

# **Institutional Embeddedness of Gender Equality and Quality Education in Afghanistan: A Case of Higher Education Institutes in Kabul**

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## **Abstract**

The emergency of “gender equality” has been a repercussion of feminism movement back in 1980s. Subsequently, it has been a prime consideration in all disciplines with quality education in particular. Diverse definitions of quality education have been surfacing in literature and highlight the embeddedness of gender equality in dimensions and spheres of quality. As a matter of global concern and Sustainability Development Goals (SDG), both gender equality and quality education underpin uniform prominence. Most importantly, Afghanistan as an underdeveloped country lacks research work and practical implementation of SDGs with discrete emphasis on women empowerment and educational standards. This article, therefore, attempts to explore the institutional embeddedness of gender equality and quality education in Afghanistan. It furnishes an in-depth analysis of the institutional intersection of both areas in general, and experiences of quality education in the gendered lives of lecturers and students in particular. Followed by a critical review of literature, researchers have conducted semi-structured interviews from a number of lecturers and students in higher education institutes operating in Kabul, Afghanistan. This will spur the perspicacity of gendered challenges endured by both lecturers and students in terms of quality education in Afghanistan.

**Keywords:** Sustainable Development Goals, Women Empowerment, Quality Education, Gender Equality, Afghanistan.

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## **Introduction**

Multitudinous theoretical studies highlight the importance of equality from last three decades; however, it has merely resulted in a contrasting perception of equality. Lynch and Baker (2005) associate equality with “equality of condition” that reflects uniformity in the access to the fundamental necessities of life among people. Equality denotes five aspects in terms of equality of resources, respect and acceptance, consensus, power, employment and education. Equality of resources, in specific, not only refers to fair distribution of economic aspects but also highlights social and cultural amalgamations as education. Quality of education involves both informal learning and formal learning in educational organizations (Baker et al., 2004). This paper however, specifically highlights equality of education in the formal and higher educational institutes in the context of women and their challenges in Afghanistan.

## **Literature Review**

Education functions as an integral element in empowering people to distinguish good from bad and make prudent life decisions. However, it does not have equal existence across various genders. Women tend to experience gender inequality rather intensely compared to their male counterparts. Such inequality exists in acquiring education as well.

### **1. Quality Education**

The term “equality in education” refers to equal and fair access towards education and its sources (Lynch & John Baker, 2005). The notion of “access to education” reverts to the 19<sup>th</sup> century in the European countries as well as United States of America where mandatory education was proposed (Ghandani et al., 2007). However, the means of access to education are not equitable across distinct economic and socio-cultural aspects. In as much as, distribution of economic resources determines the ability to acquire education, lack of gender equality also plays an important role.

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were embraced on September 25, 2015. They aspire to achieve the Millennium Development Goals of ending poverty, preserving planet ensuring everyone’s prosperity (UN, 2018). The focal point for these goals are people, planet, prosperity, peace and partnership (UN, 2015).

In Afghanistan, the persistent war for more than 30 years disintegrated almost all its sectors with specific damage to education. It led to the migration of educated and working Afghans to other countries resulting in brain drain and leaving behind a veil of ignorance (Mashwani, 2017). Unfortunately, political instability of Afghanistan further hindered achievement of higher education mainly in case of women after the end of Najibullah's communist government in 1992 (EPD, 2011). At the time of Mujahideen from 1992 to 1996, access to higher education was restricted. It further worsened with the arrival of Taliban regime from 1996 to 2001. During that period, women's education was entirely disallowed. It resulted in the deprivation of Afghan women from education as a basic human right. It was only after the fall of Taliban's government in 2001 when education began to progress and schools opened with female enrollments.

According to the UNICEF (2013) report, Afghanistan has a mere literate population of 26% with only 12% forming women. Women's access to education still face with gender inequality, poverty, gender discrimination and social norms. In spite of the fact that primary education of girls in Afghanistan has relatively improved, girls' marital status compel their education to break off (Mashwani, 2017).

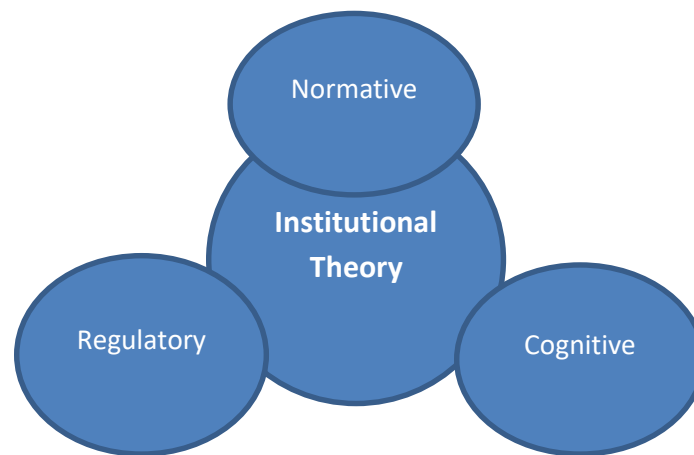
## **2. Feminism Theory**

The feminism theory is often misinterpreted and contextualized in the favor of women. However, feminism theory reviews the world under the lens of both genders and their importance (Hanson, 1992). Researchers assert that understanding gender imbalance in education refers to education feminism, as a prominent social movement of 20<sup>th</sup> century (Stone, 1994). It reflects the complexity of overlap among economic and political constitutions along with distinct involvement of society, racial and gender divergences (Arnot, 2007). In the 2010s, an eminent public engagement has been witnessed in the US regarding underrepresentation of women as 3 to 1 ratio in comparison to male counterparts.

## **3. Institutional Theory**

Institutional theory is a significant theory in understanding challenges faced by women in education. Various researchers with considerable adaptations (Dacin, Goodstein & Scott, 2002) have defined the expression of "institution". Conventionally, this theory highlights how various institutions and segments of a society confirm to the institutional conditionals of a particular region (Bruton et al., 2010; Scott, 2008). Another researcher (North, 1990), described institutional theory

as “the rules of the game in a society” (p.3). These rules are as a formulation of human interactivity. Scott (1987) explained that institutional theory is a social operation based on which humans conform to a set of socially accepted reality irrespective of individual opinions. He also proposed that governmental establishments, educational institutes, rules and mandates are components of institutional formation. The three forms of institutional theory are based on regulation, norms and cognition. Regulations are proposed by governmental organizations and involve rules and mandates. The normative functions are mandatory norms followed by individuals and organizations. This form of institutional theory can potentially encourage education for both genders. Lastly, cognitive drives refer to the individual beliefs and activities. It highlights forces that could develop cultural realm.



Source: Scott (2007)

A novel stance on institutional theory recommends that distinct cultural values are enforced on organizational structure and they have to embrace new values without cross-examining (Scott, 2008).

## **Methodology**

Methodology of this research outlines the strategies that help in attaining research objectives (Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020). An interpretivism approach has been applied in this research which helps researcher in understanding and explaining the dissimilarities among humans in our part as social actors (Yunis, Hashim, & Sajida, 2020). All human actions are important whether they have intentional notion to it or it can be grabbed only in case of the systematic meaning related to the

action (Chowdhury, 2014; Fay, 1996). Interpretivism approach reviews distinctions such as culture, situations and time. It considers subjectivity of meanings and understanding social aspects in research (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornill, 2012). Qualitative methodology allows researchers to explore novel data, theories, opinions, etc. “Even if ones exploring the people’s behavior, life histories then qualitative behavior can be favored” (Silverman, 2008, p.9).

## **1. Data Collection**

The data collection process of this research covered one month to explore gendered challenges of women in higher education institutes. Purposive sampling technique, also known as judgmental sampling is the deals with the quality of participants for data collection. Researchers decide purpose of their research and then find those people who are willing to deliver information needed for research (Bernard, 2002). It is widely used in case of qualitative research where those respondents are selected who can provide rich and in-depth data in understanding their experiences or challenges (Patton, 2002). This sampling method is typically used in a qualitative study (Etikan, Musa, & Alkassium, 2015). Data was further collect using semi-structured interviews from 12 female students in Kabul university and Kardan university. Another four semi-structured interviews were conducted from 4 female lecturers in Kabul university and kardan university. The data collection method enabled researchers to get in-depth data about women and their gendered challenges in higher education.

## **2. Interviewee Profile**

Semi-structured interviews were conducted from female lecturers and students from two universities in Kabul, Afghanistan. The sampling of Kardan University and Kabul University was based on purposive method in which researchers analytically analyzed cases that met parameters of population (Silverman, 2008).

All interviews were recorded and then transcribed for analysis. As data is qualitative, thematic analysis was adopted for generation of basic and general themes. The following areas were under consideration when conducting interviews:

1. Respondents’ understanding of quality education and gender inequality
2. Gendered challenges of female students and lecturers in the higher education institutions

Following table demonstrates number of interviews and their profile and affiliation:

Table 1: List of Interviewees

<b>Female Lecturers and Student Interviewees</b>	<b>Status/University</b>
Ms. A	Lecturer, Kabul University
Ms. B	Lecturer, Kabul University
Ms. C	Lecturer, Kabul University
Ms. D	Lecturer, Kardan University
Ms. E	Student, Kardan University
Ms. F	Student, Kardan University
Ms. G	Student, Kardan University
Ms. H	Student, Kardan University
Ms. I	Student, Kabul University
Ms. J	Student, Kabul University
Ms. K	Student, Kabul University
Ms. L	Student, Kabul University
Ms. M	Student, Kabul University
Ms. N	Student, Kabul University
Ms. O	Student, Kabul University
Ms. P	Student, Kabul University

## **ANALYSIS**

Data acquired through semi-structured interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis which is widely accepted for in-depth studies (Attride-Stirling, 2001). This analysis approach assists researchers to analyze and collate various beliefs and perspectives to provide interpretations of the qualitative data (Creswell, 2003). By properly following thematic analysis steps, researchers can draw valid interpretations. 1. Familiarity with data, 2. Coding, 3. Theme identification, 4. Network construction, 5. Explanation of thematic network.

Table 2: Codes and Basic Themes

No.	Step 1: Codes	Step 2: Basic Themes
1	men are decision-makers	Doubting women's abilities
2	male are considered more logical	
3	men are considered important	
4	women who study hard are still considered to wash dishes, cook, marry and have children	
5	women are considered objects	
6	women are considered weak	
7	men and women are not physically the same	
8	men can do anything but women cannot	Culture/tradition
9	restriction from parents	
10	restriction from society	
11	Cultural restriction	
12	Islam allows women's education but Afghan culture restricts	
13	lack of awareness in people	
14	Traditional backwardness	
15	Society	
16	inequality due to lack of education of families	

17	Misunderstanding of religion	Religion
18	lack of Islamic knowledge in people	
19	misinterpretation of Islamic guidelines	
20	discrimination negatively impact academic environment	Effect on women
21	less number of female participation compared to male	
22	gender inequality negatively affects female learning	
23	gender inequality put negative pressure on girls' minds	
24	receiving unnecessary messages from class fellows	Harassment
25	inappropriate words by male class fellows	
26	uncomfortable sharing ideas with class fellows	
27	girls are not relaxed	
28	lack of safety for girls in educational environment	
29	security issues for girls	
30	Environment	



31	Missing foreign scholarships due to gender	Discrimination
32	giving girls' opportunities to boys	
33	restricted by teacher not to play the role of judge because girls cannot be judges	
34	Not allowed to take decisions	
35	girls cannot be what they want to be	
36	boys have more resources	
37	unequal opportunities	
38	lack of business opportunities for women	
39	lack of leadership opportunities	
40	only boys are CR (class representative)	
41	boys can easily go for conferences, seminars, etc.	
42	boys get more appreciation by teachers	
43	cannot practice most areas in business	
44	even with same qualification, men are given priority over women	
45	torture girls for education	

46	discrimination since birth	
47	women don't get equal chance	
48	Male given priority	
49	imbalance in pay	
50	perception of parents that girls will be sexually abused if they go out	Security
51	parents are worried when girls are out for education	
52	unable to visit different places	
53	cannot go to market easily	
54	Missing vocational program due to security not gender	
55	support from educated parents for equal educational right of girls	Support
56	with family support, it is possible to attend vocational programs	
57	lack of women empowerment	
58	men don't respect women rights	Patriarchy
59	Powerful men	
60	male favoritism	
61	male-dominant society	
62	parents like male child over female	

Table 3: Basic Themes and Organizing Themes

No.	Step 2: Basic Themes	Step 3: Organizing Themes
1	Security	Religious Extremist
2	Religious Misuse	
3	Doubting Women's Ability	Gender Inequality- Lack of Resources- Feminism Theory
4	Discrimination	
5	Support	Institutional Theory
6	Security	
7	Cultural/traditional barriers	
8	Patriarchy	
9	Harassment	Women Empowerment
10	Disturbance caused to women	

### 1. Research Findings

In as much as women suffer in acquiring primary and higher education around the world, the condition is worse in case of Afghanistan. After conducting interviews from both female lecturers and students from two reputable universities in Kabul, researchers discovered that gender inequality does play the role of an obstacle in their lives. In case of lecturers, they expressed that female lecturers are not widely accepted in higher educational institutes by male students who consider female lacking knowledge compared to male lecturers. One of the lecturers added that:

*“Based on my teaching experience being a female lecturer; I find the different behavior from my colleagues and they give more value to the idea of male lecturers, we are not equal. Sometime even in the classrooms we find different behavior from our students; while female students appraise the female lecturers but the perception of male students are different and male students*

*think since she is a female so she doesn't know anything, even sometimes they say we don't want female lecturer, and we don't study in a class which a female is going to teach,*

*In addition, In case of the learning opportunities; there are less learning opportunities for the female students as compare to the male students, but for lecturers there is equality and female lecturers have the same access to the resources as male lecturers do. Still there are some difficulties for the female lecturers like; to go abroad and attend a seminar, workshop or an event and it could be one of the reasons I do not have the same access to the resources as a male lecturer does".*

In the workplace environment, female lecturers experience male-dominance and unequal pay compared to their male counterparts. One of the lecturers added:

*"If I would receive the same payment as male lecturers receive I would be more motivated and if we get the same environment as male lecturers they have got in terms of work life balance".*

Female lecturers who are married face double burden between balancing their personal and professional life because maintain home and raising kids are considered responsibility of women. One of the female lecturers added:

*"Work life imbalance, being a married woman I do face the problem. I cannot give proper time to the different tasks and in the result it will affect me. Sometime it gives me stress. While I am in the university, my lectureship takes the first position and my family second; but still I think about my family".*

Similar expectations exist for female students most of whom discontinue their education due to marriage or childbirth. Some of the students shared their experiences of how society judges them for acquiring education and going out of the house. Some of the female students added:

*"Yes by telling us what if you study hard or not studying you will wash dishes you will look after your children and family".*

*"Our society thinks that when a girl go out that girl is a not a good person and this mentality would not be every girl would be able to improve easily".*

Unfortunately, most Afghan girls are considered capable of home making only. The only roles assigned to women are of a good daughter, mother and wife (Rehman & Roomi, 2008).

Any role apart from the mentioned are not desirable. If a woman opts to pursue education and build a career will need family support, otherwise, she would be unable to proceed and progress. Support from immediate family was the prime source of access to higher education as per most of the respondents. This behavior can be well explained by institutional theory because such norms are strictly followed, hence, restricting women's access to education or career development in Afghanistan. However, immediate family's support does not alone flatten the journey of female students. Some of the students revealed that even with a supportive family, they could not benefit from vocational opportunities due to security issues. As a respondent added:

*“University and family provide me all the required resources and I can attend any training or workshop in the different places like male students. Maybe I will miss a training, seminar or workshop because of security”.*

Another female lecturer added:

*“There is a lot of limitations for me starts from the way I come to university there should be my brother husband father to drive me up to here”.*

## **2. Discussion of Findings**

Quality education and gender equality are both two of the SDGs highlighting the importance of quality education in people's lives and contribution of both genders in the process. Moreover, women's challenges in the field of education are well explained with feminism theory and institutional theory. Fortunately, the data collected from female lecturers and students support the intersection of institutional embeddedness of their challenges in terms of their gender. The major themes developed in this paper are religious extremist, gender inequality, institutional theory including culture, religion, etc. and women empowerment. Researchers were able to draw the conclusion that women face various challenges in their journey of higher education both in case of students and lecturers. Data highlights that women need support from their immediate family to acquire higher education or develop career for themselves. However, people's perception of women based on cultural aspect as well as misinterpretation of Islamic principles were some of

the prominent challenges highlighted by data. Researchers conclude that there are strong formal and non-formal institutional aspects that restrict women from acquiring education. Furthermore, security of the country tends to be another obstacle for women. Even with the support of immediate family, female lecturers and students failed to excel in their journey.

Researchers integrating institutional and feminism theory in explaining their challenges support uniqueness of these findings. It provides a rather novel perspective from the rest of the research studies conducted in Afghanistan.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

Aim of this research paper was to study the institutional embeddedness of gender equality and quality education in Afghanistan. Researchers adopted interpretivism and qualitative research in this study in an effort to understand challenges of female students and teachers. A total of 16 semi-structured interviews were conducted from Kabul University and Kardan University. Data highlighted that women are not considered equal compared to their male counterparts. They are expected to marry, stay home and raise kids. Moreover, women's education is judged in terms of cultural and religious aspects. Afghan people are not in favor of women acquiring higher education and therefore, they face severe gender discrimination.

As part of the SDGs, quality education and equality play key determinants in the development of this country. It is only possible when people's mind sets are changed and cultural and religious misuse are reduced. Government can play a key role in providing awareness sessions to general people to deliver the importance of quality education for both male and female students.

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