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The Struggle for Higher Education Gender Equity Policy in Afghanistan: Obstacles, Challenges and Achievements

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Abstract: The struggle for gender equity in Afghanistan has been a long and difficult one under war conditions. Nonetheless, amazing progress has been made both in transforming higher education and in improving the situation for women students and women faculty members over the last few years. What is particularly striking about this effort is the level of success in a very challenging environment. Part of the success, as we suggest, is a consequence of the focus on gender policy in higher education, which operates in an amazingly free environment. That has allowed the kind of analysis and discussion of traditional views about women to be examined and new policies put in place moving toward the MoHE goal of gender equity. Higher education has moved from a situation of virtually no women students, faculty, or staff in 2001 to 28% women students and 14% women faculty members in 2017. The atmosphere for women has changed remarkably with a Higher Education Gender Strategy to continue the process of change and a range of other policies and actions designed to create an open, comfortable, and equal environment for women. What is striking about these changes is that we think their success is due in large part to the narrow focus of change on higher education – a process that probably

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would not have succeeded if tried at the national level. Nonetheless, it is a first step in expanding improved conditions for women broadly in Afghanistan and is suggestive of a successful approach for other countries with serious problems of gender discrimination.

Keywords: gender equity; Afghanistan; inequities; exclusions; pervasive culture of male dominance; academic freedom; transformation; sexual harassment; admissions examination; violence against women; gender strategy

El esfuerzo para la norma de la igualdad de género en la educación superior de Afganistán: Obstáculos, dificultades y realización

Resumen: El esfuerzo para la igualdad de género en Afganistán ha sido largo y difícil en las condiciones de Guerra. Sin embargo, en los últimos años, se ha logrado asombroso progreso en la transformación de la educación superior y en las condiciones para las estudiantes y las profesoras. Lo más sorprendente del esfuerzo es el nivel de éxito en un ambiente desafiante. Sugerimos que el éxito se debe en parte a la atención a la norma de la igualdad de género. Eso ha permitido que se examine la vista tradicional hacia la mujer y que nuevas normas se desarrollen para la meta de la igualdad de género en la MoHE. En 2001 no se encontraban estudiantes, profesorado o empleadas femeninas. En 2017 el número ha crecido hasta lograr el 28% de estudiantes y 14% del profesorado femenino. El ambiente ha cambiado mucho para las mujeres quienes ahora pueden sentirse más cómodas y tranquilas. Esperamos que los cambios que hemos visto en Afganistán puedan sugerir métodos para lograr la igualdad de género en otros países.

Palabras-clave: igualdad de género; Afganistán; desigualdades; exclusiones; cultura de dominación masculina; libertad académica; transformación; acoso sexual; examen de ingreso; violencia contra mujeres; estrategia de género

O esforço pela norma de igualdade de gênero no ensino superior no Afeganistão: Obstáculos, dificuldades e realização

Resumo: O esforço pela igualdade de gênero no Afeganistão tem sido longo e difícil nas condições de guerra. No entanto, nos últimos anos, foram feitos progressos surpreendentes na transformação do ensino superior e nas condições para estudantes e professores. A parte mais surpreendente do esforço é o nível de sucesso em um ambiente desafiador. Sugerimos que o sucesso se deva em parte à atenção à norma de igualdade de gênero. Isso permitiu examinar a visão tradicional das mulheres e desenvolver novos padrões para o objetivo de igualdade de gênero no MoHE. Em 2001, não havia estudantes, professores ou funcionárias. Em 2017, o número cresceu para 28% dos estudantes e 14% das professoras. O ambiente mudou muito para as mulheres que agora podem se sentir mais confortáveis e calmas. Esperamos que as mudanças que vimos no Afeganistão possam sugerir métodos para alcançar a igualdade de gênero em outros países.

Palavras-chave: igualdade de gênero; Afeganistão; desigualdades; exclusões; cultura de dominação masculina; liberdade acadêmica; transformação; assédio sexual; vestibular; violência contra a mulher; estratégia de gênero

Introduction

The difficulties of achieving gender equity in the West are well known to most of us. The magnitude of the problem of gender equity in much of Asia and Africa is staggering in comparison. Yet it would be hard to find an environment more difficult in this regard than that in Afghanistan where the challenges have been Herculean. Afghanistan is listed as 169th out of 187 countries on the United Nations Gender Inequality Index (UNDP, 2013, p. 1). The problems encompass a broad range of areas including access to health care, education, employment, and social life. Only 17% of women are literate versus 35% for men (UNESCO 2016: 1), until recently Afghanistan had the highest level of maternal mortality and the second highest level of infant mortality in the world. Improved health care for women has reduced that somewhat but levels are still among the highest in the world. The situation is complicated by war, the Taliban's hostility toward women's education including their banning women from any level of education from 1996 to the end of 2001, and traditional attitudes generally about the place of women in society. Girls in some areas are harassed going to and from school, and girl's schools continue to be burned or destroyed.

In what follows, we want to trace recent efforts by the Ministry of Higher Education to foster gender equity in higher education, including a higher education gender strategy and sexual harassment policy as well as explore the challenges faced, putting those efforts in context with some concrete examples and look at successes to date. Much of the data used in this paper is from the Ministry of Higher Education (MoHE), to which we had access since the senior author was advisor to the Ministry for seven years and the other worked as an executive assistant for the Deputy Minister for Academic Affairs, Professor Mohammad O. Babury, who was in charge of higher education on a day-to-day basis. We both worked for the Higher Education Project (HEP) and later the University Support and Workforce Development Program (USWDP) run through the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, and funded by USAID. We facilitated some of the data gathering at the MoHE and did much of the data analysis while working in the MoHE including putting together the data for most of the tables included here. This material is used with permission from the Ministry. In addition, we consulted other data on gender and education which were available both in the field and in the United States.

Our methodology was both descriptive and analytical of operations we experienced, interviews, and data we had access to when in Afghanistan. We continue to have access to much of this data based on our previous work at the MoHE. Some of our findings are drawn from interviews with other participants (many noted in the text) and a small survey during June 2013 of the providers of pre-Kankor training in the Kabul area.¹ The first author worked in Afghanistan for short period in 2003, 2005 and 2006 and full time from 2009 to 2016. The second author was born in Afghanistan and worked for the Higher Education Project from May 2008 to August 2014, the period from 2010 in the Office of the Deputy Minister as executive assistant. Both authors were involved in much of the day to day data gathering at the MoHE, discussions with other ministries and activists from higher education, the community and Parliament. The primary author was involved in the policy discussions about the strategic plans of 2009 and 2016, the gender strategy, and the sexual harassment policy and served on several joint committees with the Ministry of Education, Ministry of Labour and the Ministry of Women's Affairs as well as on the Commission on Curriculum and that on Quality Assurance

¹ The survey was carried out by Mujtaba Hedayet in Kabul during June 2013 and involved face-to-face interviews with provider of pre-Kankor training in the Kabul area.

and Accreditation at the MoHE. Almost all of the MoHE policy documents discussed in this paper are available on the MoHE website.

Comparative Patterns of Inequalities and Exclusions Around the World and Their Justifications

An understanding of the problems faced in the effort to establish gender equity benefits from a comparative look at the experiences in other parts of the world, including the justifications and explanations of inequalities and exclusions facing women in various regions. The theoretical base for this study goes back to René Lenoir's (1947) work on social exclusions (*les exclus*), which focused on those excluded from society. These exclusions were unrecognized at that time and seen as *normal* and "morally acceptable" (Estivill, 2003, p. 5). Indeed, Lenoir barely mentions women, focusing primarily on the disabled, but his points are powerful. Especially important for comparisons is the writing of Amartya Sen (1999, 2001), who is very specific in his detailed focus on women and in particular on inequalities and their justification in India, Japan, North Africa, South Asia, and elsewhere. His contributions on freedom, gender and development are especially important in the struggle to end discrimination against women in part because he was so clear in laying them out and emphasizing how they had become parts of so many cultures that they seemed normal and unquestioned. His work helped make the inequalities clear.

One doesn't have to look very hard to see a vast array of kinds of gender discrimination around the world. There is a preference for boy babies and the existence of female infanticide in parts of Asia. As Sen (2001) notes: "...gender inequality can manifest itself in the form of parents' wanting a baby to be a boy rather than a girl" (p. 2). And now those preferences can be realized through "science," as they are in some places. Then there are the consequences of female circumcision in much of North and West Africa, which generally results in genital mutilation, often with profound health and sexual consequences justified variously as an essential rite of passage at puberty, to facilitate childbirth, or as a mark of womanhood. It is often perpetuated most strongly by women in the society.

We have also seen a major increase in so called "honor killings," especially in India in the last two years – something that primarily affects women (George, 2016), a practice not unknown in Afghanistan, though not prevalent. Then there is the lack of property rights for women, inequality in marriage and divorce, job discrimination, and other exclusions. Understanding these traditions, practices and their justifications comparatively helps us understand the profound depth and power of these beliefs, the impact of these inequalities and many of the difficulties in eliminating them over time.

The justifications of these inequalities, actions and exclusions are many. They include assertions that the practices are normal and appropriate, that they are ordained by God, that they do not represent inequality at all but are a result of a "division of labor," that the inequalities are biologically defined. Opposition to these practices is seen as an attempt to thwart God's will, as a threat to solidarity and the culture of a society, as a Western plot to weaken society and undermine traditional values, or an effort to prevent the preservation of local culture and tradition. Similar discrimination against women exists in Afghanistan where many parallel arguments are used to justify discriminatory acts. To foster change, we need to understand the values involved, the pervasiveness of these practices, the socialization processes which perpetuate them, the strength of the beliefs supporting these actions and inequalities, and the variety of ways they are justified.

The consequences of gender inequities are far-reaching, destructive and frequently tragic. Amartya Sen (2001) notes that much of this gender inequality is based on "received values"

some of which demonstrate an “anti-female bias” [that] “...reflects the hold of traditional masculinist values...” (p. 15). He goes on to suggest, “...what is needed is not just freedom of action but also freedom of thought – to question received values.” He continues: “Informed and critical agency is important in combating inequality of every kind. Gender inequality, including its many faces, is no exception.” Thus, a key to change is the freedom to scrutinize inherited beliefs and traditional values. That is no easy task for it is not just a matter of asking for freedom. And such freedoms are very hard to come by in societies that are steeped in hundreds of years of tradition and abhor change.

What is especially interesting about the situation in Afghanistan is that much of the success in the fight for gender equity is occurring in higher education – experiences that suggest that this is a critical place to fight that discrimination. The environment in higher education in Afghanistan was remarkably free during the last decade, especially in a war context, and thus the universities became fertile ground for discussion, questioning of values, and action involving that kind of freedoms Sen advocates as a way to break down the pervasive culture of male domination through freedom of thought and actions. This does not mean that the problems of gender inequity were solved but it opened the door to substantial changes with higher education growing from no women students or faculty to 14% women faculty members and 28% women students in 2016.

Sen (2001) suggests that this freedom for discussion, scrutinizing, and examining “inherited beliefs and traditions,” as well as advocacy for other values in a context in which equality can take root, is vital to successful change to foster gender equity (p. 15). And that is what has happened, though still incomplete, in Afghan higher education. To the extent that these changes have succeeded, they pave the way for new attitudes in the families of graduates, new values passed on to their children, and the opportunity to break the cycle of gender discrimination that has been so devastating for so many girls and women, depriving Afghan society of major contributions from half the society and depriving girls and women of the freedoms they have the right to expect.

The World Bank (2005) put the problem in Afghanistan well when it noted that: “Gender has thus been one of the most politicized issues in Afghanistan over the past 100 years, where many reform attempts rightly or wrongly have been condemned by opponents as unIslamic and a challenge to the sanctity of the faith and family (p. 24). The World Bank study goes on to say:

The definition of gender roles is so central in Afghan society and culture, that any perceived or planned changes require consultations not only with the household but also with the larger community. Men and women to a large extent share the same cultural ethos and values, including their conception of gender roles, and they seek to validate these within their communities. Years of turmoil have furthermore left communities to their own devices, strengthening the inherent distrust of external authorities and increased reliance upon conservative values. The remarkable social cohesion, which has brought the Afghan population through the years of turmoil with less scars than could be expected, also includes strict social norms and control of conformity with these norms.

Hence any perceived attempt of inducing change requires solid consultation with and consent among the affected communities. (World Bank, 2005, p. 24)

Though the challenges for bringing about changes in attitudes about gender equity are substantial, it is in the more confined realm of higher education that progress has been made. It is in this environment that the best opportunities to foster new and different values of equality

and fairness are beginning to be realized. Acceptance of these inequalities would have meant that the whole society would continue to suffer and waste the talent and resources of women and in all probability, relegate their children to inferior status for the rest of their lives. Theirs was a condition that was not freely chosen; this provides an opportunity to break that chain of discrimination through greater access to education including higher education.

Some of the gender inequalities follow from unequal opportunities, lack of access to education, and discrimination that can be overcome or at least mitigated by education, others by provision of services widely desired. Part of the path to success is recognizing that a first step is to move toward gender equity in particular contexts – in this case in the context of higher education institutions. To the extent that succeeds, we expect that beyond this sphere, equal opportunities will spread little by little, place by place, as government and other organizations (including the World Bank, HEP, and the Asia Foundation) try to foster gender equity within their own spheres of operation in Afghanistan. We have seen a promising start in higher education in Afghanistan. We will try to unpack that process in the pages which follow.

For the government, the effort to foster gender equity is reflected in the *National Action Plan for Women of Afghanistan* in 2007. It is also enshrined in the Government's commitment to: The *Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women* (ratified by the Government in March 2003), and the *Beijing Platform for Action* (1995), the global framework for the advancement of women. That was followed by President Hamid Karzai's decree entitled *Elimination of Violence Against Women* in 2009 which laid out a series of laws and rules protecting women. Yet these commitments by government did not necessarily go very deep into either its structure or operation – and this has been an ongoing problem in Afghanistan. Nonetheless, these agreements and policies provided targets which have helped higher education.

Ministry of Higher Education Efforts to Foster Gender Equity in Higher Education since the End of Taliban Rule

The immediate challenge that faced the MoHE at the end of 2001 with the defeat of the Taliban, was getting women back into higher education.² They had been forbidden from all levels of education and thus it was not just a matter of reopening the doors of the universities to women in 2002, since the pool of those who could take the entrance exam was limited primarily to girls who had returned from exile in Pakistan, Iran and other places where they had been able to attend secondary school, the small number of young women who had been in underground secondary schools in places such as Paktia and Herat,³ and those few women who had been in universities in 1996, when they were closed to women. The one exception to allowing women into higher education during the Taliban period was in medicine, since the Taliban did not want male doctors treating their wives and daughters. Kabul Medical University graduated about 134 women MDs during that period. We estimate that there were about 380 women in Kabul Medical School during 1996-2001.⁴

² There had been about 3000 women and 7700 men in higher education in 1995 before the Taliban's decree to eliminate women from all levels of education (Sarif & Samaday, 2001, p. 67).

³ For example, eleven young women enrolled in higher education from Kapisa which had several thriving underground schools for girls during the Taliban era. For an excellent description of these schools see Christina Lamb (2002).

⁴ Data for women graduates at Kabul Medical University during 1989 to 2014 was provided by Deputy Minister Professor M. O. Babury in December 2016.

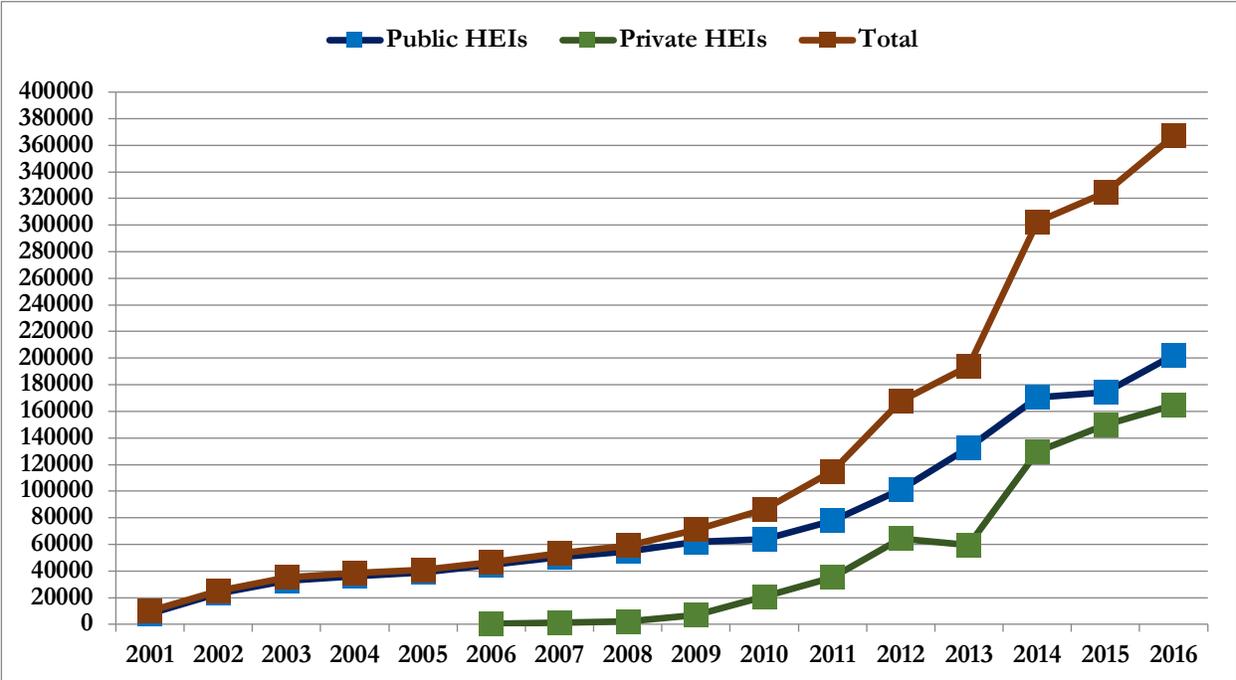


Figure 1. Growth in Higher Education Students 2001-2016
Source: MoHE Data 2016

A total of 1746 women were able to enroll in higher education institutions in 2002. The percentage of women grew 156% in 2003, and 86% the following year, bringing the total number of women to almost 8,300 by 2004. Women could enroll in any field they qualified for (given their Kankor score), however they were largely found in education, literature, English, foreign languages, journalism, medicine, Islamic education, and pharmacy.⁵ In the last few years there has been a push to get more women into the sciences.

The overall demand for places by both men and women was high at that time with total enrollments jumping 191% in 2002. Total enrollment of women in public higher education plateaued at an average of about 19% of the total from 2005 to 2014, largely because of a shortage of dormitory places for women. By 2016, the total number of women in public higher education had grown to more than 45,397 being 28.8% of total student numbers with 202,757 total students. With the legalization of private higher education in 2006, private higher education expanded rapidly growing to 165,000 students in 2016 for a total of about 367,000 in higher education nationally in both public and private higher education.

The challenges to increase the number of women in higher education were enormous and go back many years. Part of the problem was the small number of girls in primary and secondary education due to the hostility to girl’s education in some areas. In the 1950s, the total enrollment of girls in primary school was only 3,970 girls in the whole country out of 91,414 students, or 4.3% of the total. The percentage grew quickly and by 1960 there were almost 20,000 girls (11.4%). The number of girls in primary school continued to grow after the Russian invasion since they strongly encouraged education for girls and by 1990 the enrollment of girls in primary school was 34.1% of the total or 64,116 girls. The total dropped to 10.9% during the civil war, fell to 7.9% in 1999, under the Taliban and continued to fall to zero with the prohibition of women in any level of education in the areas they controlled.

⁵ Personal communication with Deputy Minister Professor M. O. Babury on February 10, 2018.

Table 1
12th Grade Enrollments and Estimates from 2008 - 2015

	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
Female	21,120	25,355	36,836	48,965	70,333	75,118	75,364	88,325
Male	60,413	68,683	91,085	111,298	139,521	134,987	140,311	160,238
Total	81,533	94,038	127,921	160,263	209,854	210,106	215,676	248,562
12th grade % female	25.9%	27.0%	29.8%	30.6%	33.5%	35.8%	34.9%	35.5%

Ministry of Education data and projections 2010 -14

As Table 1 illustrates, the number of women graduates from secondary schools continues to be lower than men although it is improving year by year. In 2008, the percentage of women students in twelfth grade was 25.9%. By 2014, it had grown to almost 35%. Nonetheless, there is a much smaller pool of women available for higher education than men. The Ministry of Education estimates that the percentage of girls will not reach 40% girls until 2020. Of those who signed up to take the Kankor (admissions) examination, about 29% were women.⁶ For many years the overall success rate of the young women who took the exam was the same as it was for men at about 25%.

The expansion in the number of women students in contrast to male students in higher education (see Figure 2) is hampered by a number of factors in addition to the lower rate of participation of women in primary and secondary education (see Table 1). Part of the problem in rural areas was a consequence of fewer schools for women, few women teachers, with many teachers unqualified.⁷ Where secondary schools exist in rural areas, they are often of lower quality than those for men with curricula that is not as rigorous in subjects such as math and science and focused on subjects thought to be appropriate for young women such as sewing.

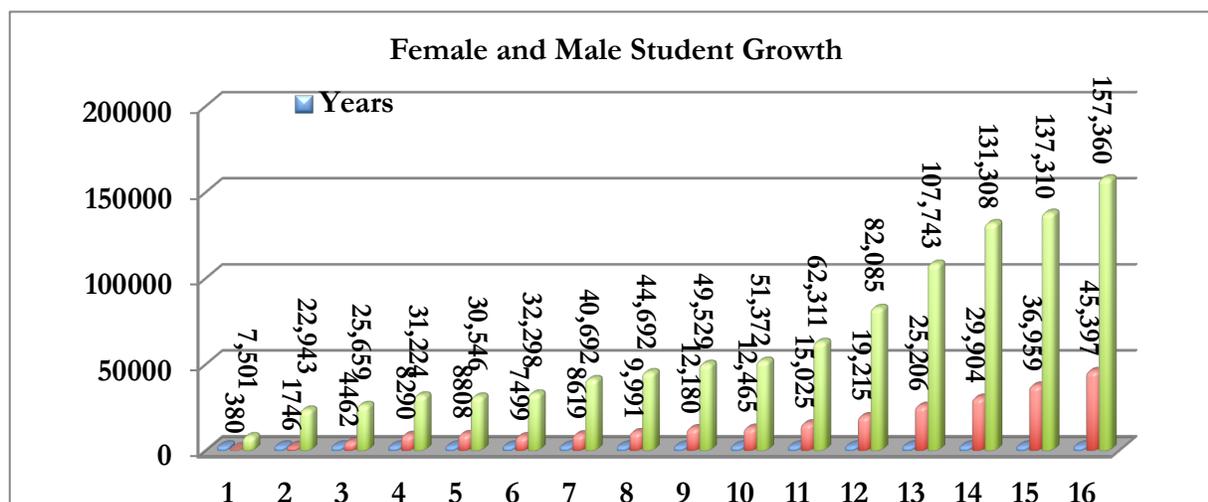


Figure 2. Increase in Female and Male Students in Public Higher Education: 2001-2016
Source: MoHE data.

⁶ This is an estimate based on the 2012 turnout for Kankor examinations.

⁷ In the Draft Ministry of Education (2015, p. 28) the authors note that among the challenges are the: “Shortage of qualified female teachers, particularly in rural areas: There are no female teachers in about 80 districts (out of 364 districts).

After years of equal performance with men from at least 2001-2010 on the Kankor (admissions) examination,⁸ starting in 2011, female students have been doing less well than men on the Kankor examination, with only 16% getting high enough scores for entry versus more than 25% for men, increasing to 19% for women in 2012, but still lower than men which continued to be 25% or higher (MoHE, March 2013, “Draft MoHE Strategy,” Kabul, MoHE, p. 3). This change seems to have been a consequence of the recent introduction of privately offered pre-Kankor preparation programs and the fact that families are sending their male children, but not many female children, to study at these Kankor preparation centers at a cost of about \$250 per person for the several month-long course. These courses have significantly increased the admissions success rate for those who take them to about 80%. Fewer than 20% of those who take these courses are women students.⁹ That is now reflected in the lower pass rates for women starting in 2012 with women averaging at 15% compared to 27% for men (MoHE, 2013).

Recently, the MoHE has undertaken a number of initiatives designed to increase the success rate of women students on the Kankor, encouraging NGOs to offer such courses free or at reduced cost for women and suggesting that higher education institutions prepare free pre-Kankor courses for women, especially in rural areas. Several donors have joined to help in this effort, especially the Asia Foundation, with a broad program designed to help at least 8,000 young women with this preparation.¹⁰

Mental health problems are another serious challenge for college age young people with an estimated 40% having clinical levels of post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, or anxiety (Babury & Hayward, 2013). This lowers their performance in the university, often leads to dropout and occasional suicide. The problem is twice as high among women as men, in part because they face additional family pressures to marry or have children while in higher education and because of sexual harassment. Almost everyone has had some contact with war at some point and for many of these experiences have been traumatic and damaging as shown in Figure 3 below. As you can see in the figure below, a little more than 62% of those interviewed had such experience ranging from injury to themselves to forced displacement from their homes. Only 36.6% had no such experiences.

The MoHE is struggling to provide the first mental health clinics in higher education with a pilot project organized and planned for two universities. However, no state or donor funding has been forthcoming to date.

⁸ The Kankor examination is a national entrance examination offered by the MoHE. It is given on a specific date in education centers around the country under very tight security. Questions are prepared by a faculty committee, reviewed, and usually printed abroad to insure security. With rare exceptions, there have not been problems of leaks in recent years.

⁹ Data were gathered by Mujtaba Hedayet in June 2013, working with the primary author. The survey involved all known testing centers in Kabul with phone interviews with several others outside Kabul which confirmed the findings. A new program to train young women for the Kankor was launched by the Asia Foundation, especially in rural areas, in 2014 with results yet to be determined.

¹⁰ The Asia Foundation (2015a, pp. 7-8, 2015b) has launched a major effort of pre-Kankor training for young women especially in rural areas. It involves Pre-Kankor training tied to the existing curriculum of secondary school.

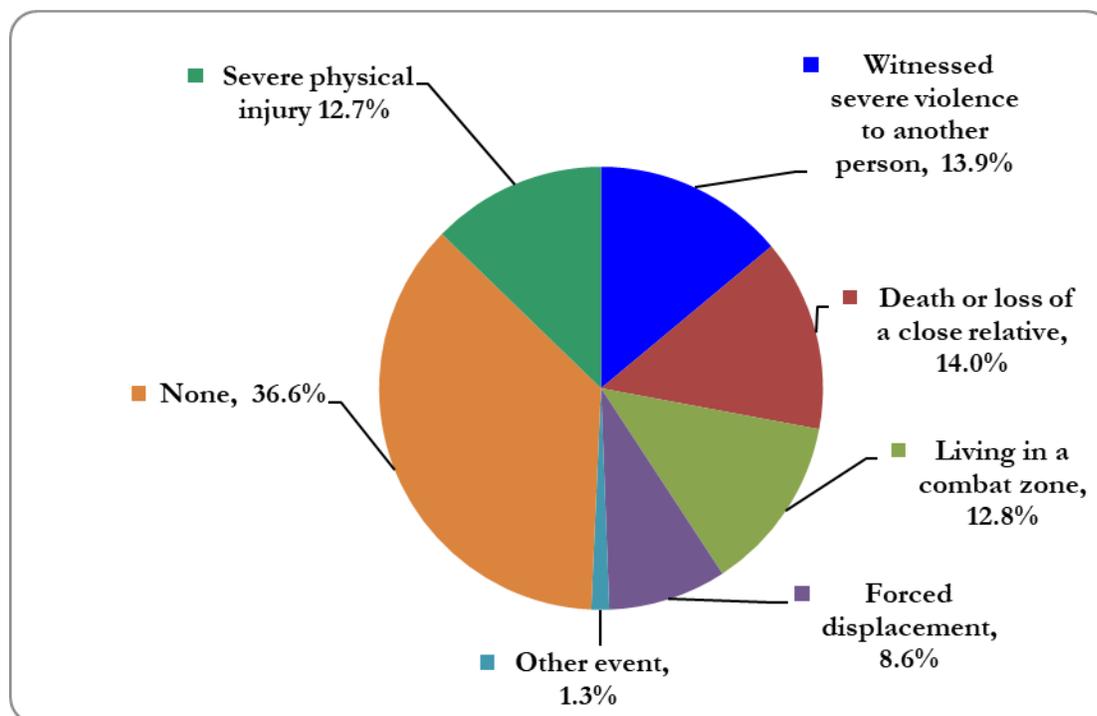


Figure 3. The Most Distressing Lifetime Event from Afghan school-based survey
Source : Panter-Brick et al. (2009).

Violence Against Girls and Women and the Issue of Safety

Attacks on girls going to and from school, sometimes with acid thrown at them, have been a regular occurrence in some parts of Afghanistan. In addition, girl's schools continue to be burned or closed down. In May 2012, the Ministry of Education reported that 550 schools had been closed by insurgents. During the 2015 capture of Kunduz, the Taliban carried out a systematic campaign against women and girls (Rubin, 2015).

Lack of Housing for Female Students

A major problem affecting the enrollment of women students is the lack of adequate supervised housing on campuses for young women. About 80% of the housing was for men in 2012, in part because the Taliban had destroyed some of the dormitories for girls. In a survey carried out by the Ministry of Higher Education in 2012, it was found that lack of adequate supervised housing was a major deterrent for sending girls to higher education institutions. Families will not send their daughters to universities without safe supervised housing. To deal with this issue, the Ministry launched a major campaign for more women's dorms in 2012.

Sexual Harassment

Sexual harassment and violence are major problems in Afghanistan including in higher education. The Asia foundation found that 13% of women regard domestic violence as one of three of their major problem after employment and education (Asia Foundation, 2015b, p. 6). For higher education, the Ministry of Higher Education responded to sexual harassment and violence by developing a sexual harassment policy in 2009, and included it in its *Byelaws for Ethics and Discipline* (2009a). To further deal with the problem, the MoHE expanded the sexual harassment policy in 2015 making it the major focus of a workshop for all chancellors and

senior administrators in July 2016. Sexual harassment has terrible consequences in demeaning women, cutting into their self-esteem, increasing their sense of insecurity, and undermining the critical conditions of openness and safety in the higher education community. It is part of what contributes to Afghanistan's recently having one of the highest suicide rates in the world with more people dying from suicide than the combination of murders and war deaths according to a study by the Ministry of Public Health in 2014 (Mora, 2014). More than 8500 suicides were reported during 2014, about half being women. Almost half of those women died from self-immolation.

The MoHE *Policy on Elimination of Discrimination and Sexual Harassment in Universities and Institutions of Higher Education* (2015) outlaws and clearly defines sexual harassment. It lays out policies to ensure that the university campuses are free of sexual harassment, providing a safe and free environment for women. Procedures are in place to assist and protect women faced with harassment and to punish those who commit it. It also covers harassment against men.

Other Pressures on Women in Higher Education

Once young women are admitted to higher education institutions other pressures affect them. There are the usual stresses associated with higher education that affect all students, male and female. In addition, young women in Afghanistan frequently are subjected to further pressures from their families, many of whom were not eager to have their daughters go to the university in the first place. They often regularly urge them to get married before they finish. These pressures complicate girl's lives since in most cases the choices for marriage partners in Afghanistan are made by parents often with little input from the young woman or man. The concern of many young women is whether their husbands will allow them to continue their education, and after that whether they will allow them to work if they wish.¹¹ We have seen many sad cases where the woman disappeared after marriage and is basically confined to the home by the husband going out only when accompanied by the husband or a male child.

Many young women are worried about employment possibilities. It is much harder for women than men to gain employment, even in government service and NGOs where there are more opportunities. If a young woman goes to work for a foreign employer she is likely to get a "night letter" from the Taliban telling her that she should stop working for foreigners. These are put under the front door at night and are usually quite explicit, for example, saying that: "We know you are alone with your mother since your father has died and that you work for company X in central Kabul. You must quit or something terrible will happen to you or your mother."¹² They do sometimes follow-up with violence if the women continue their employment.

Graduate study also poses problems for those women who want it. One of the major challenges is that most master's and PhD programs are outside Afghanistan. Other problems often relate to parents who refuse to sign the papers needed to get a passport. All women need the permission of parents or a spouse to get a passport. Several have lost out on Fulbright awards when after initial agreement from parents, at the last minute they refuse to sign the permission forms. Fortunately, there are now a large number of master's programs in Afghanistan and that has helped make graduate study more available for women.

¹¹ This information is based on interviews conducted by the second author during 2016, as well as our observations when working for the MoHE.

¹² Based on an actual experience of a colleague of the authors. In this case, fortunately there was no follow-up.

The Costs of Gender Inequality

The economic costs of gender inequalities for Afghan society as a whole are substantial. Afghanistan has one of the lowest levels of female participation in the workforce at 10%, only 25% of women are competing in the market in some type of paid employment and most of that is in the informal sector. Household decisions are dominated by men in 89% of the cases according to a recent survey (World Bank, 2016). Few women are in the formal job sector and even there, gender discrimination is rife, especially in private employment. No comprehensive studies of salary difference by gender have been carried out in Afghanistan, but from the limited data at our disposal, we would guess the difference for women is 35% to 40% lower than men. This is a major worry for girls as they complete their higher education. No one thing holds back the Afghan economy more than discrimination against women.

We have mentioned the problem of access to high education. Lack of access to primary and secondary education has other costs including the high level of illiteracy among women at 83% versus 65% for men. As can be seen in Table 2, the average number of years of schooling is only 7 years for women compared to 11 years for men. That has an effect on their children as well since we know that educated women are much more likely to send their children to school. Thus, the long-term effects of this becomes a catastrophic vicious cycle. And without education the chances to earn a decent wage are limited.

Table 2

Human Development Indicators: Afghanistan

Afghanistan HDI Index score 1980	0.228
Afghanistan HDI index score 2015	0.465
Life expectancy Afghanistan (years) in 1980	39.2
Life expectancy Afghanistan (years) in 2015	60.4
Expected years of schooling, men	11.3
Expected years of schooling, women	7.2
Gross national PPP (purchasing power parity)	\$1,885
Maternal mortality rate per 100,000 (1990)	1340
Maternal mortality rate per 100,000 (2014)	396
Infant mortality rate per 100,000 under 5 yrs. 1971	220
1979	183
1994	142
2002	115
2014	70

Source: World Health Organization (2010), United Nations Human Development Indicators (2015)

Women have limited access to health care in Afghanistan. As noted earlier, Afghanistan had the second highest infant mortality rate in the world until recently, and the highest maternal mortality rate. Part of the problem is the limited number of health care facilities, and part the inability of families to pay fees or for medication. Access has improved somewhat but infant mortality and maternal mortality remain among the highest in the world as can be seen in the

Table 2. Looking at the *United Nations Human Development Indicators* for Afghanistan in 2015, we see that Afghanistan is ranked 171st out of 182, with Sierra Leone and Guinea being at the bottom. Life expectancy has improved significantly from 1980 at 39 years, growing to 60 years in 2015 due to improved health care generally in Afghanistan.

The high price paid by early women in leadership positions. The first women faculty members, administrators, and directors faced problems of recognition of their authority by some faculty members, students, and others. That problem continues at some institutions. These women pioneers have often faced terrible problems, including death threats in at least one case. The MoHE reacts strongly against such threats, providing protection when necessary. While the Ministry has been very supportive of these women, the high price some of them have paid for taking these positions is worrying and has deterred other women from being willing to move into these positions.¹³ For the most part, however, the women were received positively and operated effectively with great success, efficiency, and grace. As a result, people began to see a change in attitudes on these campuses.

Preparing a Gender Strategy for Higher Education

The *National Higher Education Strategic Plan: 2010-2014*, written in 2009, committed the Ministry to move in the direction of gender equity (MoHE, 2009b, p. 5). By 2011, it was clear that not much progress was being made on gender equity in higher education or in the country as a whole. The efforts of the Ministry of Women's Affairs to work with other ministries on gender issues had ceased since the Ministry of Higher Education was the only other Ministry showing up for those meetings. Efforts on gender in the Ministry of Education were faltering, partly because the Minister of Education at that time was not a supporter. Programs to end gender discrimination by Parliament had also been of limited success.

In this context, Deputy Minister Babury began to talk in July 2011, about what could be done in higher education to move the agenda forward to foster gender equity. He was concerned that the number of women students was not increasing fast enough, he worried about the difficulty in recruiting women faculty members, and the need for more women with advanced degrees. He organized internal discussions about developing a gender strategy for the Ministry. The Deputy Minister asked his advisor, the primary author, to prepare a short paper on "Gender Challenges in Higher Education," which was completed on July 19, 2011. It gave a brief overview of the current situation and suggested a major focus on increased admission for women students; encouraged promotion for women when they are eligible; and urged institutions to hire more women faculty members. It also included plans to build enough resident halls to overcome the current shortage and thus encourage more women to apply for admission.

During the discussion that followed, it became clear that if there was to be progress on women's issues in Afghanistan, it was going to have to be led by the Ministry of Higher Education. That discussion initiated a concerted effort to broaden the focus on gender at the MoHE, to involve all higher education institutions in the effort, and to seek donor support for those aspects of the program which would require additional funding, in particular dormitories for women and scholarships for women faculty members to study for advanced degrees abroad. This discussion took place broadly within the higher education community, and importantly, did not engender any opposition within the Ministry of Higher Education or the higher education

¹³ Based on actual cases observed by the authors at the MoHE.

community. There was general agreement that this effort was vital for the country and for the future of higher education. Unlike the concerns expressed in 2009 during the drafting of the *NHESP: 2010-2014*, there was no dissent from administrators or faculty members.

The actual work on a gender strategy began in October 2012, when Deputy Minister Babury asked the MoHE advisor to prepare a confidential draft of a possible Higher Education Gender Strategy. Soon after that, the MoHE carried out a small study to determine the major impediments to the enrollment of more women students in higher education. That finding led to a call for more dormitories for women. That request was circulated in a piece titled: “Gender Challenges in Higher Education: The Critical Need for Residence Halls for Female Students,” which was widely circulated by the MoHE in 2012 and 2013. It was read by most donors and led to an immediate promise of funding for two women’s dorms through the US Embassy, and soon thereafter, for women’s dorms by France, Germany, and Norway.

The work on a Gender Strategy was a collective effort with many participants over the next two years. It received support and input from the Ministry of Women’s Affairs, the committee on gender in Parliament, the Human Rights Commission, a number of chancellors, female and male faculty members, and the Sharia Law Faculty at Kabul University. The Higher Education Project (HEP) and its follow-up University Support and Workforce Development Program (USWDP), both funded by USAID, assisted with preparation, translation, and overall support for the project.

In spite of the support of these leaders and organizations, except for a small group within the MoHE and on some of the larger campuses, there was little general concern about the issue of gender equity. Even though it was a goal of the 2009 *National Higher Education Strategic Plan: 2010-2014*, and had broad support, unfortunately it was not seen as a critical issue for many people in higher education beyond the leadership and a small number of interested faculty members, administrators and activists. Had it not been for the concern and initiatives of Minister Dadfur in 2009, and that of Deputy Minister Babury then and later, along with a few others committed to gender equity in the universities, plus the Ministry of Women’s Affairs, little would have been done. There was activity on these issues in half a dozen institutions including Kabul University where its Gender Studies Institute, working on issues of sexual harassment, carried out a small study on that topic in 2010. They produced a draft document in 2012, titled “Discrimination and Sexual Harassment Policy for Universities and Institutions of Higher Education” with data from their survey.

There were a few other notable exceptions of institutions making a special effort to improve conditions for women on their campuses and to make higher education more welcoming and secure for women including: a major outdoor floodlight project to enhance the safety of women at night to “light up the campus” at Kabul University; several universities are providing transportation for women students on campus (Khost); two universities have special programs to encourage women to apply to the university (Balkh and Nangarhar); another has provided special Internet facilities for women (Kandahar); one has worked with male students on a code of conduct including anti-harassment policies (Takhar); and several have special committees or a Women’s Council to address issues of women’s safety. In 2005-6, the institutional strategic plans of two universities (Nangarhar and Kabul University) listed gender equity as long-term goals.

Otherwise, until recently, when the topic of gender equity came up on campus one was likely to hear comments such as: “It is a women’s problem let them solve it.” Or an assertion that “it isn’t a serious problem here.” Or perhaps a statement that “it isn’t really so bad in higher education – we treat everyone equally.” Others recognized the problem but felt nothing could be done. Most people also turned a blind eye to sexual harassment – “it doesn’t exist, it is just

people's imagination, it is a foreign concept, it doesn't happen in universities in Afghanistan." And yet it did happen and the consequences were often devastating including women dropping out of the institutions and even suicide. Some people were afraid to bring up the issue because they felt it touched on Islam and long-term traditions and they would be criticized as unIslamic if they said anything. Yet nothing in Islam encouraged unequal treatment and indeed there are prohibitions against inequality and violence against women in Islam. Sexual harassment is prohibited in Islam and is considered unfair, an injustice and forbidden: "Allah enjoins justice and kindness and forbids indecency, wickedness and oppression. He admonishes you so that you may take heed" (*Quran*, ch.16, Surat I-nahl, verse 90).

In the meantime, the MoHE continued to finalize the gender strategy working with leaders of several institutions, the Ministry of Women's Affairs, and the Parliamentary gender group. The strategy was also reviewed widely by administrators and faculty members at a number of institutions. The final English version of the *Higher Education Gender Strategy* was completed in May 2014, with plans to release it soon thereafter.

The *Gender Strategy* included a discussion of the history of Ministry efforts to improve the situation for women, challenges faced in increasing the admission of women to higher education, the difficulties in recruiting women faculty members, problems women faced once hired including promotions, research funding, access to master's and Ph.D. programs and limited access to leadership positions. It laid out a vision for higher education "to improve gender equity" and "provide a safe and secure environment in which men and women can work creatively and freely without harassment or fears for their safety" (MoHE, 2016a, p. 8). It also included discussion of the problem of violence against women as well as sexism and sexual harassment. It laid out plans and tasks for faculty members, higher education institutions, students, and the system. It concluded with an action plan with priorities including increased access for women at the undergraduate and graduate levels, improving the atmosphere on campuses to insure equal treatment and safety, a goal of increasing the percentage of women students to 25% and faculty members to 20% by 2020, increased fellowships for women to study abroad for master's and PhDs, construction of 4000 more dormitory places for women, and establishment of a committee to review progress on these goals (MoHE, 2016b, pp. 19-20).

Unfortunately, these plans were interrupted by the failure of the efforts of women MPs in Parliament to gain legislative approval of the policy, "Elimination of Violence Against Women" promulgated by decree by President Karzai in 2009. The failure of this effort was a serious blow to gender equity in general, especially because it sparked a backlash among Parliamentary conservatives which led to the preparation and approval of other laws and rules making it hard for family members and any relative to testify against abusers and further weakened protection of wives (Graham-Harrison, 2014, p. 1). These actions demonstrated that in Afghanistan generally, not much progress had been made in changing attitudes about women. All this made the environment for public release of the *Higher Education Gender Strategy* difficult. As a result, a decision was made to delay its release for fear that it would produce a similar backlash and result in legislation annulling the plans.

In spite of this setback generally, the MoHE continued to operate on the principles set out in the gender strategy within higher education and produced new policies including an updating of the 2009 sexual harassment policy, *Discrimination and Sexual Harassment Policy for Higher Education Institutions* released in October 2015. Throughout the period from 2009 to the release of the gender strategy in 2016, the Deputy Minister for Academic Affairs worked with institutions, chancellors, vice chancellors and deans on improving the conditions for women in higher education and operated as if the policy laid out in the *Gender Strategy* was in place.

The Ministry continued with its implementation of the *National Higher Education Strategic Plan: 2010-2014* which had a number of measures designed to improve conditions for women, increase access for women to higher education as well as to hire more women faculty members. In the meantime, the Deputy Minister had additional people review the draft Gender Strategy as a way to strengthen it further and give it broader exposure within the higher education community. The reviews were generally positive and resulted in additional suggestions which were incorporated where possible.

With the coming of a new national President Ashraf Ghani, the environment improved. He read the *Higher Education Gender Strategy* and gave his enthusiastic approval. The new Minister of Higher Education Dr. Farida Momand, was also strongly supported of this effort. In July 2016, the *Higher Education Gender Strategy* was formally released at a workshop at the MoHE for Chancellors, Vice Chancellors, deans, and others. It was well received by those present. They then worked for several days on institutional strategies to support its implementation. These were reviewed by those present, strengthened, and are now being implemented by the institutions.

External assistance for gender equity. In spite of initial reluctance of donors to fund gender efforts, largely because they thought the issue was too controversial, in the last few years the MoHE did receive some external assistance with its plans to facilitate gender equity. USAID provided financial support for these efforts through the Higher Education Project (HEP) and the University Support and Workforce Development Project (USWDP). The World Bank supported gender equity through the Strengthening Higher Education Program (SHEP). There was also assistance from several other governments and NGOs including the Asia Foundation.

Several external assistance programs provided useful models for the future, especially the requirement of 50% women admissions in new higher education programs by HEP and the focus on rural women by the Asia Foundation. Particularly important has been assistance based on a good understanding of local conditions and capacity. Some NGOs interested in gender issues had little understanding of the local environment and, for example, chastised the MoHE for not bringing the percentage of women students to half the enrollment by early 2002 – failing to understand that the Taliban had closed most primary and secondary schools and the universities to women during their rule. Thus, it was not just a matter of opening the door to women, they had to get the education they missed to allow them to pass the Kankor admissions examination. They also didn't understand the sensitivity about the term "affirmative action" and that hurt their efforts.

The HEP project included a commitment to 50% women admissions in new academic programs including a Master's in English and a Master's of Public Administrations. That target was met in Education and proved very successful with several women at the top of the classes. HEP also hired a number of female staff members. The experience of many women working with men successfully on higher education projects in the MoHE and at the institutions produced an important positive effect in some of the communities in which they operated. Furthermore, the academic successes of many of the women students (some doing much better than their male colleagues) had an important impact on faculty members who had expressed doubts about their prospects. These efforts over the years have created a more welcoming environment for women and helped increase the number of women in higher education. Several other programs followed this lead.

Conclusions

The progress made on improving both the number and the conditions of women in Afghan higher education has been substantial, especially in urban higher education institutions. Higher education has moved from nearly no women students or faculty members in 2001¹⁴ to 28% women students and 14% faculty members in 2016. The sexual harassment policy from 2009 was updated and expanded in 2015, a *Higher Education Gender Strategy* is in place, and major efforts have been taken at higher education institutions to improve the climate and conditions for women. By 2015 there were sixteen university dormitories for women with 2946 places with two more under construction at Herat and Balk Universities for 850 and 370 women respectively (MoHE, 2015b, p. 1). A major effort is underway to provide pre-Kankor training for young women to help them have the same opportunities as men on the admissions examination. At the same time, women have also been assisted by the major transformations in higher education over the last five years including increased access for women students, quality assurance and accreditation, upgrading curricula, faculty development encouraging more master's and PhDs, merit hiring and promotions, expansion of IT facilities, more fellowships for women and expansion of the infrastructure.

An important part of these achievements was that the work was driven by, and focused on, higher education rather than a broader target. In spite of war, and an initially difficult environment, higher education has managed to maintain a high level of academic freedom, encouraged discussion, creativity, and the freedom to explore ideas. The work to improve conditions for women in higher education, including greater access, financial support, creation of an open and welcoming environment, working to end sexual harassment and tough measures against discrimination and violence; has been very successful. All this worked in part because it was in the somewhat enclosed and isolated environment of higher education.

We have seen the veracity of Amartya Sen's assertion that a key to ending gender discrimination and inequality is the freedom to question inherited beliefs and take action to change them (Sen, 2001, p. 15). That is happening in Afghan higher education with significant results. While the outcomes are still a work in progress, the authors have seen important changes in attitudes and actions there. Part of the success is the university environment in Afghanistan which allowed these discussions to take place, facilitated the scrutinizing and questioning of the traditions which foster inequality, and a recognition that excluding women from equal opportunities was unfair and deprived Afghanistan of the talents of half its population. And we are already beginning to see other contributions from these changes, different attitudes in the families of graduates, higher incidences of education of offspring, and changing attitudes between the sexes both in higher education and away from it – in the workforce, in the home, in the community. We see these changes in often surprising ways ranging from a young husband changing a baby's diapers – something no virile Afghan male would have done even five years ago – to male faculty members nominating women colleagues to prestigious committees, and male students publicly shaming a male colleague for a sexist remark. Progress is being made broadly one step at a time.

We would be remiss, however, not to emphasize that substantial challenges to gender equity remain especially outside higher education, in particular in terms of employment and other areas of gender discrimination. While we expect progress to continue, we know that a major setback in the democratic political environment could bring a quick reversal of fortunes.

¹⁴ We have noted the small number of about 380 women allowed into medical school by the Taliban between 1996 and 2001.

We have seen that in the past in the case of the failure of earlier efforts by King Amanullah to improve education for women. There are strong traditions of exclusion both from historical and contemporary perspectives that could reverse the progress made. That makes continued financial and technical support vital.

Sustained progress may not be easy and there will no doubt be some backsliding and losses along the way. Part of the problem is that there is not a strong constituency for gender equity yet nationally. Indeed, those fostering gender equity remain badly outnumbered, poorly funded, and often lacking in political experience. The successes to date suggest the significance of the focus on higher education, of enlightened leadership, careful explanations of the importance of freedom and equality, ongoing education about these issues, and continuation of the major efforts underway to overcome the kinds of obstacles we have detailed in this presentation. What is remarkable, however, is that in the face of such major obstacles, including more than 37 years of war, people have been able to bring about as much change as has taken place to date in Afghan higher education.

While broad participation and publicity are usually important to success in policy matters, in some cases in which attitudes are mixed and people are very sensitive to changes, as has been the case with gender in Afghanistan, the best strategy may not be an active public crusade with the likelihood that emotional opposition will be stirred up and perhaps lead to violence. Rather a quiet approach seems to work better – as it has in the case of improving the situation for women in higher education in Afghanistan.

Along with the *Higher Education Gender Strategy* released in July 2016, the Ministry of Women's Affairs recently launched an action plan (Ashrafi, 2016) in December 2016, to help foster effective enforcement of the *Elimination of Violence against Women* (EVAW) Presidential Decree of 2009. That should help improve the situation for women more broadly. As we look back on the period since the defeat of the Taliban at the end of 2001, we can see tremendous progress in higher education, from no women in schools and higher education institutions (except a few in medicine as we have noted) to more than 35% young women in schools and 28% women students in higher education. Put together with the release of the *Higher Education Gender Strategy* in 2016 by the Ministry of Higher Education, the revised and expanded *Sexual Harassment Policy* in 2015, and new efforts by the Ministry of Women's Affairs to end violence against women with strong presidential support, all this bodes well for advancing gender equity in Afghanistan.

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