



Assessment of Learning Outcomes and Social Effects of Community-Based Education, Afghanistan (ALSE)

Research Brief #9: Enhancing female representation in the education sector

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Introduction

In this brief we consider the experiences of women employed in the education sector in Afghanistan. An increased number of women working in the education sector can contribute to gender equity in educational access. Both Afghan law and public opinion support this approach. For example, the Constitution of Afghanistan stipulates that “man and woman, have equal rights and duties before the law” and that “the state shall devise and implement effective programs to create and foster balanced education for women.” Among Afghans, our previous research showed that across six provinces, 76 percent of respondents believed that girls should attend school even if the school is outside the village (Burde, Middleton, and Samii 2015). Similarly, a public opinion survey conducted by the Asia Foundation in 2017 indicated that two-thirds of respondents believed that women should be able to work outside the home. Schools and government offices were the most acceptable work locations for women.

Encouraging women to occupy positions within the education sector—from administrators to teachers—supports a culture of gender equality. For example, the presence of female staff can encourage families to allow girls to attend school (Burde and Khan 2016, 69). These staff are also well-placed to understand the education challenges girls face and to initiate policies and practices to address these challenges. Yet women remain under-represented in the Afghan education sector. And, although there are efforts to increase the number of female teachers, women rarely hold leadership positions. In this brief we explore factors influencing women’s representation in the education sector and outline promising practices with potential to improve women’s representation.

system—district, provincial, and national—and included teachers, non-governmental service providers, and ministry employees. We selected respondents based on a systematic mapping of professionals supporting community-based education across the six provinces where ALSE works: Herat, Ghor, Daykundi, Bamiyan, Parwan, and Kapisa. From this mapping, 253 individuals met the criteria of working directly with CBE programming, however, of this group, only 25 were women. Of these 25 women, 11 gave unsolicited and rich descriptions of how gender affected their work. We focus here on the information these 11 women shared in relation to gender. It is important to note that qualitative data is not intended to be statistically representative of a population, but rather it is valuable for the meaningful themes it highlights and the detail it provides, as is the case in these interviews. Guided by existing literature related to women’s experiences in the education sector (Asia Foundation 2017; MEC 2017; USIP 2015), we analyzed these interviews to identify (1) women’s perceptions of their work in education in relation to their gender; (2) challenges women faced acquiring and retaining jobs in the education sector; and (3) existing practices and opportunities that could enhance and improve women’s representation in education.

Findings

Interviewees discussed the importance of girls’ education and how their work in the education sector as women could produce positive outcomes for girls and women. They described girls’ education as an inalienable human right and a source of future economic and political stability. Some respondents believed that women and girls’ education can contribute to the future betterment of Afghanistan. While they recognized the role of norms and customs in shaping women’s education and professional experiences, they saw no contradiction between their work and Afghan and Islamic customs.

A woman can do any job while wearing the Islamic Hijab and help her society. I am a woman and I work in the office; I go to the field. When people see that a woman has come to work here, they allow their women [to talk to me] easily; they allow their daughters to work, too.
-Woman NGO worker

Methods

We explore women’s perspectives on working in the Afghan education sector through the analysis of 11 semi-structured interviews. Respondents worked at all levels of the education

Since childhood I wanted to be a teacher. I was very interested [in teaching] and village residents recommended me because of the problems girls in the village had. They weren’t allowed to attend school. That made me really enthusiastic to do this holy job, as a service for the village residents.
-Woman teacher

Our respondents felt that being a woman allowed them to better respond to the needs of girls and women. First, they had a first-hand understanding of the barriers that girls and women face and were able to work to reduce these barriers. Second, they felt that they were setting an example for other girls and women.

Finally, respondents recognized that there was a difference between policy targets regarding women's representation and reality. They felt that women were under-represented in the education workforce, especially at the higher levels.

Across the interviews, respondents noted challenges working in education. We summarize their reflections below.

Hiring practices. Interviewees noted that some hiring practices favor men's experiences. For example, they noted that hiring preferences favor candidates who have higher education degrees from abroad. In Afghanistan, however, women face barriers that prevent them from studying outside the country. Lack of higher education and international degrees impedes their ability to compete for jobs, especially at more senior levels.

Lack of professional job support. Some women felt that they did not have access to professional support including training and professional connections. Since these opportunities often underpin hiring and promotion practices, women expressed hesitancy to apply for higher positions (see also MEC 2017).

Norms and expectations. Although women did not see their gender and their work in the education sector as incompatible, they noted that gender specific expectations shaped the nature and level of their professional engagement. For example, women were encouraged to work at local levels as teachers or community mobilizers instead of in more senior leadership roles. These norms could impede women from applying for more senior posts.

Family-related commitments. Women bear the brunt of family and household responsibilities, including child care. These commitments were sometimes hard to reconcile with working outside the home. Further, women often needed the agreement and support of their husband to work.

Distance and commuting. At the local level, female teachers faced challenges when they were assigned to schools in outside communities. Concerns regarding safety and social norms about propriety mean that women often need to be accompanied when travelling outside their community. This limited women's ability to accept certain jobs and also resulted in absenteeism.

Promising practices

Respondents also described practices that helped them perform their work and offered suggestions that could improve women's representation within the education sector in the future.

Affirmative action. To reach gender targets, affirmative action policies are needed at all levels of the education system, but specifically for higher management. Furthermore, these policies must be enforced.

Female representation should go all the way to leadership, particularly in the Ministry of Education. This is a reality. Women make up a part of the educational community, and this is their right....

-Woman MoE employee

Gender responsive workplaces. Several respondents working for NGOs noted that they worked in a supportive environment, in part, because there were other women in the office. Families may be more comfortable supporting a woman working in offices with other female colleagues. Such environments could also help women overcome their own hesitations to apply for certain jobs.

Recognition of women's added value. Respondents noted that being a woman helped them with certain professional duties, especially at the community and classroom level. One respondent noted, for example, that being a woman helped her in her work because women in rural communities felt more comfortable sharing information with a female staff member rather than with a male representative.

On the job training. Respondents noted that on the job training activities helped them improve their knowledge, competencies, and confidence. In this regard, women cited gender workshops by donor agencies and NGOs.

Flexibility. Jobs should consider norms and family needs that influence women's participation in the labor force. In this context, jobs that are close to home or allow women to balance child care and professional responsibilities are crucial.

Awareness raising. Respondents suggested that in cases where government and NGOs worked closely with communities and families, they were able to change attitudes regarding women's participation in the workforce both with women and men.

Gender policies that also address the needs of men. To achieve gender equality, policymakers need to work with both men and women. Policies and programs should also consider the needs and perspectives of men. They should also address men's attitudes and practices and how these affect women working in the education sector.

Transparent hiring and promotion practices. Our findings echo those of the 2017 MEC Report. Respondents working for NGOs appreciated that jobs were not obtained based on political or personal connections. They thought this supported recruiting and retaining women who, in general, had fewer connections to draw upon when looking for work.

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