



EPD | **EQUALITY**
for Peace and
Democracy

**Women's Access to Higher
Education in Afghanistan:
Understanding the Current
Situation**

July 17, 2011



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Acknowledgement

Message from the Executive Director

The foundation for every state is education of its youth.

Diogenes Laertius

The global society has undergone through drastic changes in past century. There are female presidents, female pilots and female astronauts. Fortunately, girls can become anything they want these days. However, female education has faced significant obstacles in Afghanistan, yet there have been enormous gains and visible achievements since 2001. In the early years after the fall of the Taliban, education was a top priority for the Afghan government and donors to get children back to school. However higher education, which is very vital for development of the country did not receive the same support and attention from the donors and Afghan government. Traditionally families are supporting their girls' education at the primary level. However at the secondary drop out of girls from schools begin and very few numbers of girls can pursue their higher education.

I am pleased to share with you an Assessment of Girls' Access to Higher Education in Afghanistan. The assessment has been conducted in seven provinces of the country with sample size of 220 individuals, which included students, non students, parents of both students and non students, university professors, faculty workers, respective ministry officials and those in charge of higher education. In order to have broader vision and to go deeper into the real problems, several rounds of street interviews were also arranged.

The assessment report not only presents the main obstacles women face while accessing higher education, it also highlights the key recommendations for the improvement and future steps. EPD will be working with relevant government authorities and partners to develop detailed action plan for implementation of the recommendations.

In conclusion, I would like to thank the Ministry of Higher Education, Ministry of Education, and Ministry of Women's Affairs for their support during the assessment. I also extend gratitude to Soraya Mashal Consulting Firm for its technical support in conducting this assessment.

Nargis Nehan

Executive Director

EQUALITY for Peace and Democracy

Acronyms

AGE	Anti-Government Elements
ANDS	Afghanistan National Development Strategy
ASGP	Afghanistan Sub-National Governance Programme (ASGP)
CARE	International NGO
CSO	Central Statistics Office
CRS	Catholic Relief Services
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
IRoA	Islamic Republic of Afghanistan
HEP	Higher Education Project, sponsored by USAID
IED	Improvised Explosive Device
IEAW	Initiative to Educate Afghan Women
IIEP	International Institute of Education Planning
KII	Key Informant Interview
MoE	Ministry of Education
MoHE	Ministry of Higher Education
MoWA	Ministry of Women's Affairs
MRRD	Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development
NAPWA	National Action Plan for Women of Afghanistan
NSP	National Solidarity Programme
PRT	Provincial Reconstruction Team
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNIFEM	United Nations Development Fund for Women
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
USD	United States Dollar

Glossary

Afghani	National currency of Afghanistan (1 USD was equal to about 48 Afghani at the time of report writing)
Chaderi	Full length veil for women that covers the body completely, with a screen for eyes through which the wearer can see
Farz	Persian word that means “one’s duty” in Islam
Kankor	University entrance exam in Afghanistan
Mahram	A male relative who is allowed by Islam religion to accompany a female into public spaces
Mullah	Male Islamic religious teacher or leader
Pardah	Persian for “curtain,” it commonly refers to the practice of secluding women from men and vice versa
Ulema	Educated Islamic scholars

Executive Summary

Afghan universities are currently open to both male and female applicants, and 19.9% of the students enrolled in such institutes of higher education were female in the 2009-2010 academic years. While this is a vast improvement compared to universities under the Taliban regime, when women were outlawed from becoming students at all, there is still an obvious gender gap and imbalance that needs to be understood if efforts are going to be made to create greater equity and equality for women in higher education in Afghanistan.

The story of female access to higher education in Afghanistan is interesting, with some governments strongly supporting women's education in general and some outlawing it due to conservative ideas about the social roles of men and women. Today, the government is obliged to provide equal educational opportunities to men and women starting in primary school through their university degree.

Unfortunately, as indicated by the lower percentage above, women are continuing to encounter barriers, hurdles, and set-backs on their way to obtain access to a higher education. This assessment worked to identify some of these barriers, hurdles, and set-backs from multiple higher education stake-holders, from heads of universities, to professors, university staff, students, non-students, and parents. Street interviews were also conducted to capture local sentiments regarding higher education for women in the local bazaars (markets) of university towns. The assessment was conducted in seven different provinces throughout the country, providing a good geographical coverage, in the hope of capturing the largest variety of opinions and experiences.

Following the fall of the Taliban in 2001, only seven of the previously 14 operating universities were left in operation, albeit in very limited form. Since that time, those seven universities have been joined by 15 additional universities, resulting in a total of 22 public universities operating throughout the country today. The demand for higher education has become so large that numerous private universities have arisen to serve those students who do not enroll in the public universities. Student enrollment has been increasing in recent years, and the universities themselves have expanded to include at least one Masters Program in Education at Kabul University.

The destruction to the general education system in recent decades, however, has meant that a great deal of the development focus in education has stayed at the primary and secondary levels. While higher education has found its place in some of the country's most influential policies and plans, including the Afghanistan National Development Strategy (ANDS) and the

National Action Plan for Women of Afghanistan (NAPWA), few concrete action steps have been outlined for how to increase the number of women obtaining higher degrees. Even the Ministry of Higher Education's Strategic Plan, while expansive in language, provides little concrete plans for how to involve women more at the university level. A few international organizations, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and universities from different countries are involved, mostly on a small scale, in improving the university system in Afghanistan, there are few programs specifically focused on women's access.

Despite these shortfalls, there is encouraging evidence that a great deal of support for higher education exists for women amongst the assessment sample, even within the street interviews. The top seven most commonly mentioned benefits or reasons why women should have access to higher education in this assessment included: women make up half of the society and they need to be educated to create balance; educated women will help to develop the country; educated women make strong mothers and produce healthier children; all women have the right to education; female nurses, doctors, and teachers are needed and only educated women can fulfill these needs; women have the same needs as men and this includes higher education; and pursuing education is required (Farz) for both men and women within Islam. While it is suspected that rural opinions might not be as enthusiastic for higher education, it is important that there already individuals and groups who can be counted to support higher education for women.

There are, however, numerous barriers for women trying to obtain a higher degree that were noted by the assessment participants. Insecurity, financial issues, difficulties with the university entrance examination, the low quality of secondary education in the country, transportation concerns and issues, lack of female professors, lack of hostels for girls and cultural issues were all listed as major barriers for women pursuing higher degree. Families being fearful of the dangers their daughters would face on their way to the university or being fearful of local reactions to them allowing their daughters to attend university, were listed as some of the cultural barriers, along with wrong beliefs that education goes against Islam made it very hard for women to convince their families of the value of education to obtain a higher degree.

These barriers, though strong, are not viewed as permanent. The assessment participants provided numerous thoughts and recommendations on how to ease or even eliminate some of these barriers. The most commonly made suggestion was that education informative campaigns should be conducted throughout the country that include mullahs and other religious leaders who can support education for women in general, and for higher education in particular, from a religious perspective. Many people felt that if the people of Afghanistan could know more about education and its benefits, they would help to dissolve some of the current

barriers and encourage their daughters to pursue higher education. Increasing security, providing Kankor Examination preparatory classes for females, and improving the university environment to make it more comfortable for women to spend their time there, were all commonly suggested ways to improve the percentage of women pursuing higher education. Additionally, the assessment team noted that increasing the coordination between development implementers, funders and the ministry would help, as would increasing communications and coordination that exists within universities and between the university and the ministries.

Women access to higher education in Afghanistan can be improved, however, all efforts to do so should be tried to take a long-term perspective, one that focuses on the students of today and the future, and not just on short-term and rarely sustainable projects with immediate impact that are so often favored by development funders. The women of Afghanistan and the country as a whole deserve the right to see what positive impacts an increased number of educated women can produce.

Chapter 1: Introduction to the Assessment

As Afghanistan continues to work to develop in the post-Taliban era, an increased focus on the education of women has come to the forefront, both in the Afghanistan National Development Strategy (ANDS) of 2006 and in other development plans and documents. While most of the attention is placed on primary and secondary education, there is an increasing need to begin to focus on access to higher educational institutions for female students throughout the country.

While there are a number of reports that have helped to create a baseline understanding of the primary and secondary education situations in the country, there are no publically published reports on female students' access to higher education in Afghanistan to date. This report aims to address this gap in the available information by looking closely at how accessible higher education is for female students in Afghanistan, what incentives and barriers they face in trying to obtain higher degree, which development programs touch on female access to higher education, and the government policies that apply to female student access to higher education. It also provides some historical perspective on female access to higher education.

It is only by understanding the current situation that ministry staff, policy makers, development stakeholders, CSO advocacy groups and others who have invested in higher education in Afghanistan can move forward and help to address the low level access that currently exists for women trying to obtain higher education in Afghanistan. By understanding how things currently stand, better grounded plans can be made, based on the reality of higher education, for how to move into a future where more women are able to attend universities and beyond.

This assessment highlights the current situation, while also providing detailed information on the historical access women have had to higher education in Afghanistan to help situate the current reality into a larger picture.

Chapter 2: Methodology

To best understand the historical situation of female access to higher education in Afghanistan, the assessment team undertook an intensive desk study and also spoke with education specialists who have been involved in Afghanistan for multiple decades. Field reports, books, journal articles, and key informant interviews were used to verify and confirm data from different sources to draw the most accurate picture of the university system in Afghanistan and the role that women – as students, faculty, and staff – have played in that system.

In order to try to gain a holistic picture of the current situation for female tertiary students and higher education in Afghanistan in general, this assessment has taken a multi-pronged approach. Utilizing both quantitative and qualitative tools and analysis techniques, the assessment team has gathered data from seven different provinces. In these different provinces, the team focused on seven public, government-run institutions of higher education or universities, where we spoke with representatives of the university community. Additionally, stakeholders in the Ministry of Education (MoE), Ministry of Higher Education (MoHE), and the Ministry of Women’s Affairs (MoWA); funders of higher education development projects; and individuals from a private university based in Kabul were interviewed.

Location Selection

Geographically, the provinces selected cover the major regions of the country: Herat in the West, Balkh in the North, Badakhshan in the Northeast, and Nangarhar in the East, Kandahar in the South, and Kabul and Bamiyan in the Central Region. These regions, therefore, cover people of different ethnicities, different branches of Islam, and other common divisors in Afghanistan. The provinces were also selected to try to represent the diversity of Afghanistan’s universities in terms of student population, size, and age.

The seven universities were established at different times, ranging from the first university established in Afghanistan; Kabul University in 1932, to more recent additions such as Bamiyan University in 2004 and Badakhshan University in 2003. This allowed the assessment team to gather information within and between universities from very well-established schools and from those who have just entered the higher education sector, with the hope of being able to capture both traditions and new innovations.

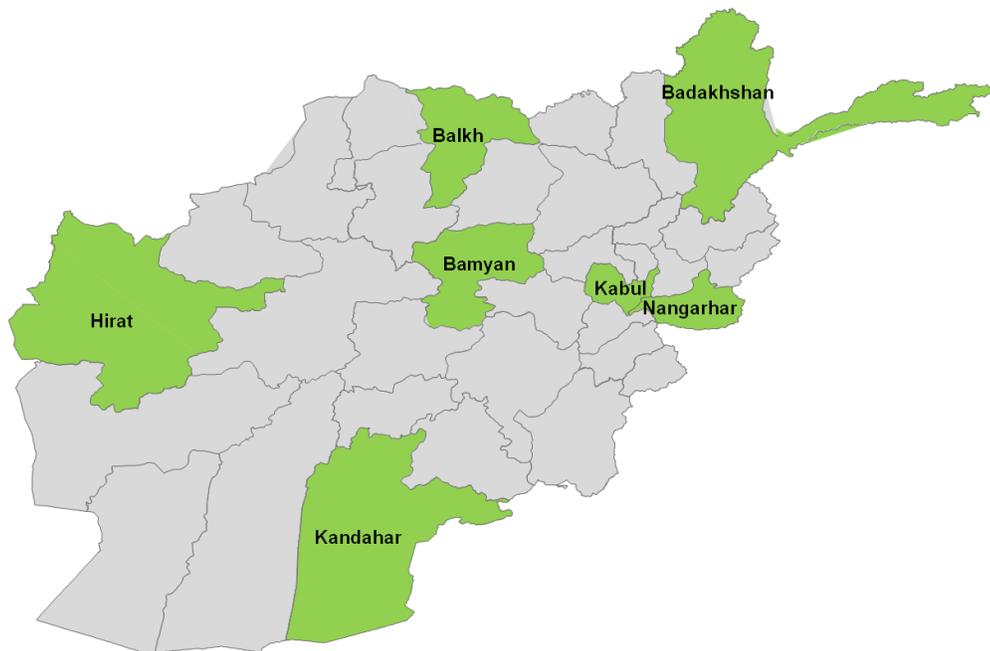


Figure 1: The seven provinces of Afghanistan where assessment was conducted

For most of these schools, female professors were hired within the first couple of years of operation, with the exception of the universities in Kandahar and Nangarhar, where it took them twelve and ten years respectively, after opening, to hire their first female professor. These two provinces are situated in the Pashtun belt of the country, which is known for its conservative views on purdah and the appropriate social roles for each gender and the social spaces they are allowed to occupy.

All seven of the assessment universities, except for the universities of Bamiyan and Badakhshan due to their more recent establishment, had to close their doors to women in their histories, with some having to close their doors completely.¹ This occurred in the years in which the Taliban governed the country, from 1996 through 2001. Prior to this time, the universities had allowed women to enroll more or less since their establishment, if not a few years following their establishment. As will be detailed below, the era when the Taliban controlled and governed the country resulted in negative impacts on the education of women country-wide and also negatively impacted on male educational opportunities too.

¹ Bamiyan University was established in 2004 according to their administration and Badakhshan University was opened in 1963 as a teacher training college and only became an official university in 2003 according to the administration there.

University	Province	Region	Student Population ²	Student Population ³	Year of Est.
Badakhshan University	Badakhshan	Northeast	20	512	2003
Balkh University	Balkh	North-central	5	5,567	1987
Bamiyan University	Bamiyan	Central	17	907	2004
Herat University	Heart	West	3	6,446	1988
Kabul University	Kabul	Central	1	13,350	1932
Kandahar University	Kandahar	South	9	2,013	1990
Nangarhar University	Nangarhar	East	2	7,109	1963

Table 1: Basic comparative information about the seven Afghan universities where assessment was conducted

Source: Afghanistan Statistical Yearbook 2009-2010 and data from assessment, including university report cards and key informant interviews (May and June 2011)

Tools and Sampling

This assessment utilized key informant interviews and focus group discussions. In total, the team conducted 62 individual key informant interviews (KIIs), 16 with women and 46 with men. The largest preponderance of male respondents can be mostly attributed to the positions held by these individuals and not to an intended selection bias on the part of the assessment team. The majority of higher positions within the university system and within the ministries are most often held by male. It also conducted 57 separate focus group discussions (FGDs), 35 with women and 22 with men. In the focus groups, the team spoke with 167 women and 106 men. The breakdown of these KIIs and FGDs will be provided in more detail below.

Focus Group Discussions

Focus group discussions in this assessment were limited to small groups of 4-6 individuals from an established category. All attempts were made to conduct male and female FGDs separately to ensure that everyone felt free to present their views. Previous assessment experiences in Afghanistan have shown that mixed gender focus group discussions often result in very low levels of contribution from female participants, leaving their opinions and knowledge

² The student population ranking includes all 22 public universities. (Islamic Republic of Afghanistan Central Statistics Office 2010)

³ All student population data provided is for the academic year 2009-2010. (Islamic Republic of Afghanistan Central Statistics Office 2010: 41)

unrevealed. The intention behind this was to try to create an environment in which each participant felt free to talk openly within their group, without concerns for gender relations.

Focus group discussions allow for a great deal of discussion and interaction between the group members, which provide insights into a topic that would not be available through individual interviews. It also allows room for the discussion to lead the interview into different directions, though guidelines do help the focus group discussion leader to guide the conversation when necessary. Focus group discussions are most often used for qualitative data collection, as they provide space for people to provide greater details about their motivations and their understandings of situations, both of which were vital for this assessment.

Focus groups were conducted with male and female students, male and female parents of students, male and female non-students of student age, male and female professors, and female staff members at each university, as detailed below.

The focus group discussions were conducted with male and female students separately and with male and female non-students separately to help us to understand what motivates those students who are continuing their education and what prevented the non-students from continuing their education. It also helped us understand the different challenges that these students and non-students have faced in their educational pursuits. In Afghanistan, families are known for playing a strong role in determining the educational decisions of young people, and therefore focus group discussions were also conducted with parents of students and non-students so that the assessment team could better understand the role they have played and the reasons for their stances on whether the young members of the family should pursue higher education.

	Category of FGD	FGDs	Total Participants
1.	Students	14	72
2.	Parents	14	70
3.	Non-students	8	32
4.	Professors	14	65
5.	University Staff	6	27
6.	Female Ministry Staff	1	7
	Totals	57	273

Table 2: Focus Group Discussions conducted for this assessment

In an attempt to better understand the general feelings about higher education for women that exist in the areas surrounding these seven universities, at least four randomly selected street interviews were conducted in the main bazaars of the university towns. These interviews were very brief and provided the assessment team with a snapshot of the attitudes of those living in the same areas as the universities, whose attitudes also contribute to whether the social acceptance or rejection of higher education for women influences the decisions of families of female students and the students themselves about whether to pursue a higher education or not.

While public universities play a very important role in higher education in Afghanistan, in recent years a number of private universities have been established. The assessment team also spoke with the head of the most popular private higher education institutions in order to understand the role, if any, that private institutions are playing in helping to increase women’s access to higher education. We spoke with the head of Kardan University based in Kabul, which had the largest student population in 2009-2010 school years.⁴

Additionally, a number of key informant interviews were conducted with Ministry staff members and other higher education stakeholders, such as the implementers and funders of higher education development projects. This helped the assessment team gain a stronger understanding of the policy environment that currently exists in Afghanistan and helped us to understand the different development projects that have taken place, are taking place, and are expected to take place that focus on making higher education more accessible to female students in Afghanistan.

	Category of KII	Number of KIIs
1.	Public University Administration	21
3.	Ministry Staff Members	6
5.	Donors and Implementers	3
7.	Street Interviews	31
9.	Private University Administration	1
	Totals	62

Table 3: Key Informant Interviews conducted for this assessment

⁴ Kardan University had 2759 students in 2009-2010, followed Bakhtar University, which had 657 students (Islamic Republic of Afghanistan Central Statistics Office 2010: 44)

Key Informants Interviews

Key informant interviews were conducted with individual stakeholders in higher education and with members of the general public to provide some perspective of how higher education for women and from those not necessarily directly connected to tertiary education.

KIIs are used because they allow researchers to ask both open and close ended questions from individuals with specific perspectives and/or knowledge. These interviews were conducted on a one to one basis, allowing the interviewee to speak freely without censure from others. KIIs were conducted with the head of each university, members of the university administration who were familiar with the statistics of the school and other functions, and with people in the market in each province. In Kabul, KIIs were conducted with ministry representatives from the Ministry of Education (MoE), Ministry of Higher Education (MoHE), and the Ministry of Women's Affairs (MoWA), along with development funders and implementers, and finally an interview was conducted with the head of one of the private university within Kabul.

Limitations and Considerations

Due to time constraints this assessment was limited to covering only seven of the 22 public universities and one of the numerous private universities. This does mean that it is possible that the situation differs in other provinces, though we tried to limit the possibility of this by selecting diverse provinces and universities in which to work, as was stated above.

Utilizing a more qualitative approach has allowed the assessment team to gather a great deal of detailed information that provides deeper answers to the questions than only a quantitative approach could provide, however, this does not mean that the data collected is not statistically representative for all provinces or all universities of Afghanistan. This should be kept in mind when reading the text and for future planning. We do, however, believe that the data presented here shows a very strong picture of the reality on the ground for women who are trying to access higher education within the country.

Chapter 3: Exploring Higher Education in Afghanistan

History of Women's Access to Higher Education

The university system in Afghanistan is slowly maturing after it was heavily fractured following the fall of the communist regime.

The first university faculty established in Afghanistan, was the Faculty of Physical Sciences in Kabul in 1932.⁵ This was the start of Kabul University, which was officially established in 1946.⁶ There were a reported 223 female students that graduated from the first class enrolled at Kabul University.⁷ Following this, Nangarhar University was established in 1963, followed by the Polytechnic University in Kabul that was founded with assistance from the Soviets in 1969.⁸ It was not until 1977, that a ministry was established to deal with higher education.⁹ It was called the Ministry of Higher Education and Ideological Training, and it was mandated to regulate all institutes of higher learning. A number of universities were established during the 1980's, including the University of Islamic Assessment and Herat University.

Access to higher education, especially for women, has been heavily dependent upon the political situation of the country, with access severely curtailed following the fall of the communist regime of Najibullah in 1992. Under the Mujahideen government (1992-1996), many universities provided limited access to education, if they were open at all. The situation worsened under the Taliban, as co-education was outlawed and women were not allowed to attend. This lasted until the end of the Taliban regime in 2001.

As one would assume, access to higher education is dependent upon educational opportunities at the lower levels of education. Government education for women at the primary and secondary levels in Afghanistan did not begin until the 1920's, when the first primary school for girls was established in 1921.¹⁰ The first secondary schools for boys were only established in the early 1900s.¹¹ The government of Amanullah (1919-1929) was hoping to encourage the growth of an "enlightened intellectual class", and therefore, they provided stipends to the secondary

⁵ (Abdulbaqi 2009)

⁶ (Abdulbaqi 2009)

⁷ Jana, 2011 #501}

⁸ (Abdulbaqi 2009)

⁹ (Abdulbaqi 2009)

¹⁰ (Burki 2011: 46)

¹¹ (Gregorian 1969: 239)

school students.¹² Two more primary schools were established in Kabul, along with one middle school by 1927.¹³

The first women to attempt to obtain higher degree occurred under the administration of Amanullah. Fifteen female students were sent to Turkey for higher education in 1928, to become nurses and midwives according to a staff member at the MoHE, though they were not allowed to complete their degrees.¹⁴ The girls who were sent were daughters of the Kabul elite. This was widely seen as going against Afghan culture and social norms, and was seen as a sign that the government had gone too far in its efforts of reform, and the girls were recalled and the other schools for girls that had been established were closed.¹⁵

The government that followed Amanullah, that of Bacha-e-Saqao initially closed down all girls' schools and recalled all Afghan females studying abroad to come back to Afghanistan.¹⁶ Following this, he worked with the religious establishment and opened some urban girls' schools, though these were few, and all below the higher education level. Malalai reopened in 1931, though only to train nurses and midwives.¹⁷ It did not reopen as a real school until the mid-1950s, and only through the 9th grade.¹⁸

When Zahir Shah first came to power (1933-73), his government began to open primary schools for girls throughout the country as he believed education was vital for the progress of the country.¹⁹ It was also under the rule of his father, King Nadir Shah (1929-1933) in which the first faculty of Kabul University was opened in 1932. This faculty accepted both male and female students. The government provided books, clothing, room and board, and more to encourage students.²⁰ Additionally, it allowed students to once again pursue their higher degrees abroad, with students travelling to France, Germany, the UK, the US, Turkey, and Japan to study.²¹

It was only in 1950, that the first girls' high school was established in Kabul, which is where the

¹² (Gregorian 1969: 240)

¹³ (Burki 2011: 46)

¹⁴ (Centlivres-Dermont 1994: 337; Ahmed-Ghosh 2003: 4)

¹⁵ (Centlivres-Dermont 1994: 338; Burki 2011: 49)

¹⁶ (Gregorian 1969: 275)

¹⁷ (Gregorian 1969: 309)

¹⁸ (Gregorian 1969: 309; Centlivres-Demont 1994: 338)

¹⁹ (Gregorian 1969: 307)

²⁰ (Gregorian 1969: 309)

²¹ (Gregorian 1969: 308)

current Malalai School now stands.²² As a comparison, the first boys high school was established in 1903, Habibiya.²³ In 1950-51 faculties for women were opened in medicine, the sciences, and the humanities at Kabul University.²⁴ This was followed by the establishment of a girls' high school in Herat in 1957.²⁵ During the 1950's, foreign aid from the US and the Soviet Union increased. These foreign funders helped to build more schools for girls. Women at this time were becoming nurses, doctors, and teachers, indicating that they had obtained higher education, though little to no information is available on the number of women attending university at this time.²⁶

Additionally, a constitution was drafted by the government under King Zahir Shah in 1964, which said that the state would focus on creating more educational opportunities for women (Article 44).²⁷ Women in education were at this time making strides, especially in urban areas. In Kabul in the 1970's, 42% of women were reported to have been formally schooled, though this most likely refers to higher education.²⁸ There was a rise of female faculty at the universities and women were gaining ground in other public spheres, with women acting as representatives in Parliament.²⁹ However, the situation was much graver country-wide. A World Bank report from 1975 says that only 8% of primary age school girls were enrolled in school and only 2% in secondary school, higher education was not even mentioned, leading one to believe that the numbers of women attaining higher education were limited.³⁰ However, Centlivres-Demont notes that 15.4% of the Kabul University student population was female as of 1976, and that only 11% of the student population was female prior to 1974.³¹

When the communist government came to power after the Saur Revolution in 1978 and the Soviet troops came in to support that government, there was an increased focus on education and on the education of women in particular. Education for boys and girls was made mandatory.³² The state compelled women to attend literacy classes in the rural areas, which caused a strong backlash in conservative areas and many schools and government buildings

²² Only through the 9th grade, was noted earlier (Centlivres-Demont 1994: 338; Burki 2011: 50)

²³ (Ahmed-Ghosh 2003: 3)

²⁴ (Centlivres-Demont 1994: 338)

²⁵ (Burki 2011: 50)

²⁶ (Ahmed-Ghosh 2003: 6)

²⁷ (Burki 2011: 56)

²⁸ (Brodsky 2011: 78)

²⁹ (Ahmed-Ghosh 2003: 6)

³⁰ (Brodsky 2011: 78)

³¹ (Centlivres-Demont 1994: 349)

³² (Ahmed-Ghosh 2003: 6)

were burned.³³ The number of primary schools in rural areas decreased.³⁴ While education for female would remain rare in the rural areas, under the communist regime education for girls became more common in urban areas. Though in 1979, the percentage of women completing high school was still low at only 5%.³⁵

One author noted however, that despite these restrictions there was actually an increase in the percentage of women in high schools and universities due to the mandatory military service imposed by the government on the male population.³⁶ In 1984, 57.7% of the Kabul University student was female.³⁷ In 1988, there were 250 students in Soviet Master's and Doctorate programs each year and 1,000 students partaking in Russian undergraduate programs, some of whom were female, though the exact number is not known.³⁸ The government also was trying to support education by increasing its university allowances in 1988.³⁹ Centlivres-Demont believes that there was a big push for education by the government at this time as it hoped to increase its support within the country; she reports that there were 13,000 university students in the country at that time, with 7,600 of them attending Kabul University.⁴⁰ She said that the government altered the rules, allowing some students to enroll without having taken the examination and that the required number of years of study prior to university was lowered from twelve to ten.⁴¹

While many universities were open to female students by the mid-1980, this changed drastically with the fall of the communist Najibullah government and the rise of the Mujahideen in 1992. Some universities, such as Kabul University, virtually shut down during this period, as Mujahideen forces threatened university staff and students. Kabul University became a battle ground, with some buildings burned down by the Mujahideen, according to Ahmed-Ghosh.⁴² Women experienced increasing restrictions on their movement, and the all enveloping veil called a chaderi, was made mandatory at this time.⁴³

³³ (Burki 2011: 53)

³⁴ (Centlivres-Demont 1994: 347)

³⁵ (Jana 2011)

³⁶ (Centlivres-Demont 1994: 347)

³⁷ (Centlivres-Demont 1994: 349)

³⁸ (Arnold 1994: 59)

³⁹ (Rubin 1994: 215)

⁴⁰ (Centlivres-Demont 1994: 349)

⁴¹ (Centlivres-Demont 1994: 348)

⁴² (Ahmed-Ghosh 2003: 7)

⁴³ (Ahmed-Ghosh 2003: 7)

This period was followed by the reopening of some of the universities under the Taliban regime (1996-2001). However, the education situation worsened for women under the Taliban domination. The government outlawed co-education, effectively eliminating even primary school educational possibilities for girls. Women were not allowed to leave their homes, except to buy food and they were only allowed to do this with a mahram or male relative, by their side.⁴⁴ A few women, however, were allowed to complete their medical degrees.⁴⁵ During this time, access to education was lowered for boys too due to the increased insecurity in many areas. Prior to the Taliban takeover of the government, there had been 14 institutions of higher learning in the country.⁴⁶ This was reduced to only seven during their rule. Those schools that survived faced severe funding and teacher shortages, as many people fled the fighting that was taking place at that time and sought refuge outside the country's borders. The current deputy of the Ministry of Higher Education estimates that 70% of the professors left Afghanistan due to the fighting.⁴⁷

Following the fall of Taliban in 2001, Afghan universities have been coming back to life and new ones have been established, such as Bamiyan University and Badakhshan University. All of the universities that were part of this study have allowed women to matriculate, but the number of women willing and able to do so in 2001 and 2002, when many of them reopened their doors to women, was low and has only been slowly increasing in the interim 10 years.

There had been 24,333 students enrolled in higher education in 1992, but that number dropped to only 17,370 students by 1995 and down to 7,881 in 2001.⁴⁸ This number has steadily been growing since that time, to the current level of over 60,000 students throughout the country. More and more high school graduates are taking the university entrance exam, the Kankor Examination. In 2008-09 an estimated 90,000 students applied for the Kankor Examination, and about 20,000 entered into the higher education system.⁴⁹

The number of students looking to pursue higher education influenced the decision by the Government of Afghanistan to legalize private institutes of higher education in 2003.⁵⁰

⁴⁴ (Ahmed-Ghosh 2003: 7)

⁴⁵ (Jana 2011)

⁴⁶ (Abdulbaqi 2009)

⁴⁷ (Nemtsova 2010)

⁴⁸ (Nemtsova 2010)

⁴⁹ (Islamic Republic of Afghanistan Ministry of Higher Education 2009)

⁵⁰ (Islamic Republic of Afghanistan Ministry of Higher Education 2009)

The Current Status of Higher Education in Afghanistan

Higher education in Afghanistan is financed by the Government of Afghanistan. Article 43 of the current Constitution states that the “Government of Afghanistan is responsible for providing free education for its citizens through to the Bachelor degree level.⁵¹” This means that there are no enrollment fees or fees for classes that the students must pay. For those universities that have hostels, these costs are also covered by government funding. Thus the main costs of attending a public university include: transportation, photocopying or the purchasing of book chapters, food costs, and clothing.

Private universities, however, charge a tuition fee. Parents of students in the different provinces estimated that one year of private university costs anywhere from 20,000 Afghani to 100,000 Afghani, depending on the location and quality of the school. A cost that is often prohibitive for students and their families as the per capita income in the country as of 2009 was only 1,000 USD,⁵² which is equivalent to around 49,750 Afghani. As it will be discussed below, the costs of higher education, be they for public or private university, are seen as a barrier for students in their pursuit of a university degree.

The number of public universities in Afghanistan is small in number, with only 22 functioning as of 2009-2010 according to the Ministry of Higher Education.⁵³ This stands in stark contrast to Afghanistan’s neighbor, Pakistan, where there are currently 127 fully functioning institutes of higher learning, 73 of which are public universities. Some of these schools offer only a few different faculties, while some offer up to ten different faculties in which to study. While the Ministry of Higher Education indicates that all of the universities provide dormitories for both male and female students, with the exception of Paktia University that has no female students listed as living in a dormitory, our assessment has shown that there is no dormitory for female students at both Kandahar and Herat Universities and no hostel for the male students of Bamyan University. The other four universities that partook in this assessment had both a male and female hostel, with most being able to fully accommodate all female students though not

⁵¹ (Islamic Republic of Afghanistan Ministry of Higher Education 2009)

⁵² (Central Intelligence Agency 2011)

⁵³ The statistical information in this paragraph comes from the Afghanistan Statistical Yearbook 2009-2010. The universities include: Kabul University, Kabul Polytechnic University, the University of Education, Kabul Medical University, Herat University, Albironi Kapisa University, Abdullah Ebni Massoud Takhar University, Nangarhar University, Kandahar University, Balkh University, Badakhshan University, Kunduz University, Parwan University, Jawzjan University, Faryab University, Sheke Zahen Khost University, Baghlan University, Bamyan University, Paktia University, Ghazni University, Samangan University, and Helmand University.

all of the male students.⁵⁴

Kabul University is the largest university by far, with almost 12,000 students in the 2009-2010 school year, according to the university's administration. Overall, the number of students attending university throughout the country has been increasing. In the school year 2008-09, the total student population increased almost 9% from the 2007-2008 school year, going from 56,451 students to 61,375.⁵⁵ It is interesting to note that while the student numbers have risen for both genders, the increase in female students was more significant with an increase of almost 21.9%, as compared to 5.8% for male students. This is even higher than the year before, when female enrollment rates increased 16.2% and male rates increased 14.1%. These are encouraging numbers, though it must be pointed out that the female students in 2009-2010, still only accounted for 19.9% of the entire student body, leaving room for improvement in the gender balance of Afghan public universities. Additionally, it should be noted that this percentage is an average and some schools, such as Kandahar University have a much lower enrollment percentage of female students. The Kandahar University student population is only 3.6% female, while in contrast the female population at Herat University is 33.9%. These differences show that the severity of the gender divide is not uniform throughout the country, which indicates that perhaps different means of encouraging female students to pursue higher education could be in order.

The number of female students is not the only measure of gender balance in the university structure; increasingly the ministries and university administrations are recognizing the importance of having female professors and female staff. Despite many barriers to higher education that Afghan women have faced historically, there are female teachers working within the universities of Afghanistan. In areas of greater insecurity, such as Kandahar, the percentage of female teachers is lower, but overall, female teachers account for 14.7% of the total teachers working in public universities.⁵⁶ This percentage has stayed relatively steady over the last three years.

There are no statistics available regarding the number of female non-teaching staff at the universities in Afghanistan, but our assessment has revealed that the percentages are still quite

⁵⁴ Male students who apply for housing but do not receive it due to space restrictions are provided with a stipend of 1,800 Afghani per month to find their own housing.

⁵⁵ These statistics and all others included in this paragraph stem from (Islamic Republic of Afghanistan Central Statistics Office 2010: 45).

⁵⁶ (Islamic Republic of Afghanistan Central Statistics Office 2010).

low, ranging from only 1.7% of the staff at Badakhshan University to 32.5% at Balkh University. Many of the university administrators indicated that increasing female participation in the university in terms of students, professors, and non-teaching staff is one of their goals. Some universities have had more success at this than others.

Kandahar University had no female staff until this past year, when through word of mouth, they were able to hire six female staff. The female staff in Kandahar told us that one of their main motivations for working at the university was the possibility that the university extended to them to continue their own higher education if they worked at the university. Herat University has been the most active in trying to increase female involvement, providing child care on campus for female staff, professors, and students, along with providing a separate dining area and bathroom area for women.

In general the female staff interviewed felt that the reputation of a university was very important as to whether they felt comfortable working there and that separate gendered facilities, such as dining areas, resting areas, and toilets strongly contributed to a good reputation. Almost all of the female staff we spoke to said that they felt that in general they were treated equally at the universities as the male staff, with salaries only seeing slight differentiations, with male staff obtaining slightly higher salaries, though we were unable to confirm whether this was due to gender discrimination or differences in job descriptions. In Kandahar, the female staff said that their salaries should be increased from their current level of 3,000 Afghani per month, which they said was not enough to pay for their communication and transportation costs. Even MoHE officials expressed their concern that the support staff salaries, which range from 3,000 Afghani to 4,450 Afghani per month, are too low and act as a preventative to finding female candidates for positions.

The number of women involved with the MoHE is also important to look at. According to MoHE staff members, there are women serving up to the level of Director. At the MoHE, there are currently 106 female staff out of a total of 591 staff, accounting for 18.8% of the total staff.

Since 2003, a number of private universities have opened throughout the country, though the majority of them are situated in or around the country's capital city of Kabul. While there were only 7 private institutes of higher education listed in 2008-09, there were twelve such universities that were recognized by the Government of Afghanistan in 2009-2010 according to

the Afghanistan Statistical Yearbook 2009-2010, though others say there are more.⁵⁷ One Deputy Minister of the MoHE told the assessment team that there are now 47 private universities in Afghanistan (as of June 2011), and that there were already 34 such universities in 2010. Discussions with ministry staff, development project funders, and others involved in higher education in Afghanistan, indicate that the number of private institutes of higher learning is increasing quickly, with teachers imported from neighboring countries such as India and Pakistan. While some students see this as an opportunity to continue their education despite not having the Kankor Examination results they were hoping to have in order to get into the faculty of their choice, others within the development sector and the ministries are vocal about their concerns for the quality of instruction that is being offered and for the high tuition fees that students and families must pay in these private institutes.

According to some of the key stakeholders we spoke to, private higher education is increasing. While there were only 2,318 students enrolled in a private institute of higher education in 2008-09, this number jumped to 7,046 students in 2009-2010.⁵⁸ Male students still dominate this population, however, with only 12% (848) of the students being female in 2009-2010, which is actually a decrease compared to 2008-09, when 15.1% (354) of the students were female.⁵⁹

Female teachers in the private institutes accounted for 12.4% of the teaching staff in 2009-2010, which is an increase from the 8.6% recorded for 2008-09.⁶⁰ Interviews with members of the administration of a few private institutes noted that the number of female professors is low because most of their professors are recruited from other neighboring countries and that fewer women are willing to take the security risks involved in relocating to Afghanistan than men in their experience.

As can be seen, the current higher education sector is quite active with many students enrolling in both public and private institutes of higher learning.

⁵⁷ These include Mawlana Jalalludin Mohammad Balkhy Higher Education, Bakhtar Higher Education, Maiwand Higher Education, American Afghan University, Khatam-Al Nabieen Higher Education, Sadat Higher Education, Ranhigher education, Khawaran Higher Education, Salam Higher Education, Kardan Higher Education, Kateb Higher Education, and Peshgam Higher Education. This is the official list provided in the Afghanistan Statistical Yearbook 2009-2010. Many of these institutes of higher learning call themselves universities, so it is not unusual to hear people speak of Kardan University, instead of calling it Kardan Higher Education. (Islamic Republic of Afghanistan Central Statistics Office 2010: 36).

⁵⁸ (Islamic Republic of Afghanistan Central Statistics Office 2010: 44)

⁵⁹ (Islamic Republic of Afghanistan Central Statistics Office 2010: 44)

⁶⁰ (Islamic Republic of Afghanistan Central Statistics Office 2010: 44)

Higher Education Policies

Higher Education is one of the eight main pillars of the Afghanistan National Development Strategy (ANDS), indicating its high priority for the government of Afghanistan. This national development plan was written collaboratively with multiple stakeholders involved in the development of the country. It was completed in 2006.

National Higher Education Strategic Plan

The MoHE's Strategic Plan, which covers the years from 2010 through 2014 and was initiated by UNESCO's International Institute of Education Planning (IIEP).⁶¹ This plan was written in collaboration with multiple higher education stakeholders. It outlines two main programs. Program one has stated aim to "Educate and train skilled graduates to meet the socio-economic development needs of Afghanistan; enhance teaching, research and learning; and encourage service to the community and nation." The second program intends to "Lead and manage a coordinated system of higher education comprising of universities, institutes and community colleges dedicated to providing high quality tertiary education."

Within this document, there are few pointed references made to women in higher education. The MoHE has a goal that 30% of the total students of higher education should be female by 2014. This means that they hope to have 34,500 female students out of the 115,000 expected students, which is a high goal, considering that as of 2010 there were only just over 12,000 female students enrolled in public universities. Though short on details for how to encourage this increase in female enrollment, it does indicate that women will have priority in university housing. However, it is difficult to imagine how this will occur as all housing is gender segregated and there has been no movement to switch male dormitories into female dormitories and there are no stated plans for building of more female dormitories that the assessment team was made aware of, with the exception of Herat University.

The Higher Education Strategic Plan does indicate that a gender unit has been created within the organizations structure, "to encourage gender mainstreaming." It is perhaps this unit that will complete the task of writing an affirmative action plan to increase female faculty and staff members, which is expected to be achieved by 2014. While the strategic plan makes it known that the MoHE would like to increase the number of females involved in higher education, it does not provide any concrete action steps as to how it will make this happen. They mention

⁶¹ Higher Education is one of the eight main pillars of the Afghanistan National Development Strategy (ANDS).

that they might take possible corrective measures, such as affirmative action, remedial tuition, financial aid, and counseling services to help those who have been disadvantaged, including the poor and women, but no concrete plans appear to have been put forward. Mention is also given to creating a distance learning program that would allow women and others who are unable to physically attend institutes of higher education to learn via distance, though this is mentioned only as a possibility in the future.

National Action Plan for Women of Afghanistan

The Ministry of Women's Affairs (MoWA) played a vital role in the creation of the National Action Plan for Women of Afghanistan (NAPWA), along with UNIFEM.⁶² This is a gender supporting policy that applies to all government entities. As a non-implementing agency, MoWA mostly works on adjusting, revising, and creating policies that support women in Afghanistan in general, including higher education. The MoHE is one of the few ministries that consistently invite MoWA to discuss their programs and projects. They provide MoWA with insights and inputs regarding how to plan projects that are gender equal and promote equity.

The NAPWA itself looks at higher education for women and puts forward goals, including the objective of 50% net enrollment of female in universities.⁶³ They would like to see women pursuing non-traditionally gendered faculties in the universities such as education and medicine, towards areas where women are less represented, such as journalism, business and computer sciences.⁶⁴ The objectives they put forward include increasing access to quality education for rural and urban women; reducing the constraints to education such as early marriage, sexual harassment, and physical access; creating gender equality at all levels of education, from primary school children to directors in the MoHE; and strengthening teacher training.

Unlike the previously mentioned MoHE plan, the NAPWA does put forward some action steps, though little information was provided to us indicating that these steps are currently being pursued. The first action step was to implement an affirmative action program to encourage female to become teachers with higher salaries and opportunities for training. They said that this affirmative action should continue until 50% of the teachers are female and to encourage female students to continue their education.⁶⁵ An incentive program to prevent female drop-

⁶² (Afghanistan 2007)

⁶³ (Afghanistan 2007: 85)

⁶⁴ (Afghanistan 2007: 85)

⁶⁵ (Afghanistan 2007: 87)

outs was also mentioned, but with no details about what this could or should entail.⁶⁶ A Task force including the Ministry of Transportation and Aviation was called to determine the best means of providing transportation to female students for education at all levels, though this has not yet resulted in any transportation plans in the universities studied.⁶⁷ At the higher institutes of learning, the NAPWA calls for making female hostels or dormitories, available at each university.⁶⁸ As will be detailed later, USAID did build a hostel for women in Kabul a few years back and Herat University is currently building a female hostel. The document also calls for schools to follow up and address sexual harassment of women and violence against women.⁶⁹ Finally, the NAPWA calls for the government to launch a public campaign to highlight the importance of female education,⁷⁰ which there is evidence of having occurred, as will be detailed below.

Actions and Activities

In alignment with the ANDS and NAPWA, the MoHE has moved forward with its plans to implement affirmative action policies to encourage and support increasing numbers of women to attend university. A senior staff member of the MoHE detailed that female students from rural areas were given an additional 15 points on their Kankor Examination scores in order to help them gain admission into the university system. He said that this decision allowed for an additional 1,000 female students to enroll in universities throughout the country. He also said that the MoHE is helping women to increase their scores in order to help them find scholarships, though he did not provide further details on this.

The Ministry of Higher Education is focused on improving the quality and quantity of higher education available for male and female high school graduates. At the same time, it is concerned with increasing the number of female teaching staff at the universities and their capabilities. The MoHE is the main clearing house for information on scholarships for professors to study abroad in order to further their education levels. As of 2008, only 5.5% of the public university professors had a PhD and 30.7% had a Masters in Arts and Sciences, and the remaining 63.8% had only a Bachelors degree.⁷¹

⁶⁶ (Afghanistan 2007: 87)

⁶⁷ (Afghanistan 2007: 87)

⁶⁸ (Afghanistan 2007: 88)

⁶⁹ (Afghanistan 2007: 88)

⁷⁰ (Afghanistan 2007: 88)

⁷¹ (Islamic Republic of Afghanistan Ministry of Higher Education 2009)

The vast majority of the scholarships abroad are taken by men. The reason given for this by school administrators, professors of both gender, and ministry staff is the difficulty for many Afghan women to travel abroad, either due to family responsibilities or due to family concerns about their traveling abroad on their own. In order to try to address this, the MoHE Strategic Plan: 2010-2014, says that it will create more Masters programs within the country in order to allow both male and female professors to continue the enhancement of their knowledge and skills in order to strengthen the education they are providing in the universities. The first Masters program (in Education) was established at Kabul University in 2008 with assistance from the Higher Education Project (HEP). The program is 50% female and 50% male. So far, 44 individuals have graduated and received their Masters degree from Kabul University. A Masters program in English will be created over the next three years at the Kabul Education University funded with 3.5 million USD from the US State Department.⁷²

Additionally, the National Action Plan for the Women of Afghanistan (NAPWA) states that women should be included at all levels of education, including the policy level. As of the time of this assessment, women were involved as directors and assistant directors at the faculty level. The MoHE said that it encourages women to apply for its positions and that it works to provide them with suitable hours that allow them to both work and care for their families. The Director of Secondary Education said that he hires male and female staff at an equal rate. The Head of Planning at the MoE indicated that the Director of Basic Education is a woman, as is the Provincial Head of Literacy Programs. He said, "We have plans to increase the number of women in the future," though he did not provide details of how this was to be accomplished.

The MoHE is also concerned about ensuring that its staff is encouraging women to apply for positions within its domain. Unfortunately, however, the female staff of the MoHE who participated in a FGD told us that they do not feel they are valued at the ministry. "It feels like we are here symbolically, like we are not supposed to be here but now that we are they have to put up with us." They expressed that they felt as though they were not supported by the ministry and that they felt as though they were hired as tokens. They said that despite making requests for such facilities as a women's bathroom, a prayer room, and a dining room, they still had not been provided with any of them. Additionally, they indicated that all the male staff were given more overtime work than the women, as the men were seen as the sole breadwinners of their families, without understanding that this was also true for some of the women. When the women inquired as to why they were not getting overtime work, they were

⁷² (UPI 2011)

told that it was not safe for women to work late; something that these women felt was just an excuse.

When asked about what positions of the MoHE were open to female staff, the women told us that all positions were officially open to women, but that they did not make it easy for women to ask for a higher position within the ministry. They said that they hoped women would soon be able to enter decision-making posts at the ministry, with more women becoming directors and deputy ministers. They also felt that gender awareness trainings were needed at the MoHE. The only statistics available regarding ministry staffs referring to the MoHE stem is from 1988, when 43% of the MoHE staff was female, a far cry from the percentages seen currently.⁷³

University Gender Policies

Herat University and Kandahar University both indicated that they have a gender policy at their schools. Herat's policy is focused on the completion of the girls' hostel, increasing female students, starting a research center headed by a woman, and starting a three year Bachelors program for women. Kandahar University's policy is a little less clear, with the assessment team being informed that they are attempting to "coordinate and liaise with the international donors and PRT's (Provincial Reconstruction Teams) to grab as much resources from them as possible," which has resulted in a special focus on women. Through this coordination Kandahar University has built a prayer room and a recreational room that has a television, air conditioning, internet, and a refrigerator for the women of the university. Unfortunately, at both of these universities there was not a great deal of awareness regarding the policy amongst professors of either gender, indicating that perhaps more information sharing is needed.

Bamiyan University, Balkh University, and Badakhshan University all were forthright in stating that they did not have a specific gender policy, but their strategic plans either mainstreamed gender or had separate sections on gender. Bamiyan is focused on providing a safe and appropriate working environment for women, while Balkh has the specific goal of allocating 35% of all resources and seats of power for women. Nangarhar University said they had no gender policy, but they did have the goal of increasing female participation in the university at the student, staff, and teacher levels by 50%. Kabul University informed the assessment team that they are waiting for the MoHE to complete a gender policy that they then plan to implement.

⁷³ (Arnold 1994: 60)

There appears to be a great deal of room for the establishment of well-planned and action-oriented gender policies at the seven universities, where this assessment was conducted. This process should be inclusive of the teachers, staff and students at the university, and should be familiar to all of them, which requires a great deal of information sharing.

Higher Education Development Programs: Present and Future

Since the fall of Taliban, education has been an important issue of focus within the Afghan Government and the international donor community. Most development aid, however, has gone to improve the primary education system, with very few projects taking place at the higher education level. However, there are a few projects that focus on higher education, though none concentrate solely on increasing access to education for women. To learn about these, the assessment team spoke with three implementers and funders of higher education programs and staff at the MoE, MoHE, and MoWA. They spoke to the assessment team about the different projects that are being implemented in the field and those planned for the future.

MoWA, with technical expertise from different partners, MoE, and the MoHE has developed two policy papers that are in alignment with the NAPWA. The first is called “Increasing women’s enrollment in primary education” and the second is called “Increasing women’s enrollment at higher education”. EPD, together with MoWA, took the initiative to work on these two policies to get them approved by the President of Afghanistan. EPD established a technical team comprised of MP’s, civil society partners and representatives from international community and donors to review these policies and advocate for their approval. Additionally, the MoWA staff said that the ministry carries out a great deal of awareness raising workshops and campaigns that are meant to encourage women to pursue higher education. One such program is called “Door to Door”. Members of the ministry visit the homes of people to discuss female education and they also work with the Ulema to give speeches in the mosque supporting female education. Additionally, MoWA has had television spots funded by the UN’s Afghanistan Sub-national Governance Programme (ASGP) and implemented by a number of local NGOs.

The Higher Education Project (HEP) is one of the largest higher education development programs in the country. It is a 51 million USD, five year program funded by USAID that was expecting to receive a one year extension of 10 million USD, at the time of the interview. The main focus of the program is capacity building of the faculty members of the public universities of Afghanistan. The program administration feels that their focus on building the capacity of both male and female faculty will result in an increase in the number of qualified female

professors, which in turn will create a better environment for female students to attend the university. The program provides training in English and computers and also conducts workshops on gender equity and equality. The program also provides access to higher education, such as Master's and PhD programs for Afghan public university faculty members. However, most of these programs and scholarships are offered abroad, which has limited the number of female participants. Therefore, HEP, has started a Masters program at Kabul University, which will be discussed more below.

The staff of HEP has seen evidence that their program is having a positive impact on introducing more women to higher education. One staff member reported that while previously about ten female students were accepted into Kandahar University, these female students often left because the environment was not suitable for them as there were no female teachers in the university. This, however, has changed now as there are few female professors at the university. The number of female students has increased and more female students are staying at the university to continue their studies.

The “Strengthening Higher Education Program” (SHEP) is the other largest higher education program in Afghanistan. It is a 40 million USD project funded by the World Bank, in alignment with the Afghan National Development Strategy (ANDS) and in collaboration with the Ministry of Higher Education (MoHE). It focuses on building the capacity of university professors and the construction and reconstruction of hostels, libraries, and other buildings at six universities in Afghanistan. Additionally, the program is working on building a new strategic plan in partnership with the public universities that mainstreams gender. The program has connected with many universities around the world and provides scholarships for Afghan faculty to pursue higher degrees and to strengthen their skills. Recognizing the difficulties that women face in travelling abroad to pursue higher education, they have been conducting assessment about ways to address this challenge, and perhaps will help support increasing the number of opportunities for progress internally, as did HEP.

Additionally, Russia has contributed 5 million USD to the polytechnic and USAID pledged 200 million USD for higher education over the next five years (2010-15).⁷⁴

There are also some smaller higher education projects. Washington State University implements the Afghan Equality Alliances project, which focuses on building the capacities of

⁷⁴ (Nemtsova 2010)

university students and teachers.⁷⁵ It also entails curriculum development. The Germans are said to have contributed some funding for IT and Economics education and also provide private scholarships for Afghan students to obtain their higher degrees in Germany. France funds French language education, and India provides a large number of scholarships in Education.

USAID helped to build a women's dormitory in Kabul in 2004.⁷⁶ The dormitory was built to house 1,100 women, allowing them to attend the Medical centers, the Afghan Education University, the Polytechnic, and Kabul University. They provided funds for the management and maintenance of the dormitory, along with food for the students housed there for three years. Japan's Five Women's University Consortium has been providing capacity training to individual female professors from Afghanistan since 2002.

UNESCO is also involved in higher education, though with smaller projects those range between 60,000 USD to 70,000 USD each. Working with the MoHE, these are internal strategic capacity development support projects. They are helping the MoHE with its information management system, and helping them to think strategically about gender mainstreaming in the strategic plan. UNESCO is also involved in a number of general education and literacy programs, which contribute to the number of students, both male and female, who might make it through high school. They are also involved in gender policy work within the MoHE, MoE, and the Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development (MRRD).

There are also small scholarship programs run by individuals, NGOs, and others. The Khaled Hosseini Foundation, founded by the author of a number of popular novels set in Afghanistan, provides scholarships for a limited number of girls to attend American Universities, as does the Initiative to Educate Afghan Women (IEAW). IEAW has supported 33 female students in the US. The Afghan Girls Financial Assistance Fund was established in 2008 and is supporting 11 students in collaboration with local families to attend US Universities.

Additionally, there are many general education programs of the UN, local and international NGO's, and others that aim to help girls stay in school focused on primary and secondary education. One of the most impactful programs, according to individuals at the MoWA, has been the UN World Food Programme's project "Food for education." Through this program

⁷⁵ The Special Speaker to the MoHE said that 12 Afghan universities have partnered with universities from around the world, with the goal of strengthening the Afghan universities, though we were not provided with additional details to include in this report.

⁷⁶ (USAID 2005)

students are given food incentives for attending school. Other community-based education programs for primary and secondary school are run by NGO's such as CARE, SCA, CRS, the Afghan Center, and others.

A number of implementers of higher education projects feel that there is not a great deal of coordination between higher education stakeholders. They believe that this is caused by the lack of proper mechanisms at the MoHE and a simple lack of coordination amongst donors. They believe that the MoHE has not been able to successfully find funders/donors for their strategic plan, which is reflected by the fact that they did not come close to reaching the 550 million USD goal that was determined as necessary according to the 2009 strategic plan. One funder blamed lack of fundraising on the fact that funders are more interested in quick impact projects, and not necessarily long-term projects, which seems to be the case when looking at the large number of small scale projects in higher education.

However, according to HEP, the different organizations that are focusing on higher education in Afghanistan collaborate regularly. They attributed this, in part, to the small number of projects focused on higher education and the small university sector. The HEP projects works with SHEP to maintain the registrar of students, they work on student services together, such as career counseling, and they are working on converting the system to a credit system to assure quality. HEP is working with the Afghan Equality Alliances project by being involved in the review and rewriting of the English and Public Administration Departments' curriculums.

Scholarships

Unlike many other countries, scholarships for studies are mostly directed towards professors in Afghanistan. While there are a few scholarship programs for undergraduate students, the focus has mainly been on trying to find ways to provide graduate and post-graduate degrees to professors within the Afghan university system, to increase their skills and knowledge in order to provide a better quality of teaching within the university system.

The spokesperson of the MoHE said that since 2009, over 500 women have applied for scholarships to study abroad. Most of the scholarships available were provided by other countries. The Head of Foreign Relations in the MoHE said that there are 1,100 scholarships available each year and that about 25% of the 1,524 applicants are female. Additionally, there are open scholarships for Masters Degrees and PhD degrees in India (500 to 800). Pakistan provides 200 graduate scholarships and Bulgaria, Russia, and Turkey provide undergraduate

scholarships.

These are the scholarships that are advertised through the MoHE, the additional scholarships mentioned in the section above appear to be offered through other channels. The MoHE advertises the scholarships through website, through the national radio and television stations, and on bulletin boards within the universities. The MoHE policies and procedures booklet indicates that both genders have equal opportunity to gain a scholarship, indicating that no specific action steps have been taking within the ministry to try to increase the possibilities of women obtaining a scholarship.

There are only a few scholarships that have been reserved for female teachers, such as those that have been offered by the Korean government, Bulgaria, and Bangladesh.⁷⁷ These scholarships generally have a worth of between 10,000 USD and 60,000 USD, which covers the costs of travel, tuition, books, and housing, with some scholarships also providing a living stipend of 200 USD to 1,000 USD for food and other expenses. Some scholarships, however, require the recipient to contribute travel costs or some percentage of the university or living costs. This often results in the scholarship not being utilized as only few Afghans have the additional money required for such a contribution. This is what happened with the Korean government scholarships for women, ten women were accepted but none were able to go because they could not afford their share of the costs.

From speaking with professors and university administration officials, the assessment team learned that very few scholarships were being given to women. Out of the seven universities where this assessment was conducted, our assessment team was told about two female professors only who had obtained scholarships, though dozens of male professors had received them. This discrepancy is dangerous as it means that male professors will continue to move up the university teaching levels and women will not, as higher degrees are large determinants in promotions within the university.

While university officials assured the assessment team that scholarships information was shared with both male and female teachers, in at least two universities they were told by the female professors that they had not been provided scholarship information. One university head told us that there were very few women taking scholarships because they could not travel

⁷⁷ The Asian University of Bangladesh has 25 scholarships available for Afghan women.

due to family obligations and responsibilities. While some women confirmed that travel for them would be difficult, others did not agree. The decision of whether to apply for scholarships or not should be something that the women decide for themselves, not an assumption that prevents the relevant information from reaching them.

Chapter 4: Assessment Findings

Acceptance of and Support for Higher Education amongst the Population

The individuals who participated in the KII's and FGD's conducted for this assessment overwhelmingly agreed that women should have equal access to education as men, with 98.1% of respondents saying they strongly agreed with this statement. All 176 female respondents and 136 of 142 male respondents said they strongly agreed that women should have equal educational opportunities as men. Five men said that they somewhat agreed that women should have equal access to educational opportunities, only one man said that he strongly disagreed with this. Overall, this is a strongly positive response, though it should be remembered that these responses came from those involved in higher education in one manner or another (university faculty and staff, students, non-students, parents, ministry staff, and development funders and implementers) and from people on the streets in urban areas. It is likely that this positive response is not representative of the sentiments found in rural areas, but it does indicate that there are some people who support equal opportunities for women in education, which is not commonly assumed when people think or talk about attitudes towards female education in Afghanistan.

Apart from interviewing university administration; faculty; staff; students; non-students; parents; ministry staff; and donors and implementers, the assessment team also conducted 41 individual street interviews, 12 with women and 29 with men.⁷⁸ In each province, at least four randomly selected individuals were asked to participate in a simple survey to help provide some insights into how people not necessarily directly involved in higher education, feel about women's access to higher education. The average age of the male and female respondents was both 30.4 years old, with respondents of both genders ranging in age from 18 to 50. Seven of the women were housewives and the others were either employed or were students. Only three of the male respondents were unemployed, the others were employed in various occupations ranging from soldiers to shopkeepers, etc.

Out of those who participated in the street interview, 29 said that they felt that women should have equal opportunities to get education as men. Only one male cobbler from Nangarhar "strongly disagreed" with this statement and one male soldier from Kabul said he only

⁷⁸ The discrepancy between the genders was mostly attributed by the research team to having difficulty speaking with women in the local market or bazaar without causing problems. Additionally, there are generally more men than women available and willing to speak in public spaces.

“somewhat” agreed. All of those who were interviewed said that they strongly agreed that they should pursue higher degree, that number dropped to only 27 for female students pursuing a higher degree. This difference is less than anticipated, which is a positive sign. The same cobbler in Nangarhar discussed above, also strongly disagreed that women should pursue a higher education. One business man in Kandahar somewhat disagreed, and two male, one from Kabul and one from Kandahar, said that they only somewhat agree that women should pursue a higher degree. In general, the only common denominator that arose amongst those who did not strongly agree that women should have equal access to education, that women should attend university, or that women have the right to work outside the home is that their average age was slightly above that of the sample at 37.6 years of age as compared to 30.4 years of age and all were male.

The assessment team also asked these 31 individuals about whether men and women have the right to work outside the home. All of the respondents said that men have the right to work outside the home and most of the respondents (26) said that they strongly agreed that women have the right to work outside the home. The number of individuals who strongly disagreed with this was slightly elevated as compared to the question regarding pursuing a higher degree, with three men indicating that they strongly disagreed that women have the right to work outside their homes. This seems to indicate that while an individual might value education; this is not directly related to their understanding of women’s rights in terms of working outside of the home. More assessment is needed to understand how wide spread these divergent opinions are in general. Two male said that they somewhat agree that women have the right to work outside of their home, provided or conditional to their family’s agreement only.

It is interesting to note that in general both men and women support higher education for both male and female and believe that they have the right to work outside their homes. This positive response could be partially attributed to the urban environment/areas in which the street interviews were conducted, and we would suggest further research be conducted to verify if these positive sentiments reach further into rural areas or into those not in urban public spaces or if it is limited to individuals who have the freedom to walk in urban centers.

Perceived Benefits of Female Students Pursuing Higher Education

During the KII’s and FGD’s, we asked individuals if they felt it was important for women to attend university. Every individual who participated in our assessment at the university level and within the ministries and development staff said yes, they do believe it is important. This accounts for over 290 individuals from seven different provinces.

When asked to explain why it was important for women to attend university, the assessment team encountered a myriad of responses, some of which overlapped and almost all of which were agreed upon across both genders. The seven most common responses were mutual amongst university faculty and staff, students, and non-students, with parents having five out of the seven in their most common responses also. This coherence in responses is interesting to note and encouraging, as it provides agreed upon benefits of higher education for women that can be used in information campaigns.

The most common response cited by over half of all respondents was that women should attend university because they make up half of the society. For some this was followed by ‘a logical explanation’ that university educated women are needed to help develop the country. The third most commonly mentioned reason was that women who are educated make better mothers, which is something that even the most conservative members of the country believe is important. Additionally, people said that women should pursue a higher degree simply because it is their right to do so, which was strongly connected to the idea that women have the same needs as men, and therefore, should have the same desires for higher education. The practical need for female doctors, nurses, and teachers to assist the female population is because women are often not allowed to be treated by a male doctors or nurses or to be taught by a male teacher in Afghanistan, was commonly stated. An increase in female doctors, nurses, and teachers can help to keep women healthier and provide them with increased knowledge and support. Finally, the seventh most common answer relates to the holy religion of Islam, which dominates Afghanistan. Many respondents told the assessment team that it is farz or one’s duty, as a Muslim to be educated, whether you are male or female.

There were only a few ways in which different groups answered differently. Female were more likely to say that women should go to university in order to ensure their economic or financial security. Some women said that they could contribute to the household income, while others focused on economic independence for the female students. Parents also focused more on the perceived economic benefits that could stem out to their daughters and to themselves if their daughters attended university. Men were more likely to raise farz, and the idea that both genders should be pursuing an education in alignment with the teachings of Islam.

These top reasons for why it is important for women to pursue a university degree could be used in future media campaigns to support encouragement of women’s education and building on beliefs that are already held by a part of the population. We would caution against making a strong connection between education and financial gains, however, as a higher degree is not a

guarantee of a well-paying job, though it definitely improves ones chances of being hired for such a position.

Perceived Barriers to Women Pursuing a Higher Degree in Afghanistan

There was a great deal of agreement among the university administrators, students, non-students, parents, ministry officials, and development workers involved in higher education regarding the barriers women were encountering in trying to obtain a tertiary education. The top five reasons that people believe act as barriers in obtaining higher education for women in Afghanistan include: lack of security, economic problems, the Kankor Examination, families not allowing their daughters to attend, and cultural problems. Each of these was mentioned by over 100 respondents. Following these top five barriers were six more that were generally agreed upon, though with lesser frequency. Lack of transportation, early marriage, low quality of primary and secondary education, an anti-education mindset of the society or specific sectors of the society, negative ramifications on a family's reputation, and the belief that co-education was not acceptable, were all mentioned by the respondents, across each of the provinces where assessment was conducted.

As we can observe, these categories contain overlaps and connections. A lack of security is seen as contributing to families not allowing their daughters to pursue higher education and is a reason why transportation for women to safely reach the university and back home on a daily basis is considered to be of high importance. The concerns over the quality of education being obtained by girls in primary and secondary education is linked to the belief that girls are not prepared for the Kankor Examination academically, which is preventing girls from moving forward with their education after high school. Cultural problems, though rarely elaborated upon by the respondents, appeared to be connected to the anti-education sentiments of certain sectors of society; of concerns for the separation of male and female students; early marriage; and to the negative reputation that can be attached to a family for allowing their daughter(s) to attend university.

In total, over 30 diverse barriers were provided by the individuals who participated in the assessment. This indicates that increasing the number of female students pursuing a tertiary degree is a complex endeavor and that in all probability multiple diverse efforts will need to be made to relieve or lessen some of these barriers. This will take time and patience and can be done through trial and error.

Security

Lack of security was perceived to be the number one barrier preventing women from pursuing a higher degree in Afghanistan for both male and female respondents. Though it was not the number one response for university administrators but it was the number one response for both male and female students, male and female non-students, and male parents.

The fighting that continues between Afghan and international forces against anti-government elements has impacted negatively on women's education both in areas of heavy fighting and areas where fighting is not as frequent. Families fear their daughters being harassed, kidnapped, and otherwise endangered, with most expressing fears about problems occurring during the women's travel to and from the university.

This sentiment is supported by the fact that universities situated in locations that are generally experiencing lower threat levels and lower levels of regular or frequent fighting, have a higher percentage of female in their student body. For example, Herat has a student body that is 31.2% female, Badakhshan has a student population that is 27.6% female, and Kabul has a student population that is 27.4% female. While these provinces have experienced anti-government element (AGE) activities, they have been much lower than in Kandahar - where only 3.7% of the student population is female, or Nangarhar - where only 2.9% of the student population is female.

While the large number of different barriers provided to the assessment team via an open-ended questioning process indicates that there is no single answer to increase the number of female students pursuing a university education, a lack of security is one of the larger barriers but it is also one of the most complicated one to address.

Economics

The economic pressures of sending a child, especially a female child, to pursue a university degree was the second most often mentioned barrier after security and this was said for both public and private universities. Following the national Constitution, Afghan public universities do not charge a tuition fee to students. Additionally, the government covers the costs of housing for students in universities with hostels. If the space is not adequate in the hostels for all students seeking housing, the government provides them with 1,800 Afghani per month to cover housing costs.

Despite this government support, there are still many costs that parents and students associate with attending university, including but not limited to: transportation costs, the purchasing of reading materials, stationary, clothing, and communication costs. Though the hostels most often provide food for the students, in some areas such as Bamiyan, the students need to subsidize this food with their own funds as the food provided is reportedly not adequate.

In Bamiyan the estimated costs of supporting a student through one year of higher education ranged from an estimated 20,000 Afghani to 30,000 Afghani. In Balkh, the parents estimated that it cost them 20,000 Afghani annually to send one child to public university. In Herat, the parents estimated that a year of a public university cost a family 12,000 Afghani (mentioned by the mothers) to 25,000 Afghani (mentioned by the fathers). The fathers, in this case included special courses in their calculation, which while unspecified most likely refers to additional courses in English language or in computer training. In Kabul, parents estimated that it cost them 20,000 Afghani (mothers) up to 30,000 Afghani (fathers) to send their children to university each year. In Nangarhar the students provided the highest estimates of what it costs to attend university for a year, ranging from 49,500 Afghani to 58,500 Afghani for reading materials and food alone. This was mentioned by the female students staying at the University dormitory and these girls were from all over Afghanistan, as far away as Badakhshan. The parents in Nangarhar provided annual estimates that were more in alignment with the other provinces, saying that it cost around 30,000 Afghani to 36,000 Afghani annually.

Some students work part-time to support themselves, most often at a local school or with an NGO (in Bamiyan), though this number is limited. In Balkh, the students estimated that about 5% of female students and 20% of male students were working to support their pursuit of higher education. In Kabul, the parents estimated that 90% of students' families were paying for their education. In Kandahar, most male students reported that their families supported them but that they knew a few students who supported themselves. However, the female students in Kandahar believe that almost 50% of the students are paying for their own education.

Most students, however, rely on their families to provide the necessary funds. This can mean that the money comes from their father, mother (if she is the head of household), a brother or sometimes even an uncle or other extended family members. This can put enormous strains on the economic resources of families in a country such as Afghanistan where the salaries are very low. There are of course families who do not have trouble funding their children's pursuit of a higher degree but there are many families who have struggled to do so, including some of the parents we spoke with. Many parents expressed the thought that they felt responsible for

encouraging their children to pursue a higher degree and responsible for supporting them financially. In Nangarhar, one family told us that they had put off buying a home in order to put their children through university. One father in Nangarhar told the assessment team, “I accept all the difficulties for my children to study”.

While some families were able to pay for these costs with their full-time job, others took on additional part-time work to pay the costs associated with pursuing a university degree and others had to make additional sacrifices. A number of parents said that families sometimes sold their family jewelry (Bamiyan and Balkh) in order to help pay the costs of pursuing a university degree and other families had been forced to take loans from banks and from money lenders. One mother narrated how she used all of the money she earned making handicrafts to send her children to university. Mothers in Badakhshan testified that their families did not buy new clothes or participate in functions where they would have to buy gifts, such as weddings and other celebrations in their community, in order to support their child’s education. Mothers in Kabul also talked about not buying new clothes and having to take out personal loans from neighbors or family. Parents in Kandahar told the assessment team that some families relocated from their villages in order to provide their children with access to better education in the city, which also can be expensive.

The costs associated with private university are even higher with tuition costing 60,000 Afghani and above in Kabul without transportation, books and food. Tuition costs 32,000 Afghani annually in Badakhshan. Fathers who participated in a FGD informed the assessment team that it cost more than 70,000 Afghani for one year of higher education at a private university. A private university degree in Herat appears to be more expensive, at least as quantified by parents there with the annual tuition costing 34,000 Afghani, and parents estimating that the total costs reach between 68,000 Afghani, to 100,000 Afghani for one year of private university, including all costs. Parents in Kandahar estimated that a private university education costs between 20,000 Afghani to 50,000 Afghani per year. Private university in Nangarhar is estimated to cost a total of 100,000 Afghani per year including tuition, pocket money, book money, etc.

Unlike many other countries, scholarships for students’ undergraduate studies in country are not common. Only in Bamiyan did one mother tell us that her daughter was receiving some support from a local NGO for her university costs. Almost all the scholarships that are available for students are for studying abroad, which is an opportunity that is not very common, leaving those who remain in Afghanistan with economic hurdles to overcome in order to get a tertiary

degree.

Kankor Exams

The Kankor Examination is the national entrance exam for universities in Afghanistan. The first step in pursuing a higher education in Afghanistan following high school graduation, is registering for and taking this test. The test is held one time per year and each student is able to take the test up to three times to try to obtain the scores necessary to enter into the faculty of their choice. After this, however, they must either attend a faculty that will accept their scores or give up pursuing a higher education in Afghanistan's Public Universities.

An individual's test score determines which faculty of study they are eligible for. Each faculty sets its own minimum score limit and anyone over the score is eligible to join that faculty. This arrangement was often cited as a reason that individuals, especially girls, were not pursuing higher education or had dropped out.

Many students and their parent's wishes are focused on opting for and studying medicine or engineering, both of which require high Kankor scores for entry. When students do not obtain the necessary scores, they must enter into a different faculty or try to take the test again in the following year if they have not already taken the test two times before. For example, a student needs a score above 300 to enter into the faculty of Medicine but only a score of 200 to 260 for the faculties of Education and Agriculture, respectively. Students attaining less than 100 points are not accepted by any faculty.

According to a Deputy Minister of the MoHE, 66,800 male students and 16,237 female students took the Kankor Examination in 2009, which means that 19.6% of those who took the test were female. In 2002, only 1,000 women took the Kankor Examination out of an estimated 8,000 students in total, which shows how quickly and drastically demand for higher education has been growing among the female population.⁷⁹ In 2009, only 34,543 male students and 10,763 female students passed the examination.

The Kankor Examination was mentioned as the third most common barrier, when the assessment teams asked what the main barriers to female higher education were in Afghanistan when both males and females were taken together Overall this was fourth for all

⁷⁹ (IRIN 2002)

male who responded, but second one for the female. For female parents, it was the number one most mentioned barrier. The university administration and faculty felt that it was definitely a contributing factor with it being the fourth most mentioned amongst male and the fifth most mentioned amongst the female interviewed at the university.

A number of the heads of the universities felt that the entrance exams were also a contributing reason to some of the drop-outs from their schools. They told the assessment team that those students who have already taken the exam three times or who decided not to try taking the exam again, sometimes enter one of the faculties in which their scores are acceptable. This situation is seen as one of the main reasons for male students to drop out of the university according to university administration and professors. These students often start off in their second choice faculty but soon grow bored with the topic and decide that it is best not to pursue their higher education. Female students also seem to be suffering from the same fate though not as often. There is a sense that female students, once they make it to the university, are very determined to stay and complete their degrees - be it their first choice faculty or not.

However, many of the female non-students we spoke with said that not getting into their faculty of choice was the main reason they were not ready to pursue higher education. The majority of them had decided to delay attending university and take the Kankor Examination the following year in the hopes of performing well enough to get into their faculty of choice.

Some women, discouraged by the lack of success of other female high school graduates to get into the faculty of their choice, do not even try to take the test themselves convinced that they too will not succeed.

In recognition of the impediments placed in the path of women trying to pass the Kankor Examination, the MoE has provided aids such as preparatory courses and entry exams and they have published and distributed 100,000 books on how to pass the entry exam. These have also been replicated into a CD. Additionally, students in insecure and remote provinces receive additional points on their examination. We were told that students in Bamiyan, Nangarhar and Kandahar were awarded with 15 extra points if they are male and 20 extra points if they are female.

The women of Badakhshan felt that their lack of access to Kankor Examination preparatory class had contributed to their not performing well enough in the exam. This was not only experienced in Badakhshan, but also in most of the other provinces. As was mentioned by both

male and female students and non-students, boys have greater and easier access to such courses as they have a greater amount of freedom of movement to attend such classes, while most women were restricted from attending such courses as their families were not certain of the security their daughter to send them to these classes and there were no gender segregated courses available. To add to this, all such classes or courses are an additional expense that many families cannot afford to pay. The four female non-students in Herat told the assessment team that many families put a great deal of pressure on their daughters in particular, to go to the medical faculty, and if they do not obtain the necessary score for medicine their families no longer support their pursuit of higher education, preventing them from attending other faculties which their scores allowed them to enroll in.

The female non-students in Nangarhar told the assessment team that they felt they had been unfairly treated in the examination. They said that it had been held earlier than usual which meant that they were not prepared. They told us that they felt that MoHE did not want people from Nangarhar to succeed - "especially the girls." They continued to describe the individuals from the MoHE who came to check the exams as discouraging and unprofessional and they felt that they had scared the people in the province. While we were unable to corroborate this information, it is an important reminder that information about the examination schedules should be provided well in advance of the examination and that perhaps MoHE staff should receive more gender sensitivity training before providing and checking the exam to ensure that they are properly representing the ministry and its desire for all students to have a fair chance at pursuing higher education, especially women.

While the students and non-students believe the lack of access to preparatory courses is causing a disadvantage for girls, the exam results from 2009 disaggregated by gender do not support this theory. A larger percentage of the females who took the exam passed, 66.3%, than the percentage of boys, 51.7%. Unfortunately, no detailed information regarding who passed and who participated in a preparatory course was gathered but this data does appear to indicate that female success rates are not lower due to a lack of access to preparatory classes. Women did relatively well in their exams.

Almost all of the female non-students the assessment team spoke with said that if they did not have the barriers that they face, they would be pursuing higher education. While all of the non-students we spoke with were high school graduates, unlike most individuals at their age they provide some insights into the barriers that even those who managed to obtain both a primary and secondary education face. Though we must also take into consideration the many students,

especially female students, who are not attending tertiary education because their educations were cut off at a prior level or they never received any formal education. While we can comfortably state that those non-students we spoke with were hopeful that they could continue their education and were doing everything in their power to make that happen. The level of enthusiasm for higher education amongst those whose educational opportunities were cut short was not as clear to the assessment team. This is an area where we would recommend further assessment to understand how great the level of interest in higher education is for those children in primary and secondary schools and for those out of school in both rural and urban areas. The female non-students in Kandahar said that they believed that only 30% of girls want to pursue a higher degree and that 80% of those girls are from in or around Kandahar city, indicating that they believe there is a stronger pull towards higher education in the urban areas as compared to rural areas.

Previous Education

The chain of education that one must travel up in order to reach the university is one that many Afghan girls are unable to climb. The number of female students in primary school has risen dramatically over the last ten years, with 39.1% of the 4.7 million students attending primary school being girls but historically these rates were much lower compared to female primary school enrollment rates of 90.4% in Iran, 67% in Saudi Arabia, and 62% in Pakistan.⁸⁰ The number of girl's successfully attending secondary school has not increased as dramatically. In the most recent academic year (2009-2010), 33.0% of middle school students were female.⁸¹ The female to male ratio decreases even more at the high school level, where only 26.9 % of students were female. There were 112,417 female students enrolled in the government high schools as compared to 304,176 male students in 2009-2010.

There have been a number of studies that have looked at primary education in Afghanistan, some of which highlight the fact that it is not uncommon for those families that allow their daughters to attend primary school to pull them out when they are nearing puberty. One report found that, "Enrollment for both girls and boys appears to peak at age 11 (around 5th grade) and then steadily declines".⁸² Additionally, these enrollment numbers do not always correspond with actual attendance, as students can be kept on the class register but simply marked "permanently absent." This is allowed by the MoE policy for up to three years, after

⁸⁰ (Ayubi 2010)

⁸¹ (Islamic Republic of Afghanistan Central Statistics Office 2010: 62).

⁸² (Jackson 2011: 10)

which time the student is taken off the register.

This exodus of female students around the fourth or fifth grade is detrimental to all later rungs of the educational ladder for women. With fewer primary students, there are fewer secondary students. Add to this the increasing pressures to ensure that daughters who are approaching the age of marriage are safely secured from any contact with non-related males and the result is that there are many fewer female students graduating from high school than boys.

Additionally, there are not enough primary, secondary, or high schools to cater to all of the student-aged children of Afghanistan. As of the 2009-2010 academic year, there were only 435 high schools for females and 979 mixed gendered, with 1,060 for male students only.⁸³

Quality of Lower Education

One of the barriers to higher education for female students that was raised was the low level of education provided in the primary, secondary and high schools.

This was especially voiced by the female non-students interviewed, most of whom were prevented from pursuing their university degree because they had not succeeded in the Kankor Examination themselves, though a few had also been prevented from attending university by their families due to security concerns.

Of the 29 female non-students but high school graduates that we spoke with, 24 said that the main reason they were not pursuing higher education was that they had “failed” the Kankor Examination. This can mean that they did not even obtain the score of 100 needed to be accepted into any faculty or it can mean that they simply did not receive the score that would allow them to attend the faculty of their choice or of their family’s choice. This information was not specified in the FGD’s, but what we can extract is that women are having trouble with the Kankor Examination and are not obtaining the scores that they need to be able to continue with their education. It is encouraging, however, that almost all of these 24 women indicated that they are still interested in going to university and are studying hard to retake the Kankor Examination in the hope that they can improve their scores. This held true across all seven provinces.

There were another four female students each from a different province who had different

⁸³ (Islamic Republic of Afghanistan Central Statistics Office 2010: 63).

experiences. One was accepted into Kabul University but her uncle decided that she was not allowed to move there from Bamiyan in order to attend the university. A woman from Kandahar had been accepted by the university, but in Helmand Agriculture Faculty, which she did not want to study in. The family of another student who was accepted into university did not have the money to support her studies. Another student in Balkh had decided to forego retaking the exam and was planning on attending one of the private universities. One female had a different experience altogether, she had been accepted in Kandahar University and had attended for a few years but she was attacked with acid on her face. Following this, she took a year off and when she tried to return she was told that she had been “terminated” from university. Determined to return to school, she is actively working out the technical details to be reinstated at Kandahar University.

Cultural Issues

The fifth most commonly stated barrier was that of cultural problems. This was more commonly a response from adults than from the students themselves. Female student responses placed this only as the ninth barrier, while female university professor’s responses put this in first place.

While few people were able to articulate what these problems consisted of, the assessment team was able to tease out its meaning through their own understanding of the social environment and the other barriers that were mentioned, such as early marriage, anti-educational attitudes, and concerns about the reputation of a family being damaged, and the unacceptability of co-education. When these separately listed barriers which were seen as cultural or traditional are included cultural issues becomes the most commonly raised concern amongst all university administration and faculty, students, parents, non-students, and ministry staff, independent of gender.

It is not uncommon for men and women to marry young in Afghanistan, with an estimated 60% of all marriages involving a bride under the age of 16.⁸⁴ Traditionally, with marriage come the marital responsibilities including bearing and raising children. Therefore, very few families allow married women to continue their education - be they in high school or in university when they marry. Herat University has attempted to address one part of this cultural phenomena by providing child care services on the campus which allows the female students, faculty and staff

⁸⁴ (IRIN 2005)

to bring their children to the university with them and gives them time to pursue their work or education. Even though this action has meant that some women are free to continue their education or work at the university, for other women traditional ideas of purdah continue to prevail and their education is terminated by their husband or by his family members upon marrying. We would recommend that further research be conducted on this phenomenon to determine how widespread a problem this really is and at what level of education to conduct targeted information campaigns.

Some families that do not allow young brides to continue their education do so because they see education as unnecessary, especially for women or even damaging, believing that it goes against the teachings of Islam. This kind of thinking has been supported by selective religious leaders, especially in provinces such as Kandahar and Nangarhar, though this kind of thinking can also be found in other provinces of the country. For some, anti-educational thinking is based upon the idea that what is taught in formal schools is Western in orientation and will lead those who attend astray from the true path of Islam.

Of the people interviewed for this assessment, none expressed anti-educational ideas but they felt that others in society held them and that these people in turn had influence in communities, especially in rural areas, which leads us to the concept of reputation. The assessment team was told by individuals from each of the seven provinces that some families though they would like to send their daughters to school, felt pressured not to send them by individuals who held anti-educational views. These families believed that if they allowed their daughters to attend school that their daughters reputations would be ruined and that they would be seen as immoral and this in turn would reflect badly on the whole family. This led many families to keep their daughters at home, safe from the rumors of neighbors and relatives alike. This kind of social pressure is very hard for families to ignore as a tarnished reputation has many negative and sometimes quite dire consequences, especially in rural communities in Afghanistan where social connections are the only available social safety net.

This leads us to the last identified cultural problem, the belief that co-education is not acceptable. Again, none of the individuals that we interviewed told the assessment team that they personally felt this way, but they did emphasize that some elders and those who are more traditional in mindset believe that women should not be permitted to interact with men who they are not related to. This then entwines with the aforementioned concerns for the reputation of daughters and of their family. Some see the sharing of space between men and women from different families as sinful and against Islam and while there are likely many who

do not view the situation in this manner or who find the advantages that education can bring to be more important than the segregation of men and women, social pressure not to break societal norms is very strong especially in rural areas.

Transportation

Most students must travel to the university from their homes or from a hostel, if the hostel is not on campus. This is a concern on multiple levels. Firstly, people are concerned about student's safety as they travel to the university, especially for female students who sometimes face harassment like the female student in Kandahar who was attacked with acid or from the reports of sexual harassment towards female students in Balkh University.⁸⁵ These kinds of incidents provide a great deal of concern and worry for families and for the women themselves. Female students in Bamiyan, Balkh and Nangarhar told the assessment team of their own experiences while attending the university. The women of Nangarhar said that people wrote bad things on their hostel walls, called them brainless to their faces and accused them of not being good Muslims. In Bamiyan, the female students reported being harassed by people on the streets and within the confines of the university campus. Local boys, elders, and even male university students say bad things to them and use "bad words". The female students in Balkh said that they faced harassment from local street children, male students, police and sometimes even teachers. This kind of harassment can be difficult for women to face and can be very intimidating for their families who want to protect them and keep them safe. While the female students in Badakhshan, Herat, Kabul and Kandahar told the assessment team that they did not face harassment due to their connection to the university, whereas one female student told us about being almost a victim of an acid attack on her way to the university, showing that the universities in these towns are not entirely threat free.

Add to this the insecurity of traveling in Afghanistan that are common for all commuters and travelers, including IEDs, suicide bombers, mines, and traffic accidents and the dangers of travelling to the university are seen by some families as too high a risk. Additionally, transportation is costly, with one father in Kandahar reporting that he paid 500 Afghanis for the gasoline he needed to drop off and pick up his daughter at the university every day. He said that he did this because he could ensure that she did not face any troubles on the way to or from the university. Students in Nangarhar reported that it cost them 100 Afghani per day to travel to the university and back home.

⁸⁵(Abdulbaqi 2009)

Combining concerns about safety and the economic burden, makes transportation an issue that is focused on. While it is listed as the sixth most commonly stated barrier, however, when asked for recommendations on how to increase women's access to higher education, improving transportation was only mentioned by six women. This discrepancy is interesting and should be looked into. If transportation is truly a barrier, then it would seem wise that efforts continue to be sought on safe and secure means of transport for female students that are not cost prohibitive.

Lack of Female Professors

While lack of female professors was not highly focused on when individuals were listing the main barriers they perceive to Afghan women becoming students of higher education, it was something that FGD participants spent a good amount of time speaking about.

In Afghanistan as a whole, only 14.7% of all university level teachers in the public higher education system are female.⁸⁶ There is a general consensus that the university system needs to hire more female teachers and that the gender balance should be better.

The existence of female teachers in the university setting is seen by some administrators and professors as a way to encourage women to attend university by leading through example, and helping to ease some of the concerns that families have about their daughters entering into a male dominant environment on a daily basis. Some professors who participated in this assessment felt that having female professors would not only increase the number of female students at the university but could also have a positive impact on the amount of respect given to women in society. Professors in Herat felt that a lower number of female professors was discouraging for female students as they are inspired by living examples of possible future options for themselves. As can be seen in Table 4: Gender statistics from the seven universities", while there is no direct correlation that can be obtained from the data gathered, in general, universities with a higher percentage of female professors have a higher percentage of female students.

⁸⁶ (Islamic Republic of Afghanistan Central Statistics Office 2010: 45)

	University	Female students (% of total)	Female Professors (% of total)	Female Staff (% of total)
1.	Herat	31.2	18.5	19.6
2.	Kabul	27.4	19.3	20.1
3.	Balkh	24.1	24.0	32.5
4.	Badakhshan	13.7	10.6	1.7
5.	Bamiyan	4.5	27.6	8.1
6.	Kandahar	3.7	2.9	10.9 ⁸⁷
7.	Nangarhar	2.9	2.8	2.0

Table 4: Gender statistics from the seven universities

Lack of educational opportunities for women at all levels during the Taliban era has had negative repercussions as the higher education field is rebuilt. Female students were not allowed to pursue their education, which has resulted in a gap in educated women to take on teaching positions in institutes of higher learning. This will continue to be the case as long as general education remains unbalanced in terms of gender. The lack of female graduates was the most often listed barrier to women becoming professors in the public university system. Even women who managed to pursue a higher degree may not be eligible, as successful candidates must have held at least a 75% average at university and should not have failed any courses in order to apply to become university teachers.

Teaching positions are advertised by the MoHE through their website, radio and television programming, newspapers and via word of mouth. The professors we spoke to did not feel as though there was any great difficulty for women to hear about the positions but that the hiring process was more difficult for the women who did apply. This was not because they were treated differently during the hiring process but because they faced different social challenges than the male candidates.

Long hiring process and the difficulties women face to travel to Kabul to meet with the MoHE from their provincial homes are the main social challenges for women. In recent years, the MoHE has centralized the hiring process for public university professors. It requires all teaching candidates to travel to Kabul to partake in a competitive process, which includes test, interviews, holding a lecture and other selection activities.⁸⁸ This is often impossible for women

⁸⁷ All female staff were hired within the last year.

⁸⁸ Professors and university administration staff told the research team that previously, most of this process was done within the province, and when the university administration had selected their candidate, their paperwork would be sent to the MoHE for approval, only after this would they then be hired and officially become a university

from the provinces to do either due to family responsibilities such as children, concerns about travelling to the country's capital without a mahram, economic constraints or a woman's husband or other family members not providing her with permission to conduct such travel. The hiring process appears to be preventing some women from being able to partake in the teacher selection process.

Additionally, a problem for both genders is the low salary during the probationary year for the first year professors. After being selected by the MoHE and officially hired, the teacher is sent back to the province in which they will be assigned which does not always represent the province that they had hoped to teach in, for a one year probationary period. During this time, they are supposed to be visited and observed by experienced MoHE teachers but we were told that this was not happening very often. Their salary during this year-long period ranges from 3,000 Afghani to 3,500 Afghani, which is seen as a hardship and a barrier to becoming a professor, as few people can afford to earn so little each month for a full year.

Overall some of the aspects of the hiring process were seen as barriers to female working as professors in the university. Cultural barriers, the need for a woman to obtain her husband's permission to apply for and accept a job outside of the home, taking care of children and the fear of bringing a bad reputation upon one's family for working in the university all contribute to the lower number of women working in the universities as professors.

What is seen as an additional barrier for women in becoming teachers of higher education is their lack of access to graduate and post-graduate level of studies. While there are scholarships available for women to continue their education abroad, very few are able to travel internationally to obtain such degrees. Most women are restricted from travelling due to the reasons provided above. There have been a few scholarships to Bangladesh and India, which have allowed Afghan women to travel to these locations with their children, which is seen as a solution by some university administrators but does not address the cultural and familial concerns about women travelling on their own. The lower qualifications of female professors already in the system means that there are few, if any female lecturers who are at the higher levels, which is seen as problematic by international donors and ministry staff alike.

The lack of post-BA educational possibilities for women in Afghanistan is also limiting their opportunities to become university professors. As was said before, the number of professors

professor.

with higher degrees above the BA level is not as high as the MoHE would like and this is especially true for women since their opportunities are more limited.

The female professors that we spoke with had mostly positive things to say about their working environment. They said that they felt they were treated equally to their male counterparts, with the exception of Bamiyan University where the female professors said that men were provided with housing and transportation while they had been provided with neither. The assessment team was unable to independently verify this claim. The women of Herat were appreciative of the university's effort to provide them with childcare which allowed them to spend more time at the office. In general, the universities were working on spreading the word about faculty openings and trying to encourage women to apply. The university administration members told the assessment team that they were trying to create a good working environment for women though they did not provide detailed examples of how they were doing this. The female professors reported only rare experiences of harassment at the university, though in Kandahar they were sometimes bothered outside of the campus because of their association with the university.

The universities participated at different levels for encouragement of female professors. While the university administrators at Balkh University said that they were not making any special efforts to encourage more women to apply as professors because they believe that they are already successful in this arena with females making up to 24.0% of their teaching staff, all of the other universities indicated that they have been working to encourage more women to apply. However, other universities such as Bamiyan were working on ways to provide female professors with additional trainings and workshops.

Additional Barriers

Additional barriers that were not mentioned as often can still be real barriers that should be taken into consideration and addressed. Some students told us that it was not uncommon for families to prioritize the education of their sons over their daughters because their economic situation does not allow them to support both and boys are seen as needing the education more than girls, as they will be responsible for supporting their own family. Some female students, especially in Kandahar, pointed out that most women they knew were simply not interested in pursuing a higher degree, whether that is due to lack of information; lack of desire; fear of reputational harm; or any other factor; it is something that should be researched and addressed in information campaigns. A number of mothers talked about how lack of "proper" and "safe" hostel was a barrier for girls accessing higher education. A few students,

university staff and fathers said that they thought the lack of child care available at the university was preventing women from attending, as they had to stay home to take care of their children. Finally, the lack of appropriate opportunities for post-graduation for women was also raised. Though this was only said by a few university and ministry staff, it is still an important factor that could be added to an information campaign. While education in itself is important, providing information about how it can benefit individual, their family and their country could help encourage more families to support their daughters in pursuing higher education.

Chapter 5: Recommendations

The participants in this assessment project provided the assessment team with many suggestions for how to improve female access to higher education in Afghanistan. Their responses varied from structural changes to the education system as a whole to cultural changes in the society. Ideas concerning incentives, affirmative action steps and other means of making women and their families more comfortable with the idea of attending an Afghan university were shared, agreed upon and even argued over in the interviews and focus group discussions conducted. The following recommendations take these suggestions into consideration and try to step back and provide a larger perspective on the feasibility of their implementation in the current environment. For a full listing of respondent recommendations.

Information Campaign

The most often voiced recommendation for how to improve women's access and participation in higher education was to implement an education information campaign throughout the country. Individuals from each of the seven provinces and from all categories of people felt that the country needs programs that help families and communities to better understand the importance of education in general and higher education in particular. It was also seen as necessary to help ease some of the concerns that are perpetuated in Afghanistan that education stands in opposition to Islam or that only woman of loose morals would pursue higher education. An official at the MoHE said that the most important way to encourage female students to pursue a higher degree would be to "enlighten the minds of our people". The university administration and faculty suggested that the awareness programs for higher education should take place within the high schools, while ministry staff and parents thought that conducting such programs inside rural communities would be the most effective. It is hoped that conducting such information campaigns can help to ease some of the cultural conflicts regarding women attending university and obtaining a higher degree.

We believe strongly that different ministries should continue to work together to produce a comprehensive and lasting campaign that utilizes some of the beliefs expressed by parents, students and others about the benefits of higher education for women, and that targeted messages should be broadcast widely. Understanding that Afghanistan is a large country with limited literacy levels, we would suggest that the ministries concentrate on radio programs, like those done for national programs such as the National Solidarity Programme (NSP). Radio programs can have a greater reach than print efforts or traveling to each community, though one on one contact is often the most persuasive. Another means of communicating a positive

understanding of higher education for women which has been utilized in civic education programs for voting and for health information is to utilize mobile theatre. Mobile theatre is conducted by a number of development actors and they have reported great success with such efforts. By enveloping their messages in a storyline that is entertaining and provides some levity for a community, the message can sometimes be more easily absorbed than when transmitted via other means.

We would suggest that personal success stories of university graduates, both male and female, be presented and that the belief that it is “farz” for both men and women to become educated should be emphasized. A fair number of individuals suggested that local mullahs be involved in some campaigns, which could require a separate campaign to educate the mullahs themselves on the different benefits and the possible positive impacts having more university educated women could have on the country as a whole, within families, and within communities. This was raised by individuals from the university, students, non-students, and parents. Some individuals told the assessment team that Islam was sometimes used as an excuse to prevent women from going to school and that they thought this image or understanding of Islam needed to be adjusted, but the people who hold these beliefs would need to be convinced of the importance of education from an Islamic perspective.

This campaign could choose to look at the top seven more commonly mentioned benefits or reasons why women should have access to higher education, or other reasons as they suit the local operating environment. The top seven benefits found in this assessment include: women form half of the society and they need to be educated to create balance; educated women will help to develop the country; educated women make strong mothers and produce healthier children; women have the right to education; female nurses, doctors, and teachers are needed and only educated women can fulfill these needs; women have the same needs as men and this includes higher education; and pursuing education is required of both men and women within Islam (farz).

Additionally, we would recommend that university administrations, staff and teachers be required to participate in gender workshops. In order to create a comfortable environment for female students and professors, there must be a greater understanding of what gender equality means and what discrimination looks like. These people are the face of the university and they should be supportive of women being involved at all levels of the university, which while occurring in some universities is not taking place in all. In one province, a female professor told the assessment team, “On one hand our director is a good person and supportive in some cases

but him being a university chancellor has still a very negative mind. Sometimes he even says that females are not able to work in some positions, because being a female they cannot face high level people in difficult situations or crowds of male students". As one can see, the opinions expressed were not helping to create gender equity.

We would also recommend that gender sensitivity training be conducted and evaluated within the MoE, MoHE and the Universities, as they need to be made aware of the different goals and objectives related to gender equity and equality, and perhaps also need to be provided with information that they can share when confronted with those who oppose access to higher education for Afghan females. If they are armed with information and are operating in gender sensitive ways, this can help the cause of increasing access to higher education for all women in Afghanistan. This is further explored below.

Security

Though only the eighth most commonly provided recommendation i.e., improving the security is vital to increasing the number of women attending university. We believe it was not mentioned more often because it is an issue that many Afghans feel nearly impossible to address. Increased security would allow many parents to send their children to primary and secondary school without fear for their safety. Without graduates from primary school there are no secondary school students and the same can be said for secondary school and university.

The MoE has been working on increasing the number of students in primary and secondary schools and has seen a great deal of success since 2002, when they launched the 'Back to School' campaign. The number of children in school has gone from an estimated 900,000 in 2002 to 6.7 million in 2009.⁸⁹ Jackson wrote that, "For girls, the increase has been even more dramatic: official enrollment figures have increased from an estimated 5,000 under the Taliban to 2.4 million girls currently enrolled".⁹⁰ These gains are threatened by the threats students face while walking to school. They fear kidnapping, being attacked with acid, IEDs, and suicide bombings. Families are afraid for the health and lives of their children, especially for their female children who are often seen as needing more protection from external threats. Removing their fear would not result in all student-aged children attending school because we have seen there are numerous different factors involved in families' decisions to send their children to school, but it would remove one of the larger barriers.

⁸⁹ (Jackson 2011)

⁹⁰ (Jackson 2011: 4)

However, it must be noted that this is a very difficult recommendation to follow, which is recognized by the assessment team. Attempts to increase security in the country have been ongoing since the fall of the Taliban in 2001, yet recent years have shown decreasing levels of security throughout the country. It is hoped that through communication campaigns, greater security for students can be created as communities begin to value education more highly and proudly.

Examination Preparatory Courses

Creating culturally appropriate and acceptable examination preparatory classes was the second most often mentioned recommendation, especially common among students and non-students. However, as was pointed out previously, in terms of success rates on the examination, women are outperforming men even without examination preparatory classes, with over 60% of women succeeding as compared to the males' rate of success that is just over 50%. This does not mean that we discourage increasing the preparatory classes available for women, which we believe can only be seen as a means of encouraging women and supporting them but it does lead us to believe that if there are limited resources to commit to increasing female participation in higher education, then perhaps this should not be the first response prioritized.

We do recommend that the MoHE ensure that its staff participates in a number of gender workshops or trainings to associate themselves with the ministries goals regarding female participation in higher education. It is hoped that these kinds of trainings and workshops can provide them with information that will make them advocate for women in higher education and can help them present an encouraging face of the ministry to the public and especially to women who are hoping to pursue a higher degree.

We also suggest that the MoHE establish a concrete schedule for the exam in the different provinces and that this schedule be advertised well in advance or even have an annual date on which the exam is held in each location, to ensure that students are aware of the test dates well in advance of the actual tests. This will allow them enough time to prepare themselves for the test which is something that some non-students felt they had been deprived of.

Incentive and Support Programs

The third most commonly suggested recommendation was to implement a policy of affirmative action for women within the university system. While the people from the universities did not

provide a great deal of detail regarding how they saw this happening, a few did mention that women should be receiving more points on the Kankor Examinations to provide them the opportunity to attend university. A few university heads told us that this was already happening, which is in alignment with the stated goals of the NAPWA. For example, we were told in Bamiyan that male students taking the Kankor Examination get an extra fifteen points while female students get an extra 20 points. The same was said in Nangarhar and Kandahar.

Some individuals felt that providing additional incentives to female students could improve the number of women enrolled in university programs. This could include a small stipend, as was previously provided to all university students in Najibullah's time, which could cover at a minimum, transportation costs. A number of parents told the assessment team that the government should be working on programs that provide good jobs to university graduates, especially women, believing that this will inspire other families to make the necessary sacrifices to send their children to university as they would have evidence of tangible benefits that would stem from their sacrifices. This was the ninth most commonly provided recommendation.

While the assessment team believes that incentive programs could have a positive impact on the lives of the women currently attending university, we are not certain that all of the above mentioned incentives and support will make a drastic shift in the number of women pursuing a university degree in the long run. These programs could help a small number of people whose only obstacles to higher education are financial or logistical, and will likely produce a temporary spike in women working to pursue a higher degree, but it will not help the many women who have not been able to complete a full round of primary and secondary education. Nor it is likely to change the minds of those who believe that education for women is unnecessary or even dangerous. These incentives should not be ignored but we would recommend that other programs be prioritized as we believe they are likely to have a stronger, albeit, possibly only over the long term, impact on women's access to higher education.

One additional support program that would be inexpensive and easy to implement would be a university student pairing program, where the university could pair older female students with younger female students to help them learn how to navigate in the university when they arrive or even prior to arrival. Perhaps those universities that provide tours for the parents of possible female students could also meet with current female students to show them examples of other women who have successfully attended the university.

Changes to the University System

A number of recommendations from the KII's and FGD are focused on the university system as a whole. Some felt that creating separate faculties and/or universities for men and women could help make it more socially acceptable for women to gain access to higher education. Some people believe that co-education is not acceptable and this is the main motivation for them working against women obtaining higher degrees. Others, however, disagree with this and believe that creating separate facilities would only help solidify what they see as antiquated beliefs.

While separation of men and women is not common at the tertiary level in most parts of the world, one can find universities that only serve women even in the United States. While these all female universities have had great success, one must remember that separate but equal is very difficult to sincerely accomplish and with the limited resources of the MoHE and the available human capital of the teachers in country, we believe that the women and men of Afghanistan would be better served by using those resources to increase the quality of the university system as it stands and not trying to create a parallel system, especially as co-education was not amongst the top five barriers listed by the respondents. For such a drastic change to the education system, it requires a great deal of thought, debate, and discussion.

However, we would encourage the MoHE in supporting the expansion of the university system to allow more students throughout the country the opportunity to pursue a higher degree from a location that is more convenient for them, especially for women for whom traveling to and living in other provinces can prevent them from pursuing a higher degree. Increased universities and/or faculties would allow for more students to obtain a higher degree without having to leave the country.

In a similar vein, we would encourage all efforts to increase the number of female teachers at the university level. There is a general sense that universities with female teachers are seen as more acceptable locations for the young women of Afghanistan to spend their time. "Female professors encourage women to study and to exchange ideas and not be afraid of their male counterparts," explained one female professor from Badakhshan. It also provides those women with role models to look up to. We also believe that all efforts to create spaces that are open to and inviting for women on university campuses should continue, be that the completion of building of female hostels or the building of female toilets, prayers rooms, and dining rooms. Establishing such spaces shows a level of cultural sensitivity in a country where purdah is still maintained in many households. It also provides women with a refuge. A staff member of HEP

also said that they believe the government should increase the number of hostels and scholarships serving women and that preference or priority should be allotted to those who are moving the greatest distance by assisting them to move to other provinces.

We also recommend the following:

- Allotment of scholarships to female students in Kabul and the provinces
- Establishment of a stronger curriculum
- Support from the MoHE for the existing Gender Departments in the universities that have them and establishing Gender Departments in those universities that do not yet have them
- Gender Equality and a Gender Mainstreaming Policy at all levels

Changes to the General Education System

Though slightly beyond the scope of this assessment, it was often commented upon that the low quality of the primary and secondary education systems were resulting in fewer high school graduates who were prepared for the university entrance examination. Many students, especially female students, do not even make it through primary school, much less secondary school.

The MoE is working to improve access to and the quality of primary and secondary education which will go a long way to providing a pool of female applicants ready to move on to tertiary educational opportunities. We would recommend that such efforts continue to be made and that development funding remain committed to improving an education system that is stretched very thin.

Coordination

Efforts to increase female access to higher education need to be coordinated amongst the different stakeholders, including the MoE, MoHE, MoWA and funders and implementers of development projects. Everyone should share their efforts and experiences, both successful and unsuccessful ones, so that everyone learns from each other's experience. Representatives of UNESCO emphasized this during their interview, saying that they believe that if donors cooperate with one another and the ministries, things would improve.

Greater coordination and communication appears to be needed within universities and between the universities and the MoHE itself. This will help ensure that universities are helping the ministry reach its gender goals and also it will mean that universities receive information in a timely manner from the ministry, for example, allowing their professors the needed time to apply for scholarships.

Conclusions

Increasing the number of female university graduates is necessarily going to require a long-term commitment to expanding women's educational possibilities at the primary, secondary, and tertiary levels. The MoE is committed to increasing the quality of instruction at the lower levels, which should have a positive impact on the number of students who are prepared to succeed on the university entrance examination and who are prepared to succeed in a university setting. Efforts such as these are going to make the big differences in the long-term and should be given priority over short-term impact projects.

Afghan women and men have shown the assessment team that there is a great deal of regard and guidance to individuals with higher education, and this indicates that there is a large demand for education that can be met if this enthusiasm is allowed to be expressed and does not need to be repressed due to cultural restraints imposed by others. The more women that obtain a higher degree now, the more possibilities there will be for women in the future. Our assessment shows that educated men and women all said that they would support their own children's' education because they wanted them to have the opportunities that they were provided with.

Some people we spoke with in the different ministries and the funders/implementers expressed concern over the rapidly increasing number of private universities and institutions of higher learning that have been blooming in Kabul and in other cities in Afghanistan. Their concerns regarding the quality of education provided at such institutions is valid and all efforts should be made to ensure good quality, perhaps with a certification program. However, we believe that this rise in private higher education opportunities is a positive sign as it indicates an increasing demand for higher education within the country and increasing opportunities for people to pursue that dream. We believe that every Afghan deserves to have access to a quality higher education in the country's own borders.

The main objective and focus should be on the students and what will work for them. It should be noted, however, that each program implemented should be monitored closely as different environments will produce different results. What is a major barrier in Badakhshan might be but a slight annoyance in Balkh, or vice versa.

Despite women only currently representing 19.9% of all university students in Afghanistan as of 2009-2010, we believe that this can be improved upon. The current trend of increasing

numbers of girls applying for the Kankor Examination and for university is a testament to the understanding that higher education can play a positive and crucial role in helping an individual to lead a better life, as was stated by many parents and is believed to contribute towards building a stronger and more developed Afghanistan.

While many barriers prevent women from pursuing a higher degree are complex and can sometimes be compelling, long-term planning and programs can help to ease these barriers and provide the social space, logistical support and incentives to provide Afghan women access to tertiary education.

There is a growing wave of support for women's education in the country which can and should be supported by all education stakeholders, from the primary through tertiary level.

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