women's education in the country from three recent eras: Taliban, Post-Taliban, and Taliban again. Similarly, the barriers to female education in Afghanistan broadly fall into two areas. The first are barriers related to safety and security. The others are economic survival barriers distinct to an impoverished and war-torn economy (Alvi-Aziz, 2008).

Taliban in the 1990s, their first stint at governing, came with a more rigid and transformative mindset. In their quest to achieve a more puritanical form of government based on the principles of Sharia, their primary focus on education had more religious leanings to it (Amiri & Jackson, 2021). Worldly education as we see it, then, was a non-starter. Many of their policy statements at the time viewed education as a tool to 'transform the society' in light of the model of Ummah at the time of the prophet (Strick van Linschosten & Keuhn, 2014). Apart from that narrow inclination, the Taliban had neither the means nor the capacity to restructure the educational sector. Less than 1% of the country's girls had primary school placements (Amiri & Jackson, 2021).

Women's access to education at the time was obstructed due to a lack of resources and their inability to provide segregated schools for the female population. As a result, a large number of girls' schools were closed across the country. However, the ban on women's education then wasn't uniform across entire Afghanistan with disparities existing across the country. In one such instance, The Swedish Committee for Afghanistan reportedly educated 13,000 girls in 1997 in the rural parts of the country (Najimi, 1997).

Afghanistan is primarily a tribal society with rigid social norms (Reddy, 2014). Whereas the governments of the time and their policies towards women's education carry immense significance, we need to understand an overarching factor that transcends all forms of governments and administrations. The cultural notion of education being “harmful” and “pointless” for women and the ensuing stigmatization that stems from this very idea immensely discourage and demotivate women and girls from education even in the absence of any administrative coercive policy toward female education. This toxic idea takes a whole new form when reinforced by the policies of a more primitive and regressive administration that comes into power, a feat often repeated every few decades in the case of Afghanistan.

After the fall of the Taliban, the education sector saw an enormous influx of funds and resources (Amiri & Jackson, 2021). In 2003, a mere two years after regime change Afghanistan saw an influx of girls in primary schools (Reddy, 2014). A third of the 4.3 million children enrolled in various primary schools across the country were girls. Nevertheless, barriers to education for women in this era took a whole new form. Taliban opposition to women's education, at this point, could be interpreted as their goal of curtailing women's development and women's capabilities building. Schools at this point in the insurgency were painted as symbols of the occupier and thus made no-go areas for women and girls (Amiri & Jackson, 2021). Teachers were forced out of work and stigmatized across the communities and branded as doing the infidel's work. Even attacks were encouraged and justified on teachers so as to discourage and demotivate them, especially those women teachers trying to educate females.

Attacks on schools and teachers adversely affected women's access to education. A teacher and a student a day were killed in 2007 and most schools in the south were completely closed (AIHRC, 2008). Moreover, the increase in criminal activities in general due to the intensity and spread of the insurgency negatively impacted women's education. Some of the Afghanistan-specific impediments to women's education during the American Occupation were (Alvi-Aziz, 2008): the re-birth of warlord-ism, drug trafficking, and extortion. All these three factors greatly increased the risk of physical and sexual abuse and harassment of women as they endeavored to pursue their education. Gender-specific violence like rapes and gang rapes, kidnappings, and forced marriages further reduced female participation in education in Afghanistan.

The fall of the Taliban ushered in a new era of gender discrimination against Pashtun females as their ethnic rivals and enemies targeted them on their way to school and thus curtailed their enthusiasm for education (Alvi-Aziz, 2008). As the threat of sexual violence against Pashtun women became a reality, the rigidity of the Pashtun social code made it impossible for Pashtun women to go out of their homes and seek education.

Lack of physical infrastructure and the presence of unexploded ordinances (UXO) and landmines became a further barrier to education as getting education became a life-threatening experience under such circumstances (Coursen-Neff, 2006). In 2006, the Afghan president Hamid Karzai reportedly announced that around 200,000 Afghan children stopped their schooling due to violence and threats of violence (Constable, 2006).

The non-security-related barriers to women's education are oftentimes the result of harsh economic realities that trigger the selling of females to pay outstanding debts or as exchanges to settle disputes in tribal matters (Walter, 2006). Women sold, exchanged, or married off young all forgo any opportunity to engage in education and learning and are subjected to a life of abuse and hardship. In such circumstances, their human rights are trampled upon with impunity with no recourse to justice or any sort.

2.3 Education & Capabilities Development

The issue of women's education and capabilities development, in a less-developed, rural, and tribal context, is a fairly contentious issue when education and capabilities development is narrowly defined and viewed solely through an economic growth perspective (Moghadam, 1994). However, the context is turned upside down when it is taken as a 'holistic' concept in a human development paradigm. The Human Development Report Group of the UNDP succinctly expounds on this human development concept as: "the ultimate purpose of development is to expand the capabilities of people, to increase their ability to lead long and healthy lives, to enable them to cultivate their talents and interests, and to afford them an opportunity to live in dignity and with self-respect. The means by which this is achieved may be diverse - by increasing the stock of physical capital, introducing new technologies, changing institutions, and altering incentives. Equally important, and sometimes more important, are investments in human capital - the provision of education and training, the creation of employment and opportunities to acquire skills while on the job, the provision of primary health

care and adequate nutrition, expenditure on research and on seeking out new sources of information” (Griffin & Rahman Khan, 1992:1).

The definition thus underscores the significance and centrality of education as a means of realizing human development through human capabilities expansion (Moghadam, 1994). UNDP’s focus on literacy and education especially from a gender viewpoint underscores the importance of women's education and their engagement in productive activities in the light of national development and women's capabilities development. Women's share in national wealth creation is a global phenomenon (Cuberes & Teignier, 2012; Duflo, 2012; Blumberg, 1999). Putting to work and enhancing women's productive capabilities is a prerequisite for economic and social development.

Women's capabilities development through education can contribute to national prosperity in two important ways (Klassan & Lamana, 2009; Moghadam, 1994). Firstly, via their participation in productive activities they can contribute to the labor markets; export manufacturing; service sector, and food supply. Secondly, women's education can reduce fertility rates; minimize child and mother mortality rates and improve the overall family health system. The latter is correlated to future human capital enrichment (Mitra, Bang & Biswas, 2015), which in turn has positive ramifications for technological change, the single most influential factor for global growth and development (Thevenon, et al., 2012).

Educating women burnishes their decision-making and social-communicational skills thereby opening potential political opportunities for them to engage in national decision-making (Clayton et al., 2019). Such capabilities development via education is not only beneficial for women as it improves their individual lives but can have a positive influence on their local and national politics by expanding the talent pool and through diversification. Such women also bring experience and knowledge with a visible effect on public policies (Philips, 1995).

Being able to express oneself articulately as a result of capacity building through education enriches the national and local policy debate even if women are mere bystanders. Voicing their concerns and opinions and enlightening the public policy discourse inevitably raises the quality of the civil society discourse and identify efficient and effective economic policies that work for the many (Weldon, 2002). Additionally, gender gaps in education curtail women's capabilities and thus render them unable to fully participate in the political process and lobby

for their interests. The word *interest* carries immense significance here as policies implemented in the absence of women's participation are oftentimes ignorant of their concerns at best; at worst they are discriminatory (Iversen & Rosenbluth, 2010).

Closely related to the subject of women's participation in politics for improved decision-making and their rights is the ubiquitous and rigid patriarchal norms, an inherent characteristic of such tribal societies, working as a glass ceiling against women's development (Tripp, 2012). Denying access to education for women in turn restrains their capabilities development process, which in turn reduces their opportunities to wholeheartedly participate in the political process and dialogue and fight for their rights (Bleck & Michelitch, 2018). A considerable number of scholars view this sort of political participation, one that takes place in a context with low-level human development, by women to be crucial as it leads to a high level of mobilization for and in defense of their rights (O'Donnell, 2004).

The right to education for women thus becomes the right to gender equality, a fundamental right, as it enables women in this case to live their lives to the fullest in the way human decency advocates and strives for (Nussbaum, 2000). This inextricable link between the right to education and the right to gender comes from the fact that education is the most significant factor in women's capabilities development without which the notion of having access to a decent and fully human life remains a chimera.

2.4 Access to Education and Human Rights

Article 13 of the Covenant of the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights unequivocally defines education to be a right in itself and a means of realizing, living, and enjoying other human rights as well (UN, 1999). Such an unambiguous assertion from the preeminent rights body firmly places education at the center of human rights discussion. It further elaborates on the significance of education beyond its practical appeal. It is education, as ascertained by the UN committee that enables a person to be truly free and enlightened and one who has the capabilities to cherish the “joys and rewards of human existence” (UN, 1999: 1). Moreover, UNGEI (2003, p.3), asserts that “Girls' education is a fundamental human right, underpinning all other rights and an essential element of sustainable human development”. Such strong positions from such powerful organizations tend to instill confidence and optimism amongst women and in those advocating their right to education. However, such rights activists

oftentimes fail to take account of the ground situation where women have to strike patriarchal deals in order to survive and progress in different societies (Unterhalter, 2005).

There is another interesting side to this debate about rights, capabilities, and gender equality in education that demarcates and underscores a clear disagreement on ethical grounds (Unterhalter, 2005). The debate hinges on the aspect of the universality of human rights. To the Cosmopolitans, human rights are universal and local policy and practice shall ensure its sanctity (Smith & Light, 2001). However, Communitarians reject the notion of the universality of human rights and emphasize the significance of context. They opine that local and state realities shall take precedence over international policy and formulation. The distinguishing feature about both sides is that both tend to agree that gender equality matters less but for different reasons. For the former, human rights transcend race, color, and gender. For the latter, gender is less of an issue as they view individual rights in light of an individual's membership in a particular community. In this instance, a community history, social order, and complex power structure leave little room for gender equality and rights as an absolute reality. Access to education thus takes backstage as gender equality is a non-starter.

2.5 Capabilities Development and Human Rights

Nussbaum's (2000) capabilities approach is also one that is seeped in the notion of placing education at the heart of the individual's human rights. The idea behind the capabilities approach is one that is inherently political in nature. Human capabilities 'exert a moral claim' for their development (Nussbaum, 2000: 131). Capabilities development is impossible albeit with access to educational support. It is thus under such circumstances where education enables capabilities development that we see the realization and understanding of human rights. On the contrary, if such capabilities development is denied to individuals by denying them access to education, we are merely witnessing 'shadows' of humans and not humans themselves. In such a context the debate about human rights remains a futile exercise and one that has little material value to the individuals in question.

Political inclusion that might result in protecting and safeguarding one's rights while advocating and lobbying for the rights of the weak and oppressed becomes a reality only when women's capabilities in terms of knowledge and communication are built through quality education and exposure (Mitra et al., 2015). As we have mentioned above human rights are

firmly embedded in politics, as it's the political dispensation that allows or obstructs the freedom to practice and enjoy basic human rights. Similarly, capabilities developed through education can enable women to take part in activities that go beyond the protection of their individual rights. Young (2011), asserts that women's participation in economic policymaking can influence the adoption of the market policies that oftentimes are reflective of the dominant group's interest at the expense of the rest of the society. By engaging in capabilities development through education, women can alter much more than simply change their individual life prospects. Such capacity building puts them in a position to alter the course of their country's direction and champion human rights causes across society.

3. Methodology

The Methodology chapter gives an overview of research methodologies used within the study as well as layout the rationale behind those choices. The study's aim was to investigate the role of education in women's capabilities development in Afghanistan. Research design, research strategy and research approach, data collection, and data analysis are the major constituents of this chapter.

3.1 Design & Strategy of Research

Some of the salient features of a scientific study are its adoption of appropriate research design and research strategy. Research design, according to Bryman & Bell (2011: 41), is a formal structure of data collection and analysis. Moreover, Bryman & Bell (2011: 41) view research design to be a representative of a “structure that guides the execution of a research method and the analysis of the subsequent data”. A discourse analysis approach was ruled out for the study analysis on two grounds. Firstly, the depth and investigation a discourse analysis required was incompatible with the data size and depth. Since the participants had no prior experience and exposure nor any deeper understanding of the geopolitical dynamics surrounding the issue of gender discrimination in Afghanistan, the data generated required a less rigorous and less nuanced analysis approach. Secondly, along with a bigger and deeper data sample, the time required for such an undertaking, data generation, and collection, also made the use of discourse analysis unfeasible for the study. Time constraints played a major role in the latter case (Delve, 2022).

A quantitative approach was a non-starter as the answers to the research questions are intrinsically qualitative in nature and quantification in this context is not possible. Deeper meanings rather than putting random subjective numbers of the participants' responses would have adversely affected the quality of the analysis.

Being a qualitative study, five different methods were available for the study. These five methods were: narrative research, phenomenology, grounded theory, ethnography, and case study (Creswell, 2013). The study chose a case study as the research method for a number of reasons (Creswell, 2013: 104). Firstly, it offers an opportunity for an in-depth understanding and analysis of the women's educational plight in Afghanistan. Secondly, it is best suited to

issues in political science and law, areas both connected firmly to the issue of human rights. Thirdly, it lends itself to the studying of more than one individual. Fourthly, it makes use of both primary and secondary data, again relevant to this research study. And lastly, it makes possible data analysis through themes, a salient feature of the study's data analysis section.

Semi-structured interviews were in line with the study's aim, i.e., to examine and investigate the perceptions, aspirations, and understanding of the participants about the issue of gender discrimination in education in Afghanistan. With both room for a few pre-determined interview questions as well as lending the researcher the opportunity to ask the participants unplanned and spontaneous questions, semi-structured interviews combine the best of both structured and unstructured interviews (Pollock, 2022). The aim of the study was to ease the participants into the interview with a few pre-planned questions as they found their rhythm and confront them with deeper unplanned and spontaneous questions so as to delve deeper into their understanding of the issue at hand. Moreover, Semi-structured interviews and as a result, the generation of a cache of verbal data make the use of a qualitative approach inevitable. Moreover, people's perceptions, wishes, and aspirations, making the bulk of the data, requires a more human-centric approach to the data analysis, which is only afforded by a qualitative approach in this instance (Bryman et al., 2011; Yin, 2003).

As to the approach of the study, a Deductive approach is used which is in sync with the qualitative nature of the study. A hypothesis, in our qualitative case research questions, is deduced from the theory and would be put to the test via our data analysis in order to investigate it in detail (Bryman et al., 2011).

Given the study's aim of investigating the existing situation of women's education and its ensuing influence on women's capabilities development within Afghanistan, pre-and post-Taliban takeover, a case study approach makes sense. Secondly, the findings from the study within the context of Afghanistan under a peculiar set of endogenous and exogenous conditions render the findings of this specific study pertinent and valid only within the context of this specific case (Yin, 2003).

3.2 Data Collection

A research methodology is intrinsically linked to the nature of data one investigates in research. So given the qualitative nature of our research study, it is only appropriate to adopt a congruent methodology in sync with the generated data. To Bryman et al., (2011: 41), ‘‘a research method is simply a technique for collecting data’’.

Data collection can come in many different forms (Yin, 2003). Some of these are primary in nature while others are secondary. Semi-structured interviews, direct observation, and physical participation are some of the primary data collection forms. Documents, archival records, and other forms of existing data come under secondary data.

For the purpose of data generation, semi-structured interviews were selected for data generation. Moreover, the aim of the study is to understand in-depth the participants’ aspirations, wishes, feelings, and perceptions, with the semi-structured interviews lending themselves to such an extensive and exhaustive undertaking.

3.2.1 The Interview Questions

Afghanistan has never been an easy place for research given the political and security risks involved. Even during the American occupations carrying out research in the country came with its own numerous risks. However, given the American withdrawal and the coming back of the Taliban into power, the future of women's education in Afghanistan has come to the forefront of research and policy again.

The coalition governments during the past two decades have invested heavily in women's education and women's empowerment and development. The notion of putting women at the forefront of socio-economic Afghanistan came from a two-pronged strategy of reconstruction and rebuilding. Firstly, in the short to medium term by educating Afghan women and building their capabilities the idea was to extricate them from abject poverty. Secondly, in the long run, educating Afghan women and building their capabilities would prove to be a potential bulwark against extremism and terrorism as their soft power gradually triggered down generations and through every stratum of the Afghan society.

By interviewing the women who actually experienced firsthand those efforts, the aim is to gain insights into their perceptions of their country then and now. Through their experiences living and studying in Afghanistan under the Americans and witnessing and experiencing those

efforts to bring about a change through education in their lives, we would get to know firsthand their views about their country now that the Taliban have returned and the future of women education in their country.

3.2.2 Interviewees and Interviews

Four interviews are conducted in the study. All four of them were Afghan women, two of whom were educated while the other two had never received any form of (formal, informal) education. All four of them are refugees and are living outside Afghanistan given the current political and security situation in their country. Care has been taken to keep every detail about them confidential and anonymous throughout the study. Some of the interview questions are added in the Appendix section of the study.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted via Skype. The different locations of the participants made face-to-face interviewing a non-starter. The convenience, efficiency, and cost-effectiveness of Skype as a platform for these interviews made the task of interviewing possible within the given timeframe. The average Skype video call lasted approximately 45 minutes. Care was taken to ensure the participants were aware of their rights during their participation in the study and their convenience was given a priority. The audio from the recording was transcribed and later translated from Dari to English. The transcripts were later used for coding and data analysis.

3.2.3 Sampling

As mentioned above, doing research in Afghanistan is too risky for foreigners. So, the second-best thing was to find Afghan women living abroad with some level of education attained inside Afghanistan. The second characteristic of the sample participants was easy to access. These were the only two reasons for the selection of these four participants for the interview. However, the study has ensured that the participants qualify the research requirements of the study in the context of the research questions of the study.

3.3 Data Analysis

Data analysis in a qualitative study is a lot less straightforward than is the case in a quantitative study. Given the complexity and variation that the data holds, qualitative data analysis is often

confronted with the criticism of being subjective in nature. However, there are certain tools that methodically analyze data and reduce the criticism of subjectivity. Thematic analysis, to mention just one, is an analysis tool that subjects data to rigorous investigation and interpretation and thus enables us to obtain results that have uniformity and are valid across different data scenarios (Bryman et al., 2011).

In order to perform thematic analysis, the data was subject to a strict and rigorous process of coding. According to King (2004: 256), “the essence of template analysis is that researcher produces a list of codes, templates, representing themes identified in the textual data”.

It is useful to have an interview guide for the formation of the initial codes. These initial codes are formed from the major concepts in the theoretical framework. Since such codes come from those vital concepts, this helps link the theory with the data. The linkage process transpires in no vacuum but takes place within the context of the research question/hypothesis of the research study. King (2004: 259), “.....pre-defined codes help guide analysis”. Coding in the thematic analysis is an iterative process with a lot of to-and-fro between data and coding. The process of coding starts right after the translation and transcripts are made. Coding comes in two steps. Line-by-line coding and word-by-word coding. In line-by-line coding, labels as codes are attached to the text. Initially, codes are right away assigned to texts but if no pre-defined code exists then a theme is developed, and a code is generated. Higher-order codes mean general themes and lower codes mean more specific themes (Thematic Analysis, 2012; King, 2004).

The themes and templates are mere tools that aid in the interpretation of the data so as to make sense of it. The interpretations of this study data can be found along with the discussions on that interpretation. Since the aim is to deduce the research question from the existing theory, a deductive approach is taken to the interpretation of the formation of the themes as a result of the thematic analysis.

3.4 Validity & Reliability

Validity and reliability tend to take off some of the criticism of subjectivity of a qualitative research study. Both these features enhance the quality of the study by enabling it to be replicable and valid across different settings. According to Bryman et al., (2011), reliability

ensures repeatability of the study, a significant research characteristic. The validity on the other hand enhances the study's integrity by making the conclusions valid. These two criteria measure different aspects of the research measurement.

In order to ensure the validity and reliability of the study, the interview participants are Afghan women who have a firsthand educational and capability development experience within Afghanistan. Therefore, their views and opinions can be relied upon and are valid within the context of women's education and capabilities development.

The interpretations from their semi-structured interviews do not lend themselves up for a more general reading. Neither are four women representatives of the holistic Afghan issue of women's education and capabilities development, but these are issues that are closely linked to the issue of limitations of the research study. Albeit care has been taken to keep uniformity in the questions put forward to the interviewees and the time interval between the interviews was kept to a minimum so as to enhance the reliability of the research work.

Keeping a complete set of data, transcripts and video recordings bolster the study validity as data can be verified with the records.

3.4.1 Limitations

As mentioned above the sample size or its makeup is not representative of the issue, i.e., women's education and capabilities development in Afghanistan. Nevertheless, a convenience sample under certain conditions is a valid research sample size and is employed under certain conditions (Bryman et al., 2011).

Logistics, time, and cost constraints were the issues against face-to-face interviews thereby letting the study rely upon interviews on Skype.

The enormous risk associated with going into Afghanistan physically and conducting the research firsthand is another limitation the study confronted and thus had to rely upon Afghan refugees living outside of Afghanistan.

The original interviews are conducted in Dari and translation and transcripts are formed in English. Meanings and thoughts lost in translation are other limitations the study has to cope with.

4. Data Analysis & Findings

The ‘Data Analysis & Findings’ chapter consists of the analysis of the primary data generated via interviews with the study participants and its ensuing analysis. It is important to briefly allude to the composition of the project participants and their relevance to the study at this point to give the study’s readers an idea and background of the data produced and data analysis further down the chapter.

4.1 Participants/Respondents

Respondents	Age	Education	Nationality	Location
Participant 1	23	College	Afghani	Abroad/USA
Participant 2	32	College	Afghani	Abroad/USA
Participant 3	25	None	Afghani	Abroad/USA
Participant 4	38	None	Afghani	Abroad/USA

Table 1: Composition of the Interviewees

In addition to a brief background of the participants above, the interview questions put forward to the study participants are isolated in accordance with the different Nussbaum’s capabilities so as to give a clear idea about those questions vis-à-vis the study’s research question within the ambit of the theoretical framework.

4.2 Women & Education and Barriers

4.2.1 Women Education & Taliban

The participants interviewed in the study strongly believe that education is the way forward for their country if it has to prosper and develop as a nation-state. However, in response to their perceptions and outlook about Afghan women getting education en-masse, their optimism was less stark. According to Participant 1, “.... *now after the Taliban, women education has reached nearly zero and it has turned into a dream we don’t know if it’s achievable or not*”.

Participant 2 has no qualms in expressing outrageous pessimism about women's education after the Taliban. To her, “*now the Taliban break every single foundation that was built for women's education*”. Participant3 sounds equally pessimistic talking about women's education and the

Taliban, “*A pre-Taliban Afghanistan was good. We had a comfortable life. Education service was accessible to everyone. Now, the Taliban don’t allow girls to go to school*”. The same concerns are voiced by Participant 4, “*It was good before the Taliban. Girls used to access education.*”

4.2.2 Physical/Logistical Barriers & Women’s Education

Participant 1 thinks, “*the schools are far and few, and reaching there takes a lot of time and trouble*”.

To Participant 2, “*the roads are bad and distances too long. Reaching school is not easy for women especially when the situation is bad*”.

Participant 3 opines, “*there are no facilities in schools, and we don’t even have water and washrooms. The roads and getting to school are also very troublesome*”.

Participant 4 is equally dejected while talking about getting to school. In her words, “*these days no one cares about the schools and the buildings are broken and dirty. It is also very hard to go to school from home as there are no buses and men are everywhere*”.

4.2.3 Social/Cultural Barriers & Women’s Education

According to Participant 1, “*our relatives and people around talk bad about women going to school nowadays*”.

Participant 2 thinks, “*my family has no issues with me going out for education. They are very supportive of women's education*”.

To Participant 3, “*my family thinks education is important for women and so they support female education*”.

Interestingly, Participant 4 says, “*my family is fine with my education but my neighbors and everyone in my street thinks of a woman going to school is bad*”.

4.2.4 Poverty & Women Education

“It is hard to survive on a daily basis. Everything is so expensive and then there are no jobs. It is very hard for families to pay the school fee or the school bus fare”, Participant 1. Participant 2 expresses similar views, *“things are hard, but women's education is important and many families including mine would cut on many things but will support my education”*. Participant 3 seems to have similar sentiments, *“How can I ask my parents for money for school or bus when I see them struggle daily for food. The government has no support for women going to school”*. To Participant 4, *“we can't live like that. We can't send kids to school because we don't have money. Everyone wants to get out of the country”*.

4.2.5 Security & Women Education

Participant 1 thinks, *“everyone is afraid of going out of their houses. Women can't study in such an environment. We fear for our safety and honor”*. To Participant 2, *“nothing is safe in Afghanistan. Schools are not safe; roads are not safe so how can women continue their education”*.

Participant 3 opines, *“I don't feel like going out of the home. I don't feel like sending my daughters to go to school as things are not good”*.

Participant 4 has similar views, *“it is better to be safe and home than to go to school and get hurt or kidnapped”*.

4.3 Education & Capabilities Development

4.3.1 Life

Life: Living a normal and useful life devoid of any physical limitations that might reduce its worth or cut it short.... (Nussbaum, 2000).

Nussbaum's capabilities list begins with *life*. Life encompasses all capabilities and exhibits the essence of all human rights. Not only is it celebrated for its functionality of existence but also for its true value and worth. Life in Nussbaum's list does not represent it in its mere existence but instead cherished for its potential and capabilities. Its relevance to the study cannot be exaggerated as women through education can truly understand and find meaning in their lives. It is through capabilities development via education that women can experience an internal and external transformation with respect to the true meaning and worth of life. In its basic raw form

in a tribal society and a developing country like Afghanistan under the Taliban, it means uplifting the plight of women through capabilities development and ensuring the decency and respect their existence demands.

Participant 1's views on education in relation to capabilities, *“As I entered the US and left my hometown it was the time when I was on my own with my husband and I started my new life. Then I started to know more about how important it is to be educated and what privileges it might bring to you in starting a new life”*.

To Participant 2, *“Education plays an important role in my life not only in my life for everyone's life. I am an independent woman, and I don't need someone to financially support me”*. To make her point further she says, *“Education makes women shine like diamonds in society and she can do whatever needed for her goals”*.

According to Participant 3, *“yes, education helps women have a good life”*. She continues, *“Education has a positive impact on a woman's life. Uneducated women are always in trouble. Both my husband and I are illiterate. We struggle with life because of that”*.

Participant 4 thinks, *“yes, educated women are able to run their life themselves. They are independent. I am illiterate and I am home like blind”*.

4.3.2 Bodily Health

Bodily Health: Enjoying a well-nourished and well-sheltered healthy life, which includes reproductive health as well... Nussbaum (2000).

Bodily health is the second most fundamental issue plaguing Afghan women, especially the illiterate ones. Instead of enjoying a well-nourished and well-sheltered healthy life they at best are the recipients of meager meals and scanty shelter devoid of any basic facilities. Their response is either muted or absent given this blatant violation of their basic human right. However, the existence of such a state and its survival is the result of a lack of education amongst Afghan women and by extension the absence of capabilities development. An educated woman aware of her bodily needs and dwellings rises against such status quo and ensures her rights to these basic facilities are taken care of.

To Participant 2, *“every educated woman is aware of her health and the benefits of being healthy and will take care”*. Participant 1 thinks, *“every educated woman knows how important being healthy is for them to have a healthy family which is the foundation of a healthy society and country, going to gyms, swimming pools only for women and other types of sports were beginning to become common amongst women, right now in the country all-women sports are banned and are inaccessible for all women and it will be so if this regime continues”*. Participant 3 opines, *“education has a remarkable impact on health and family planning”*. To Participant 4, *“education has a great role in women’s life regarding bodily health and family planning”*.

4.3.3 Practical Reason

Practical Reason: To have a living conscience.... Nussbaum (2000)

Another significant capability developed via education is the ability to have a conscience. Only through education and learning can one be able to breathe some life into one’s conscience as one becomes aware of their minuscule existence in the grander scheme of things. To have a living conscience one needs to be elevated from an individualistic standpoint and be placed in more pluralistic settings so as to evaluate their own presence in relation to other humans and the rest of the existence. Without education, the development of such a capability amongst Afghan women is nothing less than a chimera.

In Participant 1 words, *“yes, an educated woman knows how they should be treated in the family, know their importance, and also know how to give and gain respect, be active in life to create more value for their life and for others around them”*. To Participant 2, *“yes, an educated woman is aware of her rights in the home and in society and she can stand for rights and other women, and she can take a lot of responsibility in her society and make a peaceful society for everyone”*. Participant 3 thinks, *“yes, an educated woman knows her rights and responsibilities towards her society and others”*. To Participant 4, *“yes educated women are widely accepted in the society because she understands and respects and cares about others and their rights too”*.

4.3.4 Affiliation

Affiliation: Be mindful of other human concerns. Be non-discriminant to others in any way, form, or shape... Nussbaum (2000)

In the case of Afghanistan in general and Afghanistan under the Taliban in particular, affiliation as a capability takes center stage for a number of reasons. The rigid theocracy Taliban so profess is the exact opposite of what affiliation conveys. The development of such a capability amongst Afghan women through education can be truly transformative on a societal level as the level of non-discrimination spreads and people are no more identified by their tribes, religion, color, creed, or gender.

To Participant 1, “*we should respect others and their rights just like we want our own rights*”. Participant 2 thinks, “*we don’t live alone in society and so we have to be respectful of other people whomever they are. We can only live in peace if we do the right things for others*”. Participant 3 has similar views, “*we can only get respect if we respect and care about others*”. Participant 4 opines, “*we can have a peaceful and happy society if we care about each other and stand for our rights and the rights of everyone else*”.

4.3.5 Sense, Imagination & Thought

Sense, Imagination & Thought: To have the ability to use all human senses so as to do or experience life in a truly human way. This capability encompasses numerous human traits that are a direct result of human imagination, thought, and reasoning. It is rather the use of this very capability that truly distinguishes humans from every other living mammal... Nussbaum (2000)

Afghan women are just like women everywhere: hardworking, creative, and dexterous. With access to education and the resultant capabilities, development can ensure they are able, for once, to use all their abilities in order to transform and uplift their lives and the lives of their loved ones. With a long tradition and rich culture, Afghan women are best suited to a transformative shift in terms of internalizing, developing, and enhancing the various human faculties hitherto denied to them by obstructing their right to education. They are second to none in terms of their ingenuity and potential and through education and capabilities development they can truly change their country and society along with their lives.

In Participant 1 words, “*education taught me I can be whomever I dream of and achieve whatever I dream of. I know my rights much better than a sister who unfortunately was not able to have higher education*”. To Participant 2, “*yes for educated women life challenges are life lessons and she can handle it in a very perfect way*”. In Participant 3 words, “*education makes women's life easy. They know and go shopping, make appointments with doctors, find addresses easily and make the most of their lives*”. To Participant 4, “*those who are educated, they know most of the things. They can manage their relations with the immigration lawyer. Education also helps women know all their rights including rights on inheritance*”.

4.3.6 Control over one’s Environment

Control over one’s Environment: Be part of a political process; have full property rights as of anyone else... Nussbaum (2000)

To develop such capabilities, one needs to be fully aware of their surroundings and whatever transpires in them. Afghan women can only truly have control over their environment if they are educated. Through reading and learning can they inquire and search for answers and alternative narratives and challenge the existing status quo so bent on marginalizing them and discriminating against them. Through education and learning can they break through the glass ceiling and convince and persuade others to be cognizant of their interests and rights. They can even aspire to be policymakers and lobbyists and help improve the lives of other women and add their share to their country’s development.

Participant 1 thinks, “*yes women had an eye-catching effect on all political decisions we had reached a level that our decisions made a lot of difference in the political side of the country*”. Participant 2 views, “*educated women are as good as men in politics maybe even better because they think of others and the country more than men do*”. Participant 3 opines, “*during the republic government, women had an active role in the political decision making and the men and women rights were equal*”. Participant 3 views, “*educated women can make better policy for women and children and can better good things for the country*”.

The table below tallies the responses of the study participants and their views regarding the barriers to women's education in Afghanistan.

Respondent	Taliban	Physical	Cultural	Poverty	Security
Participant 1	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Participant 2	✓	✓	✗	✗	✓
Participant 3	✓	✓	✗	✓	✓
Participant 4	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

Table 2: Barriers to women's education in Afghanistan

Below are the respondents' responses with regard to the ten Nussbaum's capabilities and their relationship with education in the eyes of the participants.

Women Education & Capabilities Development: General Themes

Respondent	Life	BH	PR	Aff	SIT	CoOT	BI	Play	OT	Emo
Participant 1	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗
Participant 2	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗
Participant 3	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗
Participant 4	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗

Table 3: Nussbaum's Capability Theory and the study respondents' responses

The next table shows the themes produced via coding using thematic analysis. These general themes give the respondents perspective on the barriers to women's education in Afghanistan as well as the role education plays in the development of women's capabilities enhancement and promotion.

Participant 1	Gender Equality, Freedom, Self-Reliance, Self-esteem, Worthiness, Cordial, Respectful, Importance, Healthy,
---------------	---

	Recreational, Political Awareness, Contentment, Satisfaction
Participant 2	Powerful, Independent, Important, Stable, Value-addition, Solid, Supportive, Aware, Confident, Influential, Well-Informed
Participant 3	Good, Comfortable, Accessible, Positive, Free, Active, Easy, Fruitful, Responsible, Smart, Equal, In-control, Aware, Vigilant
Participant 4	Feel Good, Positivity, Accessibility, Active, Respected, Independent, Valuable, Skillful, Smart, Well-informed, Inclusive, Influential, Aware, Confident

Table 4: Women’s Education & Capabilities Development: A thematic Representation

The above themes are the result of vigorous coding from the interview transcripts. An excerpt of how the coding is done can be found in the *appendix* section. In the following section, the data analyzed, and the findings would be discussed in detail as they are operationalized in the context of Nussbaum’s capability theory, the study's theoretical underpinning, so as to try and examine the research questions.

Along with the discussion on these themes in light of the theoretical framework and the research questions, an attempt would be made to find any future gaps within the subject for further research. A brief conclusion would follow the discussion section summarizing the major findings and the room for future work within the subject matter.

5. Discussion

In this chapter, the aim is to investigate the study's research questions in light of the data analyzed and generated from the interviews. The results and findings of the previous chapter are extensively and exhaustively discussed to offer conclusions based on those findings. Moreover, the chapter alludes to recommendations suggested for future research in the subject area.

The aim of this research study is to investigate the various barriers to women's education in Afghanistan. Moreover, the issue of capabilities development through education amongst Afghan women is also examined as part of the research question.

In case of barriers to women's education in Afghanistan, the study's objective is to identify and classify those barriers and examine any existing solutions to the problem as perceived by the study's participants themselves Afghan women. Furthermore, the promotion of education and capabilities development in the context of human rights is also studied in order to highlight the issue of gender discrimination in education in Afghanistan under the Taliban and its impact on women's rights.

5.1 Findings & Discussion

5.1.1 Barriers to Women's Education under the Taliban

The main findings of the research study show that barriers to women's education in Afghanistan come in different forms. Some of these barriers are linked to the geopolitical situation of the country, an outcome of persistent long-wars and unrest in the country. Others are more deeply rooted in the culture and social norms of Afghan society. Still, others are the result of the country's alienation from the rest of the world and its abject poverty and absence of real economic development.

Another important finding was the unanimous agreement between the interviewees about the role of education and its significance in the capabilities development and human rights enhancement and awareness of Afghan women.

Given the scale and scope of this research study, it is unwise to draw countrywide conclusions on the issue of gender inequality education and its importance for women's development in the

country. However, the views and perceptions of the respondents in the study can be indicative of the general mood of females about barriers to their education and the value education might add to their lives in the absence of these barriers. Consequently, it also gives an idea about how women feel about education and its role in their capabilities development and the inherent link such capabilities play in underscoring the importance of human rights and its promotion and awareness.

The diversification and heterogeneity in the personalities and education level of the study's respondents yet the homogeneity in their responses to the study research questions show a near agreement across the spectrum amongst Afghan women on the issue of hurdles and obstacles to their education and their understanding of how important education is to their capabilities development and to the issue of their human rights.

The level of education, though varied across the interviewees in the study, had little impact on their understanding of the core issue of barriers to female education. The literate and the illiterate were equally aware of the presence of barriers, physical, social, and political to women's education under the Taliban. They were also less optimistic if not outright hopeless about any improvements in this area under the current regime.

All four respondents agreed to the presence of physical barriers to women's education in the form of little or no infrastructure to promote female schooling. Interestingly, the issue of cultural barriers to education in Afghanistan brought a divergence of opinion amongst the study respondents. Half of the respondents thought cultural barriers are significant and exist. However, the rest of the two respondents had a very different opinions about this issue. This nonconformity points to another inherent anomaly in Afghan society: the existence of many different races and cultures. The respondents who thought cultural barriers are less of an issue for women's education mostly represent the non-Pashtuns. The Hazaras, Tajiks, and the Uzbeks along with the Pashtun make up the bulk of the Afghan population. However, those non-Pashtuns have a lot less strict social code and are more cognizant of women's freedom and rights. Their cultural dynamic is a lot less strict than that of the Pashtun's and hence their understanding and view of culture as a non-barrier to women's education make sense when viewed from their cultural perspective.

Poverty as a barrier to female education in Afghanistan under the Taliban also had a near-unanimous approval. However, one respondent ruled it out as a barrier for a very different reason. Her understanding of poverty in the context of female education came down to the significance of education as per the understanding of the individual's family. In addition, a family's aspirations and hopes for their women in the context of education determined the amount of influence poverty made on women's education. If a family thought education might prove life-changing for their women, they pushed it higher up the significance ladder in their personal budgeting. A less optimistic family about their females in terms of education proving any worth to them rated its importance a lot lower. So, the issue of poverty as a barrier to education varied a lot across the population on the basis of how significant those decision-makers in the family thought education might be to a female, which in turn depended on their understanding and perception of what benefits education might bring to their women's lives.

These results above are in line with research work done in this area in other social settings. It is important to mention here that a more exhaustive and inside Afghanistan research needs to be undertaken as the subject area is least explored.

5.1.2 Women's Education & Capabilities Development

Nussbaum's capabilities approach is used as the study's theoretical framework; hence the participants' views are evaluated on the capabilities approach list. An interesting picture emerges when the list in its entirety is investigated in the context of the respondents' views. The capabilities like Life, Bodily Health, Practical Reason, Affiliation, Sense, Imagination and Thought, and Control over one's environment form one category while the rest of the list's elements like Bodily Integrity, Play, Other Species, and Emotions form a different category. As for the former, there appears no disagreement on the part of all participants that a relationship exists between those six elements and education. To them education plays a central role in enhancing the quality of life; improving bodily health through the development of one's better understanding of their body and being more aware of it; being able to look beyond one's animalistic instincts and having a living conscience; to be part of the whole and be more pluralistic; to make the most of life while being able to use every human ability in existence, and being able to be more human-centric with the ability to love and be loved. However, the list's other elements like Bodily Integrity, Play, Other Species, and Emotions made little sense when it came to the participant's understanding of these capabilities and their link with

education. One possible explanation is these four capabilities have a higher placement on Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Since these capabilities are in essence a reflection of the human needs and how to be able to achieve them, these four have a placement higher on that pyramid than those six basic ones. And since Afghan women and Afghan society is still stuck in trying to fulfill their basic needs, the issues of Play, Bodily Integrity, Other Species, and Emotions are a distant dream so far. Viewed in such a context it thus makes sense as to the participants' near-unanimous failure to find a connection between these four capabilities and education. As to the issue of human rights, these four elements tend to cater to the less basic of their rights. As for the other six capabilities on the list, they are representative of the more basic human rights of which the most fundamental is *Life* and *Bodily Health*. It is therefore safe to assume given the overall developmental and educational state of the country that the stages of psychological and self-actualization needs of which these four capabilities appear to be part are a distant reality in present Afghanistan under the Taliban for women. Hence, they appear, as evident from the respondents' responses, to be oblivious to those capabilities.

In lieu of the participant's responses, it appears that the capabilities on the list are of different weightage, and some are more basic than others. The more secondary are the result of those built upon by the more primary ones or conversely their existence is contingent upon the existence of the more basic ones.

5.1.3 Capabilities Development & Human Rights

A positive correlation exists between human rights and capabilities developed as a result of education amongst Afghan women as viewed in the context of the themes developed from the participants' responses.

Since we have already established that access to education for everyone without gender discrimination is a basic human right in itself and helps with the ensuing rights education promotes through capabilities developed as a result of learning. Thus, in such context lets take a look at Nussbaum's capabilities approach list and examine them in the context of the respondents' responses so as to look for signs of a connection.

According to participant 1, capabilities developed as a result of education amongst women promote *gender equality*. Gender equality is deeply rooted in the notion of the universality of

human rights without discrimination based on color, creed, or gender. The idea of human rights, according to her understanding and within the context can be perceived from her use of the word *freedom*. If education triggers capabilities development and that in turn results in one's freedom, then that is nothing short of promoting and upholding one's basic human rights. Similarly, participant three shares similar views with participant one on the issue of capabilities development, education, and women leading to *gender equality*.

Moreover, the unremitting formation of themes like '*Self-esteem*', '*Worthiness*', and '*value-addition*', from the four respondents' responses underscores the significance of Nussbaum's '*Life*', capability, and how education enhances and promotes it, which in turn is a basic human right.

The existence of themes like *Healthy* are reflective of the participants' awareness and give importance to the issue of Bodily Health, which is the direct cause of capabilities developed via women's education.

The Sense, Imagination, and Thought are reflected in themes like '*Contentment*', '*Satisfaction*', '*Powerful*', '*Fruitful*', '*Comfortable*', '*Feel Good*', and '*Valuable*' across the participants' views. These ideas are reflective of their understanding of making the most of their lives and employing every human capability so as to live life truly as a human to the full.

Inclusive, Respectful, and Supportive alludes to the capability of practical reason, which in turn calls to having a living conscience. The participants think educated women are more pluralistic and tend to have a more communal approach to public goods than a narrow individualistic stance.

Themes like *Inclusive, Responsible, Supportive, Fair, and Accessible* are also reminiscent of having a living conscience, i.e., having a practical reason. In the participants' views the notion of practical reason, a capability only possible through education, holds the key to Afghanistan's long-standing issues of national development. Only through practical reason can one have the conscience awareness and be respectful of everyone else's human rights and obligations.

'*Political awareness*', '*Aware*', and '*Well-informed*' are themes that allude to the capability of control over one's environment. The respondents think through education women can attain a sense of political awareness that can put them in a position to safeguard and watch out for their

human rights that include but are not limited to rights of inheritance, equal opportunities, and living a peaceful safe life worthy of human decency and respect.

6. Conclusion & Recommendations

In this final section of the study, the conclusions drawn and findings arrived at would be examined in light of the research questions of the work. In answering the research questions in the context of these conclusions we may be able to form an understanding of these issues as well as identify areas for further research.

6.1 Conclusion

To begin with, it is important to reiterate the study research questions so as to provide a marker and a reference point around which the conclusions can be drawn and evaluated. The study research questions thus are:

- *What are the barriers to female education in Afghanistan under the Taliban?*
- *How can the promotion of women's education in Afghanistan enhance women's capabilities development?*

In this given context of the research questions above, the conclusions drawn from the data generated via the interviews with Afghan women as respondents are as follows:

- There exist a number of barriers to women's education in Afghanistan under the Taliban, which include physical, cultural, and psychological barriers.
- The cultural barrier to women's education is not uniform across the entire population of Afghani women. Geographical location and one's tribe and race to a greater extent determine the rigidity of this particular barrier.
- The issue of poverty, a barrier in itself to female education, varies across a family's perception and interpretation of education adding a direct value to their women's livelihoods.
- Education according to all participants has a direct link with capabilities development, which in turn has a direct impact on human rights.
- Capabilities development through education amongst Afghani women can be neatly divided into two categories: the primary and the secondary.
- The primary capabilities developments are the ones closely connected with basic human rights such as life and health.

- The secondary capabilities are those linked to a higher order of human rights and needs and are reminiscent of Maslow's needs for hierarchy. These capabilities are an extension of the primary capabilities and are built upon them.

The methodology section takes account of the limitations of the study. However, it's important to mention the limitations of the data analysis and discussion section here so as to not interpret the results in an out-of-context way. Time limitation just like any other research work has plagued this study as well. Additionally, access to Afghani women for interviews and discussion was another important limiting factor associated with this study. Connected to this issue of access resulted in a limited sample size. Though the sample size was considerably small, the scope and nature of the research study are equally limited. However, in order to understand exhaustively the subject matter, a large sample size made of a diverse set of respondents is needed for a more generalized interpretation and recommendations on the issue. In its present state, this study can at best be used as an indicative study pointing towards the presence of an issue in need of rigorous examination and investigation. The quality of the data can be made even better if the interview is done in English, a feat this study failed to achieve given the original language of the respondents is Dari, a local Afghan language.

6.2 Recommendations

A number of recommendations for further research are laid out based on the study's experience with the research topic. Some of them are:

- A bigger sample size to be more inclusive and indicative of the different races, tribes, and regions of Afghani women.
- A sample size that is based on Afghani women residing in Afghanistan under the Taliban.
- Comparing and contrasting women's aspirations, experiences, and understanding of the issue of gender equality in education and capabilities development from within the country and those Afghans living outside of Afghanistan.
- Taking into account the views and understandings of the authorities in Afghanistan, a major factor responsible for the barriers to women's education.
- Studying Afghan women in the workforce and investigating their capabilities development in accordance with their level of education.

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8. APPENDIX

8.1 Interview Questions

The study participants will be asked the following semi-structured interview questions:

1. What is your level of education? A) Primary, B) Secondary, C) Higher
2. How would you compare pre-and post-Taliban Afghanistan in the context of women's education? Was education easily accessible to women pre- or post-Taliban regime?
3. What role has education played in your life? Positive or Negative?
4. Do you think education enables women to live a more worthy life?
5. Do you think education equips women to better take on life challenges?
6. Do you think with the help of education you have become a more active part of society?
7. Do you believe education adds value to women's lives? Yes? No? If Yes: Could you give examples of how education may add value to women's lives?
8. Do you think an educated woman is more aware of her rights and responsibilities? Is an educated woman better equipped against domestic violence?
9. Regarding bodily health for women, what role has education played in family planning? A) Pre- Taliban B) Post-Taliban.
10. Were women free to participate in political decision-making before the Taliban regime? How can education enable women to enjoy their political rights?
11. Can education enable women to have control over their environment? Does education allow women more freedom to make choices for themselves?
12. How has education aided your understanding of your inheritance rights?