
‘Thousands of mixed hopes and fears’: women graduates’ access to employment in Afghanistan

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Abstract: This article focuses on the employment experiences of women university graduates in Afghanistan. The 55 female graduates who were interviewed for this study reported widespread concerns about nepotism and corruption, limiting the pool of available positions for women; a high level of dissatisfaction with their current remuneration as well as pay equity issues; family constraints imposed on the types of work that were seen as suitable for women to undertake; and the impact of sexual harassment and sexist attitudes in the workplace. While calling for affirmative action and training and mentoring programs to expand opportunities for women’s employment, overwhelmingly the female graduates in this study identified their higher education qualifications as a significant factor in their ability to gain paid employment, highlighting the ongoing importance of women’s access to and participation in higher education in Afghanistan.

Keywords: Afghan women graduates; Afghan women’s employment; sex discrimination Afghanistan; sexual harassment Afghanistan.

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1 Introduction

This article explores the employment experiences of women university graduates in Afghanistan, drawing on interviews undertaken with 55 women graduates. A number of factors have been identified as contributing to women's unemployment and under-employment in Afghanistan, including lack of acceptance of women's right to work outside the home, low literacy rates, lack of qualifications, lack of professional skills, concerns about women working in a mixed-sex work environment, security concerns, and the legacy of women's historic dependence on male relatives (Ayubi, 2010). Research has also identified harassment as a key obstacle to women's employment outside the home, with female employees forced "to navigate entrenched sexist and patriarchal attitudes, dodge sexual advances, and live with memories of harassment, abuse and even rape" (Kittleson, 2013).

The female graduates who were interviewed for this study reported widespread concerns about nepotism and corruption, limiting the pool of available positions for women; a high level of dissatisfaction with their current remuneration as well as pay equity issues; family constraints imposed on the types of work that were seen as suitable for women to undertake; and the impact of sexual harassment and sexist attitudes in the workplace. While calling for affirmative action and for the establishment of training and mentoring programs to expand opportunities for women's employment, overwhelmingly the female graduates in this study identified their higher education qualifications as a significant factor in their ability to gain paid employment, highlighting the ongoing importance of women's access to and participation in higher education in Afghanistan.

2 Background to women's employment issues in Afghanistan

Afghanistan has been impacted by invasions from foreign moguls and empires for thousands of years. While there have been periods of stability and progress, including in the early part of the 20th Century to the 1970s, the last 50 years have seen great upheaval and conflict (Baiza, 2013). The Soviet invasion of 1979 which created a communist state led to the rise of the mujahideen, and ultimately the fundamentalist Islamist rule by the Taliban (1996–2001) (The World Bank, 2018). The arrival of US and NATO forces to challenge Taliban rule and attempt to create a democratic state, despite some early promise, has not met with great success. The NATO forces withdrew in 2014 in the hope that the removal of foreign intervention would create more stability. In actuality the situation has deteriorated significantly as the Taliban and Islamic State seek to leverage their power with the Government. Even schools and hospitals have been targets of bomb attacks, with the most recent terror attack being on a maternity ward which killed 24 people, including mothers, nurses and two babies (ABC, 2020). The constancy of conflict has created turmoil for civil society, for the provision of education and for economic

advancement. Afghanistan remains one of the least developed countries in the Asia Pacific and this increases the challenges that women face in Afghan society.

The World Bank identifies slow economic growth, a worsening security situation, high unemployment (with 80% of employment designated as 'vulnerable and insecure'), and increasing and deepening poverty, as some of the major challenges currently facing Afghanistan (The World Bank, 2019). The Central Statistics Office (CSO) of the Afghan government undertakes an Annual Living Conditions Survey, the most up-to-date source of information about employment rates in Afghanistan. The 2016–2017 Afghanistan Living Conditions Survey notes that while employment rates have fluctuated over time, the labour market is currently unable to meet growth in the working age population and in labour force participation [CSO, (2018), p.1]. The official unemployment rate is 23.9%, with a further 23.9% of people who have jobs reporting under-employment [CSO, (2018), p.2]. While the latest data are not currently available disaggregated by gender, in 2014 the CSO estimated women's labour force participation rate at 29%, lower in urban areas (21.1%) than rural areas (30.7%) [CSO, (2015), p.15]. International Labour Organization data put the rate even lower at 21.6% in 2019 (quoted in The World Bank, 2020). Of those women in the labour market, urban women's unemployment rate was estimated at 51.1%, while in rural areas women's unemployment was 35.1%; with a national average of 36.8% unemployment experienced by women [CSO, (2018), p.16].

Education is seen as one of the key pathways to paid employment for men and women. Historically women have not participated in paid employment as their work has been centred on the home. There are complex cultural, political and religious factors at play in all societies in relation to the role of women in the public sphere; while over the last two decades 370.5 million women have joined the labour market, women make up just 39.8% of the global labour force (Verick, undated). Women in patriarchal societies face particular employment challenges, and are likely to be those most affected by poor working conditions, low pay and long hours of work (Gills and Piper, 2002). Some feminist Islamic scholars argue that within authentic Islamic teachings, while women's and men's roles may be defined differently, they are seen to be conceptually equal (Jawad, 1998; Wadud, 2006). However, centuries of conservative cultural interpretations of Islamic teachings in male-dominated societies have redefined religious beliefs on the role and identity of women. Traditional family structures with extended patrilineal households based on the 'male breadwinner/female homemaker' model have also been identified as shaping Muslim women's employment opportunities [Spierings, (2015), p.10].

Cultural and religious factors play a significant part in limiting educational and outside work opportunities for women in Afghanistan. For example, early marriage is one major inhibitor. Over a third of young women marry before the age of 18 years; although Afghan law regulates early marriage, the law is rarely enforced (Human Rights Watch, 2017). This often deprives girls of an education as they take on the responsibilities of being a wife and mother (Blum et al., 2019). Family economic circumstances and distance from larger towns limiting access to education and employment opportunities, as well as internal conflicts and power struggles amongst ethnic groups, constrain the available options for women seeking employment.

A further challenge is the nature of the secondary and tertiary education systems in Afghanistan which do not prepare students for employment. Lack of adequate funding and coordination by the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs appears to limit access to

higher opportunities women in particular, as the demand for higher education outstrips supply (Arooje and Burrige, 2020).

It is also important to note that the available statistical information about Afghanistan is not always accurate or reliable largely because of difficulties in collecting data in remote areas, but also because of the lack of oversight and accountability in many of the published statistics (The World Bank, 2018). Among the challenges in implementing successful development policies in Afghanistan, in what remains a fragile state, is the relationship between a ‘traditional hierarchical patronage-based system’ [Hayward, (2015), p.11] and how this system utilises and distributes the extensive external donor funding (Arooje and Burrige, 2020).

The constancy of foreign invasions and interventions in Afghanistan has also resulted in levels of mistrust of foreign powers and their interference in societal and religious values. Afghanistan has not always been a fundamentalist state. It is a common misperception, reinforced by the international media, that democracy and human rights were imposed on Afghanistan after American forces ousted the Taliban in 2001. The 1964 Constitution included a bill of rights for Afghans, specifically including women. The 1977 Civil Code stipulated that girls under 16 should not be allowed to marry. However, the rise of Islamic fundamentalism has had a major impact on Afghan societal and religious values and women’s rights. Western nations and NGOs need to be aware that their advocacy for women’s rights must not be seen as just a western ideological goal for Afghanistan as this only leads to resentment from powerful elites who are in control of government. It is also seen as offensive to Afghans, who have “struggled for democracy since the early 20th century” (Ingber, 2013).

It is important therefore that any campaigns for improved rights for women in Afghanistan are cognisant of its history and the complex nature of the relationships which exist not only amongst its own population but in its relationships with foreign powers.

3 Research methods

In 2016, we commenced an in-depth study of the perspectives of Afghan women university graduates about their experiences of seeking and obtaining employment. 58 interviews were conducted; 55 of the interviewees had completed tertiary qualifications across a broad range of discipline areas. Our research aimed to identify the opportunities and challenges that existed for these tertiary-educated Afghan women seeking employment in Afghanistan after they had completed their studies. We also sought to explore how these women’s families had reacted to their employment aspirations, as well as the responses of their male colleagues to women’s workforce participation. Finally, we asked interviewees to identify the key strategies that they believed would increase women’s access to and participation in employment in Afghanistan.

Fifty five interviews were conducted with women graduates. The participants were initially recruited through connections established by the researchers with women who had completed their tertiary studies at higher education institutions in Kabul. On approaching organisations to identify women employees to interview, the interviewers were often put in touch with the Gender Units which have been widely established in Afghan organisations over the past two decades since the fall of the Taliban.

Beyond these initial interviews, a snowballing technique was used to identify the remainder of the interviewees. The aim was to speak to women graduates about their

employment experiences; this included interviewing women who could not find professional work matching their qualifications.

A qualitative research methodology was seen as the most appropriate for this study and semi-structured interviews were undertaken with the participants; these were recorded, transcribed and translated into English for analysis. A mixed method approach was used in the analysis utilising both narrative and thematic analysis methods. Thematic analysis enables the researcher to organise, identify, and report the themes that emerge from the data (Nowell et al., 2017). A narrative approach (Moen, 2006) was used which sought to explore how individuals (the participants) experience their world and how they construct their own stories. While findings from the interviews were analysed in the context of current academic literature and the available information on gender and employment statistics in Afghanistan, we also aimed to document through interview extracts what the women graduates themselves articulated as their main hopes, barriers, and recommendations for change.

A high proportion of women interviewees in this study (91%) reported currently being in employment, reflecting the main interviewee recruitment strategy of interviewing women in workplaces. 71% were employed in the public sector, 23% in the private sector, and 6% in non-government organisations.

4 Findings

4.1 *'Relations rather than qualifications': the lack of merit-based recruitment*

Corruption, nepotism, and a widespread lack of merit-based opportunities were major themes emerging from the interviews, and were alluded to directly or indirectly by two-thirds of the interviewees in our study. This mirrors the finding of a major UNODC study in 2012, which found that corruption ranked alongside unemployment and insecurity as one of the principal challenges Afghan people identified facing the country [UNODC, (2012), p.3]. The UNODC study found that the lack of transparency and objectivity made recruitment practices 'vulnerable to nepotism and bribery', and more than 80% of their respondents who had been recruited to the public service in the previous three years had paid a bribe and/or received undue personal assistance from family or friends in obtaining their job [UNODC, (2012), p.19]. Such practices are seemingly endemic despite the statement in Article 50 of the Constitution that "citizens of Afghanistan shall be recruited by the state on the basis of ability, without any discrimination" (Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, 2004). Widespread nepotism in recruitment in Afghanistan means that candidates are often selected on the basis of their personal connections rather than qualifications or skills (Ahmadzai, 2017).

Overwhelmingly, the major employment-related concern that women graduate interviewees reported was that in their experience, recruitment in Afghanistan was not based on merit but on personal contacts; people without qualifications and experience get appointed ahead of well-qualified candidates because of their personal connections. While this is not an issue specific to women applicants, it was identified as a major source of frustration for tertiary-educated women, as it further reduced the limited pool of work opportunities available to them. Many interviewees commented on the impact of the lack of merit-based recruitment on their employment prospects:

Comment [a1]: Author: Please confirm if the this should be UNODC. Yes, it should be UNODC

Comment [a2]: Author: Please confirm if the this should be UNODC. Yes, it should be UNODC

“In addition, رشوت وفساد (bribery and corruption) in all governmental and non-governmental organizations when filling vacancies, ethnic and other kind of ضىتبع (discrimination) are also part of the challenges that can be mentioned.” (Interview 22)

“now it is impossible to be recruited particularly in the area of projects without having any واسطه (intermediary)¹ ...” (Interview 57)

“I could not find a suitable job. This does not mean that I didn't look for it, but whatever organization I went to in search of a job, I was implicitly told that I could have a better chance if I knew someone from the authorities in that organization/agency/office that could support my job application and recommend me for that job.” (Interview 33)

A number of interviewees identified applying for numerous jobs and never receiving a response. In their experience, meeting the selection requirements or performing well in entrance exams bore little relationship to receiving an offer of employment:

“There is so much favoritism and nepotism involved in recruitment procedures, they favour friends and family members and those being recommended by friends or authorities over qualified applicants. Wherever I apply for a job and pass the test, they put me on the waiting list and ask me to wait. I have the talent and skill to work but since I don't have anyone to recommend me, I don't get any job.” (Interview 48)

Some women acknowledged that they had themselves benefited from their personal and family connections:

“I myself never went somewhere in search of a job unless I already had someone there to back up my application.. Because having somebody in an organization where one applies for a job is very helpful.” (Interview 23)

One interviewee identified that women were sometimes sexually harassed in the recruitment process:

“Being a woman and applying for a job means that those who have the authority to give you that job, expect you to be ready to say yes to their immoral and sexual desires...Heads and human resource officers ask women for a relationship before they are offered jobs.” (Interview 32)

To counter the impact of nepotistic recruitment practices, and because it was so difficult to obtain work without contacts and previous work experience, one interviewee believed that more internships and professional work experience opportunities should be provided for women graduates, preferably facilitated by universities while women are still students, so that they could gain work experience and have established a professional network on graduation:

“Lack of work experience causes applicants [to] get employed in lower levels. Therefore, if internship opportunities² can be provided for women during their studies or right after their graduation, in the ministries and other organizations, that can help women a lot.” (Interview 6)

Another interviewee called on donor organisations to take proactive steps to ensure nepotism and discrimination was eradicated within programs they funded (Interview 20). In a similar vein, an interviewee was critical of NGOs, which she argued had not done enough to create sustainable employment opportunities for women:

“the NGOs established and worked in the name of women, in particular the ones that received funds and applied projects with no foundational and sustainable work for the women, must be reformed. Each of such NGOs received grants for women but they only saw their own benefit in those funds and did nothing for women except some workshops with no fruitful effects. This must change.” (Interview 28)

For another interviewee, enforcing the requirement that recruitment be merit-based was the best way forward:

“My initial recommendation is that, when a woman who is educated and is hard working steps into [the] job market, personal connections and contact must not count and she has to be hired based on qualifications and work experiences.” (Interview 11)

Despite the challenges women and other applicants continue to face, one interviewee noted that there have been improvements in employment opportunities for women in Afghanistan over the past 15 years:

“employment opportunities have increased for women:...women’s rights have improved; many women NGOs work for women’s rights; educational centers supporting women are created; free training courses are offered like this program that I work for. It has a goal to train 25,000 women in 5 years. These are all opportunities available for women. We witness day by day that women’s participation is increasing in all aspects of life.” (Interview 29)

4.2 *'Less than what we deserve': remuneration and pay equity*

The CSO identifies the Afghanistan labour market as ‘under considerable stress’; while nearly one quarter of working age people are unemployed, the poor quality of the jobs that are available is seen as a more serious issue [CSO, (2018), p.3]. Issues with low pay, lack of job security and poor conditions of employment mean that many people in full employment fall under the poverty line, and underemployed people currently experience a higher poverty rate than those who are unemployed [CSO, (2018), p.5].

This was reflected among our interviewees, who expressed widespread dissatisfaction with their income level, with 42% of interviewees stating that their income was insufficient to meet their living expenses. Even interviewees who described their income level as moderate often stated that they struggled to meet the cost of living. Government and teaching jobs were described by our interviewees as being particularly poorly paid.

While the principle of equal pay for equal work is recognised in Afghanistan [UN CEDAW, (2011), p.67], several interviewees also identified pay equity issues. One interviewee working in higher education discussed her experience of being paid less than her male colleagues for the same work:

“salary scales must get modified because salaries are considered less for women. For instance, in a university in Kabul with both male and female employees, men get paid something around \$500 but women who do the same job, get paid something around AFN 7000 to 8000³ which has to be changed.” (Interview 23)

Another interviewee argued that women should refuse to accept a lesser payment, although in the current climate of unemployment and insecure employment it seems

unrealistic to expect that most women employees would be able to negotiate improved pay and conditions:

“Women are paid lower salaries compared to men for the same jobs, the same work they do and even the same qualities they have. Women who have better skills and higher educations, must say no to less payment. We all should learn this that we have to say no to anything less than what we deserve.” (Interview 20)

4.3 Not crossing the circle: family constraints on women’s employment

As our interviewees were primarily recruited from women graduates currently in employment, it is unsurprising that a high proportion of interviewees (72%) indicated that their family was supportive of their workforce participation.

However, despite this relatively high degree of family support for their workforce participation, a number of interviewees also identified that they were working within constraints imposed by their family on their employment; the degree of family support for their paid employment was contingent, and often involved an ongoing process of negotiation. It is also important to highlight, as our interviewees’ identified, that family opposition towards women’s workplace participation can come from brothers, husbands, in-laws and extended family members as well as fathers.

One interviewee commented on the ongoing negotiation with family members that might be required for some women, and how this impacted on women’s employment prospects:

“The first problem is the family. Families don’t allow girls to work by saying ‘where are you going to find a job’, ‘go here or go there’, and ‘have less contact with men’, and ‘it should not be in private sector’, and these all create limitations.” (Interview 42)

Many women work within the constraints set by their families, exemplified by the following comment:

“As long as I don’t cross the circle they have defined for me and my work meets *یارهای مع* (Islamic criteria)⁴, they will not have any complaint and even will support me.” (Interview 20)

Another interviewee had previously faced opposition to working from her father, which she eventually overcame; she reported that her husband and his family supported her work:

“My husband and his family are my main supporters. My mother-in-law has accepted all the hardship of taking care of my children so that I have no problem to do my job. I am grateful to her and also thankful to God for that.” (Interview 22)

However, other interviewees highlighted that ongoing family opposition to women’s workforce participation can be a problem even within more liberal families:

“Family disagreements with women’s work out of home is common in Afghanistan. Even open-minded families do not unconditionally support women’s education and work. Because they think their daughters will leave them one day⁵ and their efforts in educating daughters and the financial costs they pay for that would be useless and remain unpaid. I believe this is a wrong mindset/perception among Afghans that prevents them from spending on their

daughters' education. On the other hand, there is a big challenge with security in our country. Women are not safe, particularly in insecure areas, there is fear of kidnapping, rape and other forms of sexual harassment. So their families are concerned about these issues and the possible damage that may occur to their honour. Similarly the fear of suicide attacks, bombing and explosions as well as other effects of the ongoing war in the country, are some of the challenges that affect women's freedom for work out of home. Every woman who leaves her home for work outside, encounters *خټه بآ ترسید آمی هزار ام* (thousands of mixed hopes and fears)." (Interview 22)

Interviewees identified constraints set by their families on some aspects of work, for example work-related travel. Restrictions imposed by families on women's work-related travel limited their access to some jobs:

"my new manager wants me to travel to other districts and provinces the same way that male colleagues do and this is not easy for me... it is difficult for me to travel to the field as my family does not allow me to do that. So, my current work is not a suitable job for me..." (Interview 57)

Another interviewee, who worked in a university, stated that while her husband was largely supportive of her work, she had to turn down developmental and promotional opportunities that involved overseas travel, because of her husband's concerns about what other family members and relatives would say if she travelled alone (Interview 31).

Travel was not an issue for all women; one interviewee who worked in a senior role in the Ministry of Agriculture highlighted her husband's support for all aspects of her work:

"There has been no objection from my family but my husband has been the one assisting and encouraging me in the trainings we conduct in Kabul, provinces and even out of the country. My husband has been of great support for me. He never objects to my travels out of the country." (Interview 7)

In some cases, family constraints extended to the type of work that was deemed appropriate for women to undertake. In Afghanistan, the fields of education and healthcare have been considered respected and appropriate professions for women. Urban-based women worked as teachers, doctors and government workers before the Taliban era; and even under the Taliban some women were permitted to work in medical positions treating women patients and to participate in home-based work (Public Broadcasting Service, 2006). As one interviewee who worked at a private girls' school commented:

"They don't have any problem with my work here. But they generally do not let me work everywhere." (Interview 23)

A number of other interviewees mentioned the limitations their families place on them in terms of where they can work. One interviewee described her employer contacting her husband when she had to work back late:

"Some days that there is more work to do and I have to stay longer after official work hours, the office makes a call to my husband and informs him that I will be late, and provides me with transportation to my home after the work gets done." (Interview 20)

This interviewee also mentioned having to leave her previous job due to religious qualms her family held about her working in a place that is not perceived to be appropriate for a respectable woman (a television station).⁶

One woman spoke of her husband's family opposing her completing her education because it was co-educational, however when the family experienced financial need they were happy for her to work with men:

"They say my salary is Haram⁷ because I work with men, but they love my salary." (Interview 49)

This comment highlights the growing economic contribution that women are making to family income, leading to gradual changes in social attitudes towards women's employment.

Some interviewees argued that family attitudes towards women's work need to be addressed head-on. One woman believed that families don't value women's paid work because they don't see it as an important contribution to family income, and that changing this attitude was critical:

"teach families that your daughters can be supportive as your boys, therefore you should try to develop their skills." (Interview 42)

Another interviewee called for education programs, particularly targeting men, to convince them "that there is no problem in women's work but [that] it financially supports the family. This has to be done through mass media so that families get convinced" (Interview 26).

4.4 Hidden realities: experiences of sexual harassment

The prevalence of sexual harassment in the workplace in Afghanistan was noted by the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women in its Concluding Comments on Afghanistan's most recent periodic report; the Committee called for the adoption of specific legislation prohibiting sexual harassment in the workplace [UN CEDAW, (2013), p.9].

Women who work outside the home continue to be socially stigmatised, making them a target for harassment; as one interviewee commented,

"the rest of the society does not appreciate women's work out of home. From the perspective of 60% to 70% of the society, if a woman works out of home, she has a bad intentions in her mind⁸ and she is not a good woman. Those women who dare to work out of home and succeed in their profession are mostly bothered psychologically and emotionally, and they face many problems in this regard." (Interview 17)

The UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women noted negative social perceptions of working women in Afghanistan, and also expressed concern about the prevalence of sexual harassment in the workplace, calling on the government to implement awareness-raising campaigns "with a view to eliminating negative stereotypes towards working women" [UN CEDAW, (2013), p.9].

It was difficult for some interviewees to speak openly about their experiences of sexual harassment in the workplace; for many women sexual harassment was an issue that could not be discussed, even with family members, due to social and cultural norms. Some interviewees made veiled references to their experiences of sexual harassment:

"if you are employed and then you realize that they recruited you for their immoral desires, for instance they gave you the job because they were attracted to you and wanted to take advantage of your beauty or your body, then you

have to quit that job, and that is not easy. You may face unexpected conditions in the work place, something may come up that you never expected...and it is very difficult for young graduated girls." (Interview 42)

As this quote highlights, sexual harassment was often raised indirectly rather than directly named, and some interviewees talked about what their friends had experienced rather than discussing their own experiences:

"There is a wrong attitude [towards women] in every organization.⁹ I learned this each time I heard complaints from my friends. When a male supervisor touches intentionally his female employee's hand it is a kind of sexual harassment. This happened to my friend. We women in order to protect our own reputation, hide these realities. But, such things happen. Therefore, we women must value the work we do by not giving any chance to any man to misuse our presence at [the] workplace as a female." (Interview 20)

However, some women did openly discuss their experiences of harassment, with one interviewee who worked in a hospital describing it as an endemic aspect of her work:

"I think this is why families don't trust to allow their daughters and wives to go outside and work. Even in the hospital when we examine the male patients, at the end of the examination they leave their phone numbers or return to the hospital [to harass female staff]." (Interview 50)

Another interviewee's account highlights the negative impact that sexual harassment can have on women's workplace participation:

"one of my new manager's close relatives requested to have an affair with me and said he would help me by asking the manager not to send me to the field, then I threw the glass that was on the table at his head and left the office, since then I didn't return to work." (Interview 57)

Interviewees also spoke about experiencing street harassment travelling to and from work as well as in the workplace:

"Generally, when women step out of home, they face some problems including street harassment and negative attitudes towards women's work outside the home." (Interview 3)

Some interviewees indicated that the attitudes of male co-workers could be problematic, not just because of harassment but because the widespread perception that attractive women get hired without qualifications and skills is damaging to all women's standing in the workforce, resulting in a general lack of trust by male colleagues in women's abilities (Interview 31). One interviewee described discontinuing a training course she was attending because rumours started circulating in her male-dominated workplace about her leaving work early on a regular basis to attend training; she commented "This made me stop my English learning and leave the course in order to protect my honour and reputation in the office" (Interview 4).

Another interviewee saw women's empowerment as the best strategy to prevent harassment of women in the workplace:

"I think if we women are brave and have the courage to say NO, no organisation and no man will have the courage to make improper requests from us. We have to be strong and brave to control our working environment and

what ill-minded men could expect from us, then we will become able to do our work even in the worst situations.” (Interview 27)

In the absence of a legislative framework to support women in making complaints about their experiences of sexual harassment in the workplace, self-empowerment may indeed be the most effective response by Afghan women to workplace harassment in the short-to-medium term.

4.5 ‘Still looked at as slaves’: the impact of sex discrimination

Discrimination in employment on the basis of gender is unlawful in Afghanistan [UN CEDAW, (2011), p.59]. However, a number of interviewees commented on their experiences of sex discrimination in the workplace.

Employment data indicate that women employees in Afghanistan are concentrated in lower-level positions across a relatively narrow range of sectors; for example, it is estimated that women make up less than 14% of managerial positions in the civil service [UN CEDAW, (2011), pp.60-1].

One interviewee highlighted that in her experience, women’s skills and capabilities were not fairly considered:

“One big challenge in front of women is the society’s mindset that can not accept women as part of this society. Many of people in the society, including open-minded ones, look at women as not capable and not entitled to work and have their own income. For instance, when I once applied for job with an NGO, I could pass the written test and interview and then another male applicant and I were finalized. One of us had to be selected in the end. I was very confident about my success because of my good marks and my strong CV. But to my surprise, the responsible officer looked at his colleague and said that: “women can’t do much at work, but just talk. Let’s give the chance to this man who is the breadwinner of his family.” This is the kind of discrimination between men and women that we suffer from.” (Interview 20)

A female professor highlighted the discriminatory attitudes her male students exhibited towards her:

“When I stepped into my classes since female students were very few in number, students look at us with inequality. They thought that women know nothing.” (Interview 31)

Afghanistan’s periodic report to CEDAW acknowledged that addressing gender traditions and stereotypes “that have thousands of years old roots in people’s culture and beliefs is not an easy task”, one that will require time and sustained effort across a broad range of areas; attempts to change discriminatory attitudes need to take the existing ‘social realities’ into account, and not expect significant attitudinal change in the short term [UN CEDAW, (2011), pp.34–5]. A 2016 study of Afghan male attitudes conducted by the Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU) found that there was widespread consensus that men should be the family breadwinner, a view held by 93% of respondents [Echavez et al., (2016), p.17]. Interestingly in terms of our research focus, female respondents in this AREU study who had a higher education were less likely to agree that men should be the breadwinners of the family [Echavez et al., (2016), p.18]. 85% of respondents in the AREU study indicated that women’s responsibility was to manage the home; again, female respondents who had a higher education were less likely to agree with this [Echavez et al., (2016), p.26].

One interviewee commented that employers in Afghanistan were 'men-oriented', and were only interesting in recruiting women who were pretty, obedient and compliant (Interview 27). Another interviewee highlighted a number of proactive steps that needed to be taken to end the exploitation of women in Afghan workplaces:

"women are still looked at as slaves. Women are exploited in the workplace ... for their good voice or pretty appearance. This is not the right approach for improvement in women's rights. The administrative system must be reformed. Bribery and corruption must be eradicated. Special programs should be offered to improve women's knowledge and capacity, creating the ability in them to work independently. Women's opinions must be valued. Some women are really great managers, there are women who have creative minds, for whom necessary opportunities must be provided so that they can put their ideas into practice." (Interview 22)

4.6 Limiting the circle of activism: the impact of security issues

Previous research has identified security issues as a major concern for young Afghan women seeking to participate in higher education [Payne et al., (2019), p.302]. The security situation in Afghanistan has continued to deteriorate in the lead-up to general elections late in 2018, and the UN Security Council noted that "Afghan civilians bear the heaviest burden of the worsening security situation" (Security Council Report, 2018).

Security issues are a clear area of concern amongst our women interviewees. As the following interviewee highlights, these concerns operate to limit women's workforce participation in an environment where there are already many other barriers to their presence:

"When a woman or a girl steps out of home she and her family must feel peaceful about it. When women go to office they should feel security and peace there so they can utilize and improve their talents and skills." (Interview 3)

While insecurity and violence impact on both men and women, one interviewee highlighted that the security situation had a more significant impact on women as it further limited their already constrained spheres of public activity:

"Another concern not only for women but for the entire Afghan society is the security situation, lack of security is a big threat today. It limits the type of work that could be done and the areas and places that you could work in. Consequently, security concerns negatively impact women's chances of work out of home." (Interview 30)

5 The impact of carer and domestic responsibilities

Only a small number of interviewees commented on their role as carers or the impact of their domestic responsibilities on their employment.

One interviewee discussed the impact of displacement due to war and her carer's responsibilities on her ability to complete her tertiary education:

"I had previously studied in medical school for two years. But due to the war displacement, I lost pursuit of my studies for a while. When we came back home after migration, due to family responsibilities and financial problems I could not resume my studies. I was a mother of five kids and had to take care of

my children and family life, so I prioritised my children's education and their studies over mine." (Interview 28)

Another interviewee highlighted the double shift undertaken by working women, who were still expected to undertake the full range of domestic chores inside the home:

"Working women have dual responsibilities. They have one job at home that is looking after the family and doing the domestic work and another job out of home. Working women's life is different than working men. At the end of a working day, when my male colleagues says 'I am tired' I tell them that you are going home and rest, drink your tea, sit in front of tv and enjoy the rest of your time, but when women come back home from work, their second job begin which is cooking, cleaning and tending the children and other family member's needs." (Interview 42)

6 Views about affirmative action

Afghanistan's Periodic Report to the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women committed the government to take "steps toward positive discrimination in employment, increasing number of female teachers, increasing capacity-building programs for women, emphasizing on women's education, providing educational scholarships for women and organizing awareness programs on the role of women in their communities" [UN CEDAW, (2011), pp.33-4]. One affirmative action measure that was mentioned by several interviewees was female applicants being given five additional points on the entrance exam for civil service positions. Some concessions are also made to university entrance exams for female candidates [UN CEDAW, (2011), p.58].

Many of our interviewees did not mention the concept of affirmative action; of those who did, some were in favour of it, some were opposed, and some commented that the current affirmative actions which were in place in Afghanistan were not working to deliver real outcomes for women.

While a number of interviewees did not explicitly use the terminology of affirmative action, special measures or 'positive discrimination', they nevertheless saw a need for proactive measures to be implemented to counter the impact of years of previous discrimination against women:

"Since women's rights have been violated over years and they have been deprived of their natural rights, it will be good if governmental and non-governmental organisations, employers and NGOs make competition easier for women." (Interview 26)

One interviewee was opposed to affirmative action, arguing that the goal should be to apply the principle of merit equally to male and female candidates:

"Everyone should be recruited based on their qualifications...[not] because she is a woman. If it is other than this, it will destroy the healthy recruitment procedures in the organization. A man also has responsibilities to his family, so the opportunity should be given to the best qualified person among the applicants... The person's talent should be considered and the selection process should be transparent." (Interview 49)

Another interviewee commented that given the difficult situation facing both men and women seeking employment in Afghanistan, affirmative action for women applicants

might seem unfair; nevertheless she strongly supported special measures for women in both employment and education:

“In my opinion, given women’s difficulties in Afghan culture, women must be treated in a special way and more work opportunities must be provided for them. When it comes to scholarship programs, priority must be given to women.” (Interview 5)

6.1 'Paving the way': the importance of skill development and mentoring

Some interviewees identified specific skills they saw women applicants were lacking relative to male applicants, particularly English language skills, computer skills, and public speaking/communication skills. According to these interviewees, there were limited opportunities for Afghan women to obtain these skills which are vital in many jobs.

A number of women graduates described working in administrative roles and having limited opportunities to practice their technical and professional skills. For example, one interviewee who was an agriculture graduate had been undertaking administrative work; she commented that she was unable to do field work because of her carer responsibilities and because of the difficulties for women travelling alone:

“I currently work in administrative department. If I intend to work in technical departments, it will become challenging for me as I am a woman. Firstly, they will not accept me in those capacities based on my gender or if they do, they will give me missions that requires travel to other provinces and that will not be possible for me. I am married and have children. I can’t take missions to travel to remote areas. I can’t take my children with me, neither do I have the option to leave them behind.” (Interview 4)

Work experience was described by a number of interviewees as vital to improving a candidate’s employability, however volunteer work was not accepted by all employers as the equivalent of paid work experience, limiting opportunities for some women.

Interviewees also noted the lack of promotional opportunities for women, who were often trapped in low-paid entry-level positions:

“Measures should be taken to assist women improve their self-confidence and develop their skills and abilities. On the other hand, deserving and qualified women must be appreciated and encouraged and promoted so that other women get motivated to improve their personal development. The Government must take action and develop plans for women’s improvement. Women must not remain employed in the same position with no promotion opportunities throughout their life.” (Interview 8)

Some of the interviewees had decided to establish their own businesses to bypass the bureaucracy and barriers to women’s employment. A number of the interviewees spoke about the need for women to help themselves, to be proactive in working on their skills and not to be reliant on the government to fix their problems, sentiments reflected in the following comment:

“unfortunately due to some problems I could not get employed in a field consistent with my interests. Considering my past experience, I now decided to

stand on my own feet and believe in myself... Women themselves must do their best and utilize their talents and skills...they should always be creative. They have to create opportunities for themselves.” (Interview 21)

Some interviewees saw women as lacking in self-esteem and self-confidence in the workplace, not surprising in a cultural context where women’s capacity to work outside the home is constantly being challenged:

“The self-esteem is built at childhood by families when they say to their child ‘yes, you can do it’, and if we don’t hear it from childhood then it is difficult to build it in older ages...it is difficult for women to build self-esteem as they are not treated that way.” (Interview 42)

In contrast, other interviewees highlighted that the difficult environment women face in seeking education and employment in Afghanistan made them even more determined to succeed:

“If women are committed regardless of all the problems and challenges that exist...they will definitely achieve what they want.” (Interview 43)

One interviewee commented that women’s empowerment strategies are vitally important in challenging the prevalent mindset in Afghan society about women:

“if women do not improve their self confidence, if they continue feeling reluctant to prove their skills and talents, if they become satisfied with little achievements and do not try to go for bigger ones, employers will not trust women to offer them bigger responsibilities and women’s positions and status will continue downgrading.” (Interview 3)

The important role of the media in changing public attitudes about women’s roles in society was also identified by a number of interviewees.

Interviewees commented on the need for women who are already in the workplace to mentor and support other women:

“I recommend women who hold key positions in work places or socially have [a] good reputation to pave the way and prepare the context for other women and help them find the path to success. Our society is patriarchal but, that doesn’t mean nothing could be done for women. There are some men who have done a lot of work to improve women’s rights, however woman can do much more to help other women and pave the ground for their success.” (Interview 29)

Some interviewees drew inspiration from seeing other women’s success:

“The existence of educated women as active members of civil society is creating hope, though the number is not enough.” (Interview 44)

One interviewee stood out in articulating a clear and ambitious career plan, one of the few research participants in this study who expressed her goals beyond just day-to-day survival; she commented:

“I have planned big for myself. I wish to work in high level positions in Government in the future, for instance, within Directorates and Ministries. Therefore, I had to begin from somewhere. I had already worked with national and international organizations; I just wanted to give a try to government jobs as well. As I started my work here, I liked it and got determined to follow my wishes strongly from here.” (Interview 12)

7 Does higher education help women in Afghanistan secure employment?

82% of respondents in this study identified that their higher education had played a role in helping them to secure employment.

For some interviewees, a qualification was essential to their profession:

“If I am not educated then I won’t be a teacher, or employed in government level.” (Interview 43)

“Yes, my education helped me a lot; if I was not educated, I won’t be able to work here.” (Interview 50)

“This is very clear that my education helped me as a main factor in getting employed in my current job and being offered my current job responsibilities.” (Interview 22)

One interviewee, who worked for an NGO, commented

“My education helped me 100%...When somebody applies to [the NGO], first of all their education is evaluated and then they are recruited based on such an evaluation...I believe this is a big privilege since I did not get this opportunity with the support of anyone else.” (Interview 26)

Another interviewee looked beyond the instrumental function of education and addressed the broader social benefits of being an educated person:

“when you are educated then you are known different than an ordinary person. When you obtain knowledge, it helps you not only with finding the employment but also improve your life in general...education 100% works.” (Interview 42)

Others differentiated between the importance of having a qualification and the content of their degrees:

“The bachelor degree itself has helped me, let alone my further studies and higher education. If I did not have a degree, it would have been hard to find a job in the current situation of Afghanistan. I think I would not even get a chance to be hired as a school teacher.” (Interview 33)

“To be honest, I only benefited from the name of my degree but not from my studies... I have forgotten about my proficiency and I even look for an opportunity to change my field of study.” (Interview 4)

Some interviewees saw their higher education as generally beneficial, although they were not working directly in a position related to their original field of study:

“Definitely education helps in getting employed but my work has not been in line with my field of study. As I studied law I should have worked in the legal field or concerning my master’s degree in Islamic studies, I must have pursued a profession in the related field. But due to some problems in our society and the restrictions I have in my family, I could not pursue a job in the law field. But no doubt that the level of education I have, has helped me get employed here easily.” (Interview 23)

A minority of interviewees did not think that their education had been beneficial to them in obtaining employment:

“My education has been of no help in this regard.” (Interview 32)

“[employers] prefer the relations [rather] than qualifications.” (Interview 48)

“we think that after graduation we will get a lot of employment opportunities. But after graduation we see that even very small opportunities are not available. For example, for some bachelor graduates even there is no opportunity to get work as a cleaner, for someone with a master’s degree there is no chance to get employed as a high school teacher.” (Interview 27)

A number of interviewees highlighted the importance of both relevant work experience and qualifications in obtaining employment.

8 Conclusions

This study of Afghan women’s employment experiences once they have completed higher education studies highlights the underlying tensions and challenges that still exist for women in Afghanistan. As our research participants highlight, there is still much work to be done in relation to the education and employment of girls and women in Afghanistan. While some progress has been made and more women are finding employment in mainstream occupations in Afghan society, barriers still exist to their progression within various sectors, impacting on women’s prospects of attaining long term active employment. This study confirms that factors identified in previous research as contributing to women’s unemployment and under-employment in Afghanistan still act to restrict employment opportunities. These factors include the slow acceptance of women’s right to work outside the home, concerns about women working in a mixed-sex work environment, harassment related to patriarchal attitudes and sexual advances, security concerns, and the legacy of women’s historic dependence on male relatives (Ayubi, 2010).

Afghan women interviewees in this study highlighted what they saw as crucial reforms if there is to be significant improvement in opportunities for women in the long term. Interviewees called for a greater focus and commitment by the Afghan Government on the specific educational opportunities offered to girls and women, as well as training and employment opportunities. This is of particular importance within the provinces:

“My recommendation is that in order to increase job opportunities for women, we have to focus more on training and education for them. That is because despite the aid that flowed to Afghanistan during the last fifteen years, lots of it spent on women-related projects, there are no ‘girls’ schools in most of the provinces and we still have families who do not let their daughters to continue education after a certain age.” (Interview 30)

Interviewees also recognised the need for the government to implement affirmative actions to increase women’s employment options once they completed their tertiary education:

“I have a request for the Government and high ranked authorities that they have to give more chances to women. In the Ministry of Economy, for example, there are few women in key positions. Although there might be skillful and eligible woman candidates, most of the time male candidates are preferred over the female.” (Interview 12)

Women interviewees sought more secure working environments, with regulations to prevent harassment in the workplace:

"In my opinion, first of all women must be provided with a secure environment for work. Secondly, providing women with opportunities to further their education and empowering them educationally and practically will be helpful." (Interview 3)

Other recommendations were for the Afghan Government and the education system to provide greater financial support for women, and to institute more internships and practical skills training as a strategy to facilitate women's entry into the workplace:

"First, women must work for their capacity building on their own. After their study time...they have to look for opportunities to gain work experience. They have to learn computer and English [skills] in order to make a strong background for themselves." (Interview 12)

The pathway to change in any society is often lengthy and convoluted. This article has sought to provide some insights into the situations and experiences that young women in Kabul, Afghanistan have faced in seeking employment and while in employment, after completing their higher education. Despite the many hopes and fears experienced by these women graduates, they continue to seek to expand the horizon of opportunities available to women in Afghanistan.

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Notes

- 1 Somebody to introduce you and recommend your recruitment.
- 2 The original term 'internship' in Dari refers to the opportunities that some organisations provide to volunteers that would like to work with them for learning and gaining work experience. It is typically free of charge to the participant and does not offer regular fixed payment, although sometimes the organisations offer transport and food cost to the internees. In Afghanistan volunteer work and internships are not common.
- 3 Equivalent to around USD\$100.
- 4 By 'Islamic criteria' this interviewee means the Islamic standards and rules that govern women's conduct in the public life such as proper dressing, wearing hijab, no loud talking or laughing, not socialising with men, even avoiding talking to them if not necessary, etc. The interviewee is highlighting that if she consider these rules in her daily conduct at work and out of home, her family will accept her work.
- 5 This is a reference to getting married and leaving the parental home.
- 6 The interviewee referred to her previous employment as an environment which was not suitable for woman who should be bound by the religious norms. A television station might be viewed as an inappropriate workplace because it is a private work place; also, appearance on television or contribution to television programs, journalism or even working behind the scene for any purpose requires a lot of freedom for a woman and engagement with men, which would not be tolerated by working women's families, in particular for married women.
- 7 Forbidden or proscribed by Islamic law.
- 8 For example, she may be perceived to have immoral thoughts of finding someone to have an affair with.
- 9 The interviewee is referring to the perception that working women are not morally good women as they leave home and decide to be in the same environment as men.