Learning in a Militarized Context: 
Exploring Afghan Women’s Experiences of Higher Education 
in ‘Post-Conflict’ Afghanistan

by

Spogmai Akseer

A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements 
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
Graduate Department of Curriculum, Teaching and Learning
Ontario Institute for Studies in Education
University of Toronto

© Copyright by Spogmai Akseer 2015
This study examines the repercussions of the war on terror and subsequent occupation of Afghanistan, on the daily (gendered) life experiences of Afghan women. I argue that such wars are markers of the shifts in global capitalist accumulation processes, from exporting ‘goods’ to the Global South, to now exporting capitalism. Specifically, the war on terror is the latest manifestation of monopoly finance capitalism, which leverages wars and insecurity in the Global South as lucrative sites for accumulating profits and (re)investments.

Democratic ideals provide a ‘moral’ justification for mass militarism, human rights violations, torture and erosion of existing social and economic inequalities. Notions of freedom, equality or classlessness, which are important objectives of formal democracy, as well, colonialist and racist ideologies of Others have become effective mechanisms for capitalism to sustain and reproduce capitalist class relations.

Education is an important site for socializing citizens toward accepting and participating as human capital in monopoly finance capitalism. Through the World Bank, higher education reforms in Afghanistan are endorsing neoliberal policies, even as these policies continue to contradict and exacerbate existing inequalities. Specifically, female education has become a key strategy in continued militarization and occupation in the country.
In this study, I examine the contradictory ways in which female university students navigate through an increasingly militarized, violent and patriarchal terrain. Guided by a transnational feminist approach and a dialectical historical materialist framework, 19 female university students from 5 public and private universities were interviewed in Afghanistan. Findings suggest that the university is a contradictory site where participants mobilize new and old strategies for addressing gendered constraints in their lives, while simultaneously creating new ones.

The implications of these findings suggest a need for extensive institutional and ideological support for women’s learning, and also improving home-school connections. The participants’ desire to learn and their concerns over increasing violence and insecurity, reveal the militarized nature of their learning, as well, the possibility for critical and transformative learning against imperialism, patriarchy and class relations.
Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I thank God for giving me the strength and courage to continue on with this journey until the end. There were too many hoops I had to jump through to make it this far. I also thank my participants for trusting me with their stories and for offering me a glimpse into their lives at a time when many of them were also navigating through uncertain and difficult terrains. I am also forever grateful to my Supervisor Dr. Jamie-Lynn Magnusson, who introduced me to the world of financialization and who helped me understand my own role in this world, as a feminist making sense of everyday life while living across different (occupied) spaces. You are a wonderful teacher Jamie, and I am so thankful to have worked under your guidance!

I want to thank my dearest professors and committee members, Dr. Sarfaroz Niyozov and Dr. Ruben Gaztambide-Fernandez, from whom I have learned so much, and who continue to inspire me through their work. It was in the courses that I took with you, that I was able to grow intellectually and found the motivation to challenge myself further. I also thank my parents, whose love, admiration and continuous support continues to mean the world to me. You both made sacrifices so that your children would not have to. We have not forgotten Moor Jani and Plaar Jana! My beautiful siblings too have brought much joy to my life, and continue to be a source of strength for me and I am thankful for having them in my life.

I want to extend my gratitude also to the wonderful friends who have provided (selflessly) their guidance and support whenever I felt like giving up. Last but most definitely not least, I thank the two loves of my life, Said Marjan Zazai and Hunzala Patsun Zazai. I am forever indebted to you both for the unconditional love and happiness that you continue to bring to my life. Every day.
Table of Contents

Abstract.............................................................................................................................................. ii
Acknowledgements ......................................................................................................................... iv
Chapter 1 Background of the Study ................................................................................................. 1
  Mapping Out the Study ......................................................................................................................... 4
  Overview of the Literature ..................................................................................................................... 7
    The war on terror: A capitalist necessity? ....................................................................................... 8
    Essentialist narratives of difference ............................................................................................... 9
    Higher education reforms in Afghanistan: A neoliberal approach .............................................. 11
  Problem Statement and Research Question .................................................................................... 12
  Organization of the Study .................................................................................................................. 14
Chapter 2 Literature Review .............................................................................................................. 16
  Introduction ......................................................................................................................................... 16
  Capitalist Expansion and the ‘Need’ for Wars .................................................................................... 17
    Imperialism: The monopoly stage of capitalism ............................................................................ 17
    Financialization: The value of wars to accumulating profits ....................................................... 21
    The militarism/financialization alliance ......................................................................................... 24
  Neoliberal Restructuring .................................................................................................................... 28
  Implication of Women in Militarized Financial Capitalism ............................................................. 32
    Maintenance of patriarchal order through war .............................................................................. 32
    Colonialist/orientalist narratives of women as justification for war ........................................... 34
    Reclaiming feminist struggle in the war on terror ......................................................................... 37
    Interrogating ‘universal’ and ‘particular’ feminisms ...................................................................... 38
  Redefining agency ............................................................................................................................... 40
  Educational Reforms as Reproduction of Imperialist Order ............................................................. 43
    Purpose of education in conflict zones ........................................................................................... 43
    Schools as gendered institutions ....................................................................................................... 48
  Neoliberal restructuring of HE ........................................................................................................ 50
  Conceptual Framework: A Materialist Informed Transnational Feminist Approach ...................... 53
    Historical materialism .................................................................................................................... 54
    Dialectics .......................................................................................................................................... 57
  A dialectical-historical-materialist approach ................................................................................... 59
List of Tables

Table 1 Enrolment in Higher Education (1950-1995) ................................................. 81
Table 2 Growth of Student Enrollment in Afghanistan (2002-2012) ......................... 84
Table 3 University Partnerships Supported by SHEP/WB ........................................ 99
Table 4 Summary of Participants’ Backgrounds ......................................................... 122
List of Appendices

Appendix A Advertising Poster ................................................................. 237
Appendix B Consent Form ......................................................................... 238
Appendix C Interview Guide ..................................................................... 239
Chapter 1
Background of the Study

In recent years, there has been increasing interest in and recognition of the importance of education in zones affected by violent conflicts. Education is seen as a crucial step in the building and restoring process, and thus a major focus of humanitarian responses to conflict zones (Novelli, 2010). It is often prioritized with the assumption that it can potentially improve the economic conditions of those affected by the violence, and also contribute to peaceful civil relations (Maclure & Denov, 2009). Moreover, schools are seen as places where students can be equipped with the tools to address and transform fundamental social inequities and injustices (Pigozzi, 1999; Seitz, 2004). In situations where there has been systemic violence towards women, education is recognized as key in combating discrimination against them, and advocating for their empowerment instead (UNICEF, 2004, cited in Spink, 2005).

On the other hand, researchers have raised concern over the use of humanitarian aid as a political weapon to induce policy changes in the countries receiving the aid (Fleck & Kilby, 2010; Lancaster, 2007; Moss, Roodman, & Stanley, 2005). In Fleck and Kilby’s (2010) analysis of the US aid budget between 1955 and 2006, they found that the war on terror has drastically shifted from the allocation of aid upon the basis of humanitarian needs. Instead, it has prioritized those countries that the Bush administration deemed geopolitically important. Major financial institutions like the World Bank (WB) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) have played a crucial role in enforcing these transformations (Hill, 2003). Bhattacharyya (2005) for example, explains that since the 1970s, both IMF and the WB have been favouring and reflecting American political objectives rather than addressing
the humanitarian needs of a nation impacted by militarized conflict. In terms of education, the WB specifically has played a major role in influencing educational policy internationally (Torres & Schugurensky, 2002).

Harvey (2005) maintains that many of these shifts and changes that the U.S. has been advocating for and implementing reflect neoliberal ideologies which favour a militarized market-driven approach that limits the role of the state in favour of private growth and development. Taber (2009) adds further that these “neoliberalist policies are based on othering, preventing understanding, and promulgating violence, leading to violent international (and national) relations, and a perpetuation of war and militarism” (pp. 196-197).

Moreover, whereas in the past, relief and reconstruction to post-conflict contexts included immediate physical relief, reducing social dislocation, and restoring a function of social organization now it has become more military focused and market-driven (Bello, 2006). Some changes that are often implemented through this approach include privatization, deregulation, withdrawal of the state from areas of social provision, and emphasis on notions of individualism and competition. Also, public assets are targeted for privatization, commoditization and corporatization (Bello, 2006). It is an approach that is also criticized for favouring capitalist and Western hegemony, rather than contributing positively to the development of the recipient nations (see for example, Altbach & Kelly, 1978; Carnoy, 1974; King, 1991; Watson, 1982).

It is within these discussions that I situate my study and recognize the significance of investigating how the war on terror implicates women and also the war itself materializes in the lives of women living in Afghanistan. It is after all, a war that continues to be waged,
causing greater destruction, civilian casualties, and insecurity, particularly for women (Glad, 2009). Concerns raised by feminists of colour in particular resonate with me, as their accounts often interrogate and contradict mainstream feminist depictions of the war on terror as a ‘humanitarian’ effort, and instead see it as an occupation that exploits women further in order to justify and serve Western geopolitical interests (see for example, Abu-Lughod, 2002; Hirschkind & Mahmood, 2002; Mohanty, 2003).

Moreover, while mainstream scholarship continues to (over)emphasize the Taliban’s violation of women and girls rights (for example, during their rule, they had made veiling mandatory, and prevented females from seeking employment or education), other are left out by the international community, including the impact of the escalating conflict, insecurity, militarization of everyday life, and enduring poverty (Ayotte & Husain, 2005; Daulatzai, 2006; Yacoobi, 2008). Their concerns align with my personal experiences of feeling despair and alienation from the selective, politicized, and essentialist ways in which Afghan women continue to be depicted in mainstream media and scholarship.

Notably, it is women’s and girls’ access to education that continues to receive the most attention in mainstream scholarship. Novelli (2010) draws important connections between access to education and the occupation, asserting that increasing enrollment rates among females has become a key discursive justification for the US-led military intervention, and continues to be used to mark the success of the occupation. The narratives that are often circulated do not acknowledge other experiences, including, how women continue to navigate through militarized and insecure terrains in their everyday life, how they balance or navigate through historical practices of gendered subjugation, or how the present occupation
itself is exacerbating their lives. The attention brought international recognition and aid for the (re)development of the country, especially in addressing existing gender hierarchies.

Thus I became interested in examining further the socio-geopolitical context within which these narratives were circulated and legitimized. I began to wonder, what were their implications for the women living there? How were they navigating through these changes and perceptions? As someone who has always felt a strong emotional, social and physical connection to women living there, my concerns echoed those of feminists who took a critical stance towards the essentialized, homogenized portrayals of women in the Global South, appropriating or denying completely, their agency (Abu-Lughod, 2002; Mohanty, 1991). Similarly, my interest in examining the educational terrain was mainly because, as stated earlier, this was a topic that constantly came up in mainstream stories about Afghan women and girls. This attention was especially concerning to me due to the fact that schools are considered highly gendered terrain themselves, that actively reproduce hierarchies and gendered roles and expectations already existing in society (Apple, 1985; Stromquist, 2008). Moreover, Afghanistan has its own contentious history of securing Afghan women’s place in formal educational institutions. Their access is a topic that has continued to divide the population, and also reveals the contradictory ways in which it is presently used to justify an occupation, and a retreat towards more conservative religious and cultural attitudes.

**Mapping Out the Study**

My main purpose in this study is to understand the lives of Afghan women in an era that has come to mark a significant capitalist restructuring of the world. Within this restructuring, wars have become central sites for capital accumulation, and thus differences and divisions have come to play a significant role in generating and maintaining wealth and
power in to fewer and fewer hands. Exploitation, direct violence, the maintenance of uncertainty and human rights violations are becoming important elements of this paradigm. Specifically, in this study I explore how, through the war on terror, capitalism has found a more compelling and ‘creative’ way to accumulate wealth from those who are already living on the margins. Specifically, I aim to focus on the financialized form of capitalism, and how it has enabled an ‘endless supply’ of wealth, by making wars a site for profit generation.

In order to justify occupations like the one in Iraq and Afghanistan, financialized capitalism has incorporated a number of important discourses, including humanitarian development (enforced through neoliberal policies by organizations like the WB, or the International Monetary Fund), maintaining global security (and thus increasing militarization of everyday life in the Global North and South), and finally, appropriated feminist principles to market the occupation as protecting women’s rights.

Lenin (1963) noted important changes in capitalist accumulation that provide us with further context on the globalized nature of present-day capitalism. For example, he explains that during the second half of the 19th century, capital was becoming more and more concentrated in to fewer hands or monopolized. Simultaneously there was increasing interest and involvement of European nations in the Global South. Capitalists were running out of options to invest surplus domestically signalling a crisis to capitalism (a crisis that it continues to face today). Therefore, imperialism was a way through which capitalism was able to rescue itself out of a possible collapse, as it provided capitalists with new markets where they could re-invest their capital in exchange for much cheaper labour and resources. As I will elaborate on in Chapter 2, imperialism not only allowed for the extraction of profits
from non-capitalist states, but it also became a symbol of the major shift in capitalism as it shifted from an industrial-based one to finance-based.

This shift towards finance continues to reflect capitalist development in the present day. In fact, through present imperialist relations between capitalist and non-capitalist economics, finance has come to occupy a significant role in global accumulation as it encompasses all aspects of capital accumulation as well as world economic and political systems (Magnusson, 2014). Moreover, imperialism has become even more important as capital no longer has a specific nation as its base, nor is capital linked to any specific state-related interests (Patnaik, 2010).

The result of financialized capitalism has been a continued proliferation of inequality and under-development between capitalist and non-capitalist economies. These processes have benefitted extensively from existing colonial relations as well as racial superiority which “formed part of the ideological armoury of imperialism” (Sweezy, 1970, p. 311). Sweezy explains that racism not only enabled capitalists to justify foreign conquests but also divert attention from class struggles domestically:

The usefulness of racism was not limited to rationalising foreign conquest. It also was useful to the ruling classes for diverting attention away from class struggle. Racial antagonism and discrimination against racial minorities could and did lead to the depression of wages of the disadvantaged, with ‘favoured sections of the population … [reaping] substantial material rewards. (Sweezy, 1970, p. 311)

Similarly, as Magnusson and Mojab (2014) address, besides racialized relations, organized gendered relations have also become necessary components, specifically in reproducing the present financialized accumulation regimes. Though patriarchal relations have exploited women even before capitalism, the two factors have become inseparable and
thus integral to capitalism’s survival (Mies, 1986). As a result, it is not surprising to see that women’s bodies are categorically battled over in the war on terror, along with specific racialized narratives (or Orientalist rationalities), about those who are to be viewed as victims and those are to be deemed ‘liberated’ or ‘empowered’.

Finally, in this study I unravel some of the connections between the war on terror and financialized accumulation to provide an understanding of how colonialism, racist ideologies, sexism, and growing militarism come together in order to further dispossess and disempower those who are already socially and economically marginalized. Specifically, this study challenges essentialist and ahistorical analyses of Afghan women’s victims or heroes in post-2001 Afghanistan, through the examination of the interconnectedness of universal gendered politics with local gendered politics and the ways in which these connections might further disenfranchise women. This analysis is especially important at the moment as countries like Canada and the United States have invested in similar wars even as there is an outcry over the failure of the present war on terror, especially for women (Glad, 2009). Specifically, through an anti-imperialist, anti-capitalist feminist approach, I determine the ways in which a financialized and capitalist version of post-conflict development implicates Afghan women as part of its profit-driven agenda, and more importantly how Afghan women navigate through this terrain.

**Overview of the Literature**

In this study, I draw connections between three bodies of literature in order to understand the connections between the war on terror, recent internationally-led development initiatives in Afghanistan, and the location of Afghan women both as racialized and gendered objects and active subjects within this terrain. Because the occupation of Afghanistan is still
ongoing, there is still a need for more attention and research that examines the implications of such wars for women in the Global South, particularly when they are already living under conditions that are oppressive. My research addressed these concerns by examining the connections between the war on terror and financialized capitalist restructuring, followed by an examination of women’s implication in this war, focusing mainly on the use of colonialist and Orientalist constructions of Afghan women. Finally, I examine educational reforms in post-conflict contexts, particularly higher education in Afghanistan, in order understand its relation to larger geopolitical restructuring in the Global South since 2001.

The war on terror: A capitalist necessity?

The war on terror has been explained by some Marxists as an important element of capital accumulation (see for example, Amin, 2004; Bichler & Nitzan, 2004; Harvey, 2007). There has also been a critique of the fusing of democracy with (neo)liberal discourses which favour capitalist social organizing (Amin, 2001; Harvey, 2007; Magnusson, 2013; Mojab & Carpenter, 2011). Harvey (2007) and Allman (2007), for example, raise concerns over the fusing of concepts such as ‘freedom’, ‘equality’ and ‘individual liberty’ with neoliberal notions which reduce the role of the state and instead advocate market-driven political and economic practices. This process not only alienates people from their potentials or powers, but also forces them to surrender to dominant relations of power. Moreover, Mojab and Carpenter (2011) further explain that a neoliberal approach to development also conceals its violent and destructive side, as evidenced through the last two decades of increasing wars, poverty, violence against women and children and slavery.

In this research I also examine the larger geopolitical context within which the war on terror has materialized. My examination draws from the work of researchers who connect the
war on terror to a militarized monopoly finance capital (see for example, Amin, 2004; Bichler & Nitzan, 2012; Epstein, 2005; Foster, 2007, 2010; Lapavitsas, 2011; Magnusson, 2013; Young, 2010), and more specifically work that pays close attention to international dimensions of this phase (Patnaik, 2010). Investments in military spending since the 1970s in particular, not only helped rescue capitalism out of a possible recession (Bichler & Nitzan, 2004, 2012), but they have also enabled superpowers like the United States to enforce its economic and political will on the Global South (Amin, 2004). Military investments not only provide an avenue for investing surplus domestically, but also for maintaining imperialist order in the rest of the world. As Lenin (1963) highlighted over a century ago, the colonialist divisions of the world helped further assist capitalist expansion, and continue to play an important role, particularly when coupled with patriarchy. I examine this connection through the gendered and racialized dimensions of the war on terror.

**Essentialist narratives of difference**

Patriarchal relations reproduce hierarchies within which both men and women must perform and to which they are often confined. Mies (1986) links patriarchy to capitalism, arguing that the two are not only connected, but also that capitalism cannot function without it. Similarly, Moghadam (1991) maintains that patriarchy is not limited to a particular culture or context but rather is universal and is a function of asymmetrical power relations. Specifically, in this study I examine concerns raised by feminists over the war on terror’s appropriation of feminist scholarship and activism (Abu-Lughod, 2009; Bhattaacharyya, 2008; Kandiyoti, 2005; Mohanty, Pratt, & Riley, 2008). Bhattaacharyya (2008) for example explains that the war on terror has made it more difficult to differentiate genuine feminist
narratives to understand and improve women’s condition from those that serve and justify the American-led occupation.

The war on terror also enforces racialized understandings of others in order to gain support for its invasion of countries like Afghanistan. Mohanty et al. (2008) and Narayan (1997) are critical of Western feminism for framing women of the Global South through colonialist and racist frames and place them within capitalist relations of power. Similarly, Mahmood (2005) rearticulates mainstream Orientalist constructions of women’s agency in the Global South as submissive, passive or victimized, and instead urges feminists to examine women’s agency as a product of specific historical and cultural practices. Moreover, Mahmood argues against the liberal notion of agency which assumes that it is always enacted in opposition to dominance, or to challenge existing social norms. According to her, this definition does not speak to lived experiences of women living within those particular systems of domination, and as a result such an understanding overlooks enactments of agency that uphold the status quo.

Many of the stories that I came across in mainstream media and scholarship provided a limited understanding of Afghan women’s lives, often reducing them to Orientalist constructions of Muslim women as passive beings, in need of Western occupation. A newly emerging body of feminist work has raised concerns against such portrayals (see for example, Daulatzai, 2006, 2008; Hirschkind & Mahmood, 2002; Rostami-Povey, 2003, 2007). However even these accounts often discussed women’s agency as an opposing reaction to dominant discourses. My own realities of living and navigating through various constraints in my life challenged constructions of agency as an oppositional reaction to
power. I believed firmly that to overtly oppose authority was a privilege and a risk that every woman could not afford.

Thus Mahmood’s (2001) notion of agency emphasizes the important role that relations of power, including historical, on one’s enactment of agency. For example, silence or docility could be a form of agency that specific relations of power enable in a particular context. My goal in this study is to situate women’s experiences in a context that is marked not only by global relations of power, but also local ones, with both using girls’ education specifically, to assert their political objectives. Specifically, by using a dialectical historical materialist lens, I examine the ways in which these competing ideologies ultimately disempower women, while they also lead to contradictions. It is within these contradictions that women enact agency (depending on their own social location) in diverse ways.

**Higher education reforms in Afghanistan: A neoliberal approach**

In post-conflict contexts, education is often seen as an important step towards rebuilding and peace, and as a result a priority in the (re)development process. It is believed that education provides an opportunity to address fundamental social inequities and injustices (Pigozzi, 1999; Seitz, 2004). However, researchers have also questioned the benefits of education, particularly as post-conflict development aid is seen as tied to the foreign policies of donor nations (Bush & Saltarelli, 2000; Lundborg, 1998; Novelli, 2010; Wang, 1999). In the war on terror in particular, development aid is said to have shifted more explicitly towards foreign policies of the donor nations (Novelli, 2010; Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2008). In Afghanistan, increased access to schools and enrollment of women and girls were used to exemplify the success of the US-led occupation (Novelli, 2010).
Similarly Mcnerney’s (2009) study of higher education reforms in Afghanistan note donor influences through educational aid and according to his study, these influences prescribe a market-driven agenda that is not in line with Afghanistan’s own educational development. In fact, since the 1980s, neo-liberal restructuring has been an integral part of the educational aid that is often given to poorer nations (Herrera, 2008; Hill, 2003; Naidoo, 2003) and even within Western capitalist nations (Magnusson, 2000b). In Afghanistan, these restructurings have been introduced mainly through the World Bank and other major financial institutions (Mcnerney, 2009).

In this study, I explore literature mapping the connections between international aid, local educational reforms, and how these materialize in the lives of people active in those spaces. My central focus is on the experiences of women due to the fact that restoring Afghan women’s rights and their access to education specifically, has been an important justifying factor in the rhetoric used by Western-led forces to invade and occupy Afghanistan (Khan, 2008). I examine these concerns in relation to research highlighting schools themselves as sites where gendered discourses are not only (re)produced but actively maintained (Apple, 1985). Finally, I focus mainly on educational reforms post-2001 as many important reforms have occurred in this time period, under the direction of international financial institutions like the World Bank.

**Problem Statement and Research Question**

My aim in this study is to understand how Afghan women navigate universal and particular gendered constraints in their lives. Enloe (2004) explains that militarism is an ideology that carries specific values, beliefs and assumptions about what is good or proper, and what is bad, wrong or improper. Women’s bodies become markers of particular
outcomes. In the case of Afghanistan, women’s bodies provide justification for the occupation. Their access (and denial by the Taliban) to formal education in particular, has become highly politicized as both sides appropriate it to serve their own political agendas. As a result, sites like the university serve as battlegrounds for various ideologies, contested over and through the bodies of women and their ‘rightful’ place in society. The literature that I have briefly highlighted above, and will discuss in more detail in Chapter 2, highlight the different ways in which women’s bodies have come to serve Western political objectives since 2001.

The literature review provides important contextual information and in turn a framework for analysis. I also want to understand women’s daily experiences of negotiating constraints that are similarly adverse but are also contradictory, and more importantly, how they articulated and drew meanings out of these experiences. Thus, it is important for me to understand how these changes impacted their lives, by centralizing their knowledge about their own lives, but also being cognizant of the politicized nature of the structures within which they were unfolding. In order to achieve this, my efforts were guided by transnational feminist principles throughout this study. Specifically, a feminist approach examines relations of power, including between the researcher-researched, the local-global, and women themselves, to understand how these relations (re)produce and maintain asymmetrical gender relations, and also find ways to challenge them (Brooks & Hesse-Biber, 2007). My research question was as follows: How does higher education influence female students’ agency in embodying, resisting, reproducing and/or transforming gendered relations of power in their lives? This question helped me not only centralize women as actively engaged in
understanding and navigating through constraints in their lives, but also explore possibilities of resistance.

In designing my methodology and methods, I drew from feminist principles in order to examine my own relation within the research process, both as an ‘insider’ and as an ‘outsider’. I approached my participants as knowers, and their knowledge as an integral part of my understanding and analysis. Specifically a feminist approach proved useful as I was able to incorporate my participants’ responses not only as part of the analysis but also in the claims I made about their lives.

**Organization of the Study**

The layout of this thesis is as follows: Chapter 1 provides a brief background of the problem, a map of the study, a brief overview of the literature, and finally the intent of the study and research question. Chapter 2 provides a review of the literature relevant to this topic. Chapter 3 provides a historical look at the development of formal education in Afghanistan, specifically highlighting Higher Education (HE) reforms since 2001. Chapter 4 provides details about the data collection and analysis process. I will discuss how and why I used a transnational feminist lens informed by a dialectical historical materialist approach to help me collect and analyze my data. Chapter 5, 6 and 7 will present an analysis of important themes that emerged from the participants’ responses. Each chapter is divided in to three subthemes. Chapter 5, The Militarized Nature of Learning, includes the following sub-themes: From Living in Exile to Coming Home: A Journey of Hope and Entitlement, Navigating through Old and New Dilemmas While Living Under Occupation, and finally, The Pursuit of Higher Education: A Means of Disrupting Constraints. Chapter 6, Higher Education as a Mode of Resistance, includes the following sub-themes: Contesting the
Gendered Nature of Social and Material Constraints, The Home as a Site for Wavering Expectations, and HE as an Instrument of Power and Negotiation. Finally, Chapter 7, The University as a Site for Redefining Self and Others, includes the following three sub-themes: Confronting Foreign Misconceptions, (Re)Defining Education Self as ‘Different’ and finally, Transforming Gendered Boundaries: A Complex Undertaking. Chapter 8 provides conclusions and implications for future directions.
Chapter 2
Literature Review

Introduction

This study examines how the interlocking of HE and larger capitalist development efforts in Afghanistan materialize in the lives of Afghan women active in those spaces. Specifically the aim is to understand how Afghan women pursuing HE negotiate relations of power, through the context of war, occupation, violence, insecurity, militarization and uncertainty. Therefore, this study examines the waging of wars as an integral component of capitalist development in the Global South; it is concerned with the ‘packaging’ and ‘delivery’ of these development initiatives, and more significantly, how these initiatives impact women, whose subordination and exploitation is a perpetuating practice in capitalist and non-capitalist societies. Also, a theoretical framework that is developed through these bodies of literature, mainly a critical anti-capitalist, anti-imperialist feminist framework, will be useful in understanding the main thesis of this study.

The literature review is divided into four main parts. First I review Lenin’s (1963) thesis on imperialism as the (current) advanced stage of capitalism. Specifically, financialization, as a present form of capital accumulation will be examined in order to understand how wars have become part of the accumulation, and therefore profit-generating process. An analysis of neoliberal theory will follow, in order to make connections between development efforts and wars.

Second, I examine how women are implicated in such wars, by first providing an understanding of patriarchy and imperialist development, followed by a brief discussion of the role of feminism within imperial expansion, and how Orientalist constructions of gender
differences in the Global South, (specifically in Muslim countries) have enabled Western-imperialists to justify war and violence without accountability in the mainstream culture.

Third, I examine the relation between educational reforms and foreign aid in post-conflict contexts. I situate schools as gendered institutions within the broader articulations of development agencies and their understanding of the role and purpose of schooling in post-conflict zones. In order to recognize these articulations, I examine HE reforms and connect these to neoliberal policies in the Global South.

Finally, this literature review also puts together a theoretical framework that aims to assist in analyzing the experiences of women in HE and their agency. This framework is a feminist, anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist inquiry that helps guide my analysis of the war and its impact on Afghan women’s lives.

**Capitalist Expansion and the ‘Need’ for Wars**

**Imperialism: The monopoly stage of capitalism**

Capitalism is defined broadly as the turbulent and unequal (exploitive) relationship between two classes; the bourgeoisie (owners of social production and employers of wage) and the proletariat (wage labourers with no means of production of their own, who must sell their labour power in order to live) (Marx & Engels, 1945). Moreover, according to Marx, while money is ‘pre-condition’ for the development of capital (1990), it cannot be converted to capital without the labour of the proletariat. Marx (2015) writes,

> For the conversion of his money into capital, therefore, the owner of money must meet in the market with the free labourer, free in the double sense, that as a free man he can dispose of his labour-power as his own commodity, and that on the other hand he has no other commodity for sale, is short of everything necessary for the realization of his labour-power. (Para. 5)
Moreover, for the capitalists to continue converting money into capital, labour-power “must be continually replaced by, at the very least, an equal amount of fresh labour-power (Marx, 2015, para. 11). This relationship is defined and maintained by the asymmetry in the power relations of the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, with the former exploiting the latter in a direct and brutal way.

Expanding profit for the bourgeoisie is at the heart of capitalist development, and as a result, it is not limited to any one nation but rather constantly in search of finding ways to expand and increase accumulation. Marx and Engels (1945) explain that in order for capitalists to accumulate more profits, capital cannot be located to a particular group or location. They state: the need of a constantly expanding market for its products chases the Bourgeoisie over the entire surface of the globe. It must nestle everywhere, settle everywhere, establish connexions everywhere (p. 16).

The importance of expanding markets is explored further by Lenin (1917) in his discussion of Imperialism. Lenin (1917) maintains that by the beginning of the 20th century, capitalist development had reached a monopoly characterized by Imperialism. This form of capitalist development consisted of the following five features:

1. The concentration of production and capital had developed to a significantly high stage to the point where it created monopolies which played a decisive role in economic life.
2. The merging of bank capital with industrial capital, and the creation of a financial oligarchy.
3. The export of capital instead of export of commodities.
4. The formation of international monopolist capitalist associations which share the world among themselves.

5. The completion of the territorial division of the whole world among the biggest capitalist powers.

Monopolies are established when all sources of raw materials are captured by one group (p. 4). This concentration of production has reached a point where it is now possible to make an approximate estimate of all raw materials of a country and even the entire world. Moreover, as Lenin (1917) explains, the characteristic feature of Imperialism is not industrial, but finance capital. This idea is illustrated in the following point:

The greatest success no longer goes to the merchant whose technical and commercial experience enables him best of all to estimate the needs of the buyer, and who is able to discover and so to speak, ‘awaken’ a latent demand; it goes to the speculative genius (?) who knows how to estimate, or even only to sense in advance, the organizational development and possibilities of certain connections between individual enterprises and banks. (p. 7)

Lenin elucidates that the need to export capital arises from the fact that capitalism has become “overripe” in a few countries, and therefore it is not able to make profits at home (due to mass poverty and a poor agricultural state). As a result, capitalism must pursue places that can absorb this overproduction. The fact that the world was already divided among wealthy and poorer nations made exporting to the periphery an easy and favourable process for advanced capitalist nations.

Moreover Patnaik (2010) further clarifies that finance capital of today has become much more important to imperialism than during the time that Lenin was writing about it. He highlights three differences between the finance capital that Lenin was describing, and the finance capital of today. First, Lenin described finance capital as capital which “served the
needs of its industrial empire, [however] the new finance capital is not necessarily tied to industry in any special sense. It moves around the world in the quest for quick, speculative gains” (para. 7). Second, finance capital has now become international and is no longer tied to particular national interests or a particular sphere such as industry. Instead, finance capital now has “the world as its theatre of operations” (para. 8). Finally, the inter-imperialist rivalry that Lenin mentions in his analysis is now muted. Even though competitions and other contradictions exist between superpowers, they are “kept in check by the need of globalized finance to have the entire globe as its unrestricted arena of operations” (para. 9).

Like Lenin however, Patnaik (2010) also elaborates on the continued threat of ‘overproduction’ and the inability of capitalist states to overcome problems of global overproduction. Paul Sweezy (1994) explains further the problem of ‘overproduction’ at home and the need to absorb (export) surplus capital, as it can seriously threaten capitalist expansion by causing stagnation. As Sweezy (1994) explains, economic stagnation is an inherent part of capitalist accumulation, and therefore can threaten capitalism as it did during the Deep Depression of the 1930s in America. Sweezy (1994) writes: “it is the nature of accumulation to eliminate the demand that stimulates it. And unless new stimuli emerge, the process subsides, and the tendency to stagnation takes over” (para. 18).

Military spending became a central instrument in maintaining stability in monopoly capitalism (Baran, 1976). Similarly, as Luxemburg (1971) points out, militarism in general has always been of great importance to primitive accumulation and helped capitalist states’ struggle for the division of non-capitalist regions amongst themselves (p. 454). But in recent years, particularly during the 1970s when production stagnated once again, investments in the war industry helped mitigate another possible crisis (Sweezy, 1994). Moreover, Epstein
(2005) explains that during this time, profound transformations took place in economies around the world. Some of these changes included the diminishing role of the government (except to help protect capital’s interests), a rise in economic transactions between nations, and a drastic increase in domestic and international financial transactions.

Patnaik (2010) situates these changes as an outcome of the evolving nature of imperialism from the times when Lenin was describing finance capital. He explains:

In the current phase of imperialism, finance capital has become international, while the State remains a nation-State. The nation-State therefore willy-nilly must bow before the wishes of finance, for otherwise finance (both originating in that country and brought in from outside) will leave that particular country and move elsewhere, reducing it to illiquidity and disrupting its economy. (para. 12)

Patnaik further goes on to suggest that within this phase of imperialism, “there has been such an immense growth of the financial sector within each capitalist economy and of financial flows across the globe that many have talked of a process of “financialization” of capitalism, rather like “industrialization” earlier’ (para. 6). Therefore the role of the state is not diminished but rather heightened through neoliberal policies, “to one that is concerned almost exclusively with the interests of finance capital” (para. 13).

In the next section, I discuss in detail the relation between militarism, financialization, and neoliberal policies to examine how they have materialized through the current war on terror, as present modes of global accumulation.

**Financialization: The value of wars to accumulating profits**

In order to define and understand the importance of militarism to financialization and its agency in capitalist accumulation, it is important to first provide a brief understanding of Marx’s articulation of finance capital as it existed in pre-capitalist form. They are described
in his analysis of the production cycle, which characterized much of industrial-era capitalist development. According to Marx (1956), the production cycle then consisted of three interconnected circuits. These included:

1. **Money circuit**: this involves borrowing money from money capital (i.e. finance sector)
2. **Productive circuit**: this entails transforming money capital into productive capital (i.e. building factories and/or purchasing labour power)
3. **Commodity circuit**: transforming productive capital into commodity capital (also referred to as “commercial sector”). (Marx, 1956)

Within this cycle, the “productive circuit” dominated the money and commodity circuits. Since the 1970s however, a shift took place in capitalist economies from production as the dominant form of accumulation to finance as a central mode of accumulation. This shift came to be known as financialization (Lapavitsas, 2011, Patnaik, 2010). Magnusson (2014) defines financialization “as the historical process by which capital in its money form emerged dominant in the world economic and even political system” (Magnusson, 2014, p. 8). As a result, she goes on to argue that capital accumulation in its present form is dominated by the “money circuit” instead of the “productive circuit”. Magnusson (2014) elaborates: “Pragmatically, what this means is that it can be more lucrative to borrow money at one per cent interest and reinvest it in the credit market at 20 per cent interest than to take that same money and build factories” (Magnusson, 2014, p. 9).

Moreover, Epstein (2005) notes “the increasing role of financial motives, financial markets, financial actors and financial institutions in the operation of domestic and international economies” (p. 3). These elements are also highlighted in Lapavitsas’s (2011) description of three fundamental principles of financialization which include:
1. Large non-financial corporations have reduced their reliance on bank loans and have acquired financial capacities.

2. Banks have expanded opportunities for mediating activities in financial markets as well as lending to households.

3. Households have become increasingly involved in the realm of finance as debtors and asset holders.

Patnaik (2010) explains that before finance capital was tied to industry, and served national interest however, now finance capital no longer has this dependency on the industry or state interests. Detached from national interests, capital can now move freely to anywhere:

Around the world in the quest for quick, speculative gains, no matter in what sphere such gains accrue. This finance is not separate from industry, since even capital employed in industry is not immune to the quest for speculative gains, but industry does not occupy any special place in the plans of finance capital. In other words not only does capital-as-finance function as capital-as-finance, but even capital-in-production also functions as capital-as-finance; capital-as-finance on the other hand has no special interest in production. (para. 7)

This supplies capitalist states with plenty of cheap labour and exploitation in the Global South, extracting labour mainly from vulnerable, (mainly poor and racialized minority) populations (Patnaik, 2010). Magnusson (2014) also explains that through financialization, primitive accumulation, for example, sex trafficking of women and children, becomes an essential component in producing wealth and securing political power (p. 2). Financialized capitalism also blurs the lines between licit and illicit economy, and in fact the two become co-constitutive (Bhattacharya, 2005). Thus, Magnusson (2014) points out that as sex trafficking profits rise (as well as other forms of illicit wealth), so does the expansion of a
The militarization of aid, intervening in wars, and regulating movements across national borders, militarized police states, are some of the forms that militarized financialism takes. Below, I will examine in detail the connections between militarism and financialization, and link these to the present occupation of Afghanistan.

The militarism/financialization alliance

Along with the increasing importance of labour power in the present financialized accumulation regimes, there continues to be a consistent presence and pervasiveness of militarism. Marxists have long noted the centrality of wars for accumulating capital. Luxemburg (1971) for example, referred to it as an essential “weapon in the competitive struggle between capitalist countries for areas of non-capitalist civilization” (p. 454). She further explains that militarism “fulfils a quite definite function in the history of capital, accompanying as it does every historical phase of accumulation” (Luxemburg, 1971, p. 454). Similarly, Lenin (1964) also emphasized the importance of wars to accumulation, referring to them as “inseparable from the political systems that engender them” (para. 5).

In the 1970s, the entire Global North experienced a profit crunch as nations found themselves in deficit, particularly the United States. In response to this crisis, as Magnusson (2014) explains, what unfolded is the historical process by which the global economy became ‘financialized’ (p. 12). These new processes included structural adjustment programs “that violently impacted the [G]lobal South by exponentially increasing indebtedness and manipulating and destroying local economies, opening them up for exploitation by the [G]lobal North” (p. 12), and the importance of neoliberal policies globally in making possible the “reorganization of production, moving parts of production to areas where labour
was cheaper” (Magnusson, 2014, p. 12). Militarism, in the form of economic coercion was exerted through the enforcement of “structural adjustment programs and subsequent neo-liberal economic polices enforced by the International Monetary Fund” (p. 12).

The outcome of these changes included mass investments in military spending and ‘development’ initiatives in the Global South, led mainly by the United States. Foster (2010) illustrates this point by writing:

In the USA, a new wave of military spending and imperial interventionism was coupled with efforts to curtail the income of the working class, redistributing income and wealth from the poor to the rich. Internationally, this took the form of global restructuring with third world debt as its leverage, ushering in a period of neoliberal globalization. (p. 4)

Similarly, Bichler and Nitzen (2012) explain that in the past, “surplus of goods and capital had to be exported to and invested in pre-capitalist colonies” (p. 46). However, they maintain that military investments provided a solution for the disposal of surplus to be ‘wasted’ unproductively at home, and more importantly, maintain imperial order in the world. They write:

Military spending comes to serve a dual role: together with the financial sector and other forms of waste, it propels the accumulation of capital by black holing a large chunk of the economic surplus; and it helps secure a more sophisticated and effective neo-imperial order that no longer needs colonial territories but is every bit as expansionary, exploitative and violent as its crude imperial predecessor. (Bichler & Nitzen, 2012, pp. 47-48)

In regards to underdeveloped economies, Foster (2007) contends that financial globalization, enabled greater imperial penetration, and increased their financial dependencies on superpowers. Even advanced economies like China and India, “have not been able to break out of the imperial systems of foreign exchange and financial control,
which leave them often passively responding to initiatives determined primarily the ‘triad’ of the US, Europe and Japan” (Foster, 2010, p. 11).

Moreover, through financial globalization, new financial markets were constructed so that capital could find profitable outlets (Young, 2010). For example, Ramonet (1997) suggests that the creation of financial organizations like the World Bank (WB), International Monetary Fund (IMF), Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and the World Trade Organization (WTO) created an artificial world state ”with no base in society. It is answerable instead to the financial markets and the mammoth business undertakings that are its masters. The result is that the real states in the real world are becoming societies with no power base” (cited in Foster 2007, p. 9).

Amin (2001) explains that through military spending, the United States ensures its absolute hegemony over the rest of the world. Importantly, Amin asserts that the ideological discourses that enable superpowers (a ‘Triad’ consisting of United States, Western Europe and Japan), to continue on with its imperial conquests are now founded on a “duty to intervene” that is justified through a narrative of defense of “democracy”, the “rights of peoples”, and “humanitarianism”. Moreover, the vagueness of terms like “terrorism”, “dangerous”, “international crime” makes it possible for the United States to justify any aggression. According to Amin (2001), democracy is used in conjunction with capitalist development whereby all aspects of life are treated as separate entities and the logic of reason is linked strongly with market ideologies.

Ellen Meiksins Wood (2006) has provided further arguments to Amin’s’ notion of warfare and its infusion with democratic values as a strategy of militarized financialism. Wood (2006) explains that through liberal democratic concepts of ‘freedom’ and ‘equality’
incorporated into financialized capitalism, it is now even more difficult to recognize and/or challenge existing inequalities. She suggests that capitalism is able to coexist with the ideology of freedom and equality in way that no other system of domination could:

In fact, the idea that capitalists and workers alike are free and equal has become the most important ideological support of capitalism. Formal democracy with its ideology of freedom, equality and classlessness, has become one of the most effective mechanisms in sustaining and reproducing capitalist class relations. (Wood, 2006, p. 12)

According to Wood (2006), democracy is infused with politics of market ideology and profit imperatives provides an important ideology to justify “a state of permanent war” (p. 16).

Similar to Wood (2006), Magnusson (2000) also is critical of the influences of liberal discourses in the articulation of democracy, raising concerns over the prominence of capitalist relations of power in its formation. Magnusson clarifies:

Liberal democratic discourse constructs the democratic project so that it supports the major discursive features of capitalist social organization, including private property, free enterprise, and protection of individual freedom through a political framework of “democratic” practice that is inherently elitist. (2000, p. 3)

Harvey (2003) draws connections between the war on terror as a fusing of democracy with warfare, in order to justify civilian casualty, violence, destruction, and occupation of underdeveloped nations. He specifically explains, that the war on terror helped replace the language of repression, resentment, and poverty with hope of democracy, development, free market and free trade (p. 4). The war also served as “a grand opportunity to impose a new social order” (p. 21), where criticism of the state was disabled, and a unity based on hatred of the Other was established.
Moreover, development efforts within this context have been criticized for favouring ‘economic development or ‘economic progress’ rather than real attempts to improve war-stricken societies (Mohanty et al, 1991). Fluri (2009) asserts that there has been an interlocking of neoliberal economic structures and the practices of development and humanitarian aid. Fluri argues that achieving peace is strongly linked to neoliberal economics and imperial geopolitics. Suhrke (2007) further elaborates on this point by suggesting that restructuring leads to tensions related to social changes such as violence and insecurity. The next section provides a greater understanding of neoliberal theory and its influence in imperialist wars.

**Neoliberal Restructuring**

Magnusson (2013) explains that financialization is in tandem with neoliberal economics. These economic policies have helped capitalism toward its current financialized form. Kotz (2008) adds further that neoliberal policies have further enabled financialization to flourish globally. As with financialization, neoliberal policies gained momentum around the crisis of the 1970s, when it was felt that state powers needed to be limited in order to expand capital. Specifically, Kotz (1980) explains that around 1980, “a radical shift took place from state-regulated capitalism to neoliberal capitalism” (p. 5). Harvey (2007) maintains that after the crisis of the 1970s, something was needed to help open markets in new spaces for investment, and “clear fields where financial powers could operate securely” (p. 32). He defines neoliberalism as “a theory of political economic practices proposing that human well-being can best be advanced by the maximization of entrepreneurial freedoms within an institutional framework characterized by private property rights, individual liberty, unencumbered markets, and free trade” (p. 22). The role of the state is to secure private
property rights and support freely functioning markets through military, defence, police and juridical functions.

Harvey (2007) illustrates that neoliberal restructuring enabled the transition of wealth and power from the lower class into the hands of wealthy upper class through a process called ‘accumulation by dispossession’. Accumulation by dispossession, Harvey (2003) explains, is a continuation and a proliferation of the practices that Marx called ‘primitive’ or ‘original’ during the rise of capitalism. As such, it contains many of the same processes that were used to move capital and power into fewer hands. These processes include:

- commodification and privatization of land and forceful expulsion of peasant populations
- conversion of various forms of property rights into exclusively private property rights
- suppression of rights to the commons
- commodification of labour power and suppression of alternative (indigenous) forms of production and consumption
- colonial, neo-colonial and imperial processes of appropriation of assets, including national resources
- monetization of exchange and taxation, particularly of land
- slave trade (especially sex trade)
- usury, national debt and the use of credit system as radical means of primitive accumulation.

Harvey (2007) specifically explains that the privatization of public assets, corporatization, commodification have been key features of neoliberalism. He goes on to
state that “its primary aim has been to open up new fields for capital accumulation in domains formerly regarded off-limits to the calculus of profitability” (p. 35). Some of the reforms proposed by neoliberal policies include the privatization of public utilities (including water, telecommunications, and transportation), social welfare provisions (for example public housing, education, health care, pensions), public institutions (such as universities, research laboratories and prisons) and warfare, through private contracting (Harvey, 2007). The aim in all these processes, Harvey (2007) explains, is to move assets from the public to the private privileged domains.

The primary function of the state and financial institutions like the IMF and WTO, has been to ensure that accumulation by dispossession could happen without resistance. As Harvey (2007) writes, “[o]ne of the prime functions of state interventions and of international institutions is to orchestrate crisis and devaluations in ways that permit accumulation by dispossession to occur without sparking a general collapse or popular revolt” (p. 38). Moreover, the military helps support the imperial state “to ensure that insurrections do not occur in whichever country has been raided” (Harvey, 2007, p. 38).

Amin (2004) asserts that wars have become a necessity for superpowers in the new ‘globalized’ economic order with military interventions “as the only means to submit peoples of the periphery to its demands” (p. 7). Its interconnectedness with liberal notions of “freedom” and “democracy” have made its effects especially more pervasive. Moreover, Allman (2007) extends this notion as she warns against neoliberal conceptions of freedom, which is actually the freedom for one to sell their labour-power for an agreed duration of time, and ‘equality’ (to the labour-time purchased by the employer). This is a process that
ultimately alienates people from their own potentials and powers, and forces them to surrender to those with power (p. 35).

Mojab and Carpenter (2011) raise concerns with neoliberal development policies’ impulse to privatize public goods, which includes reduction in public spending, privatization and deregulation, because this process “conceal[s] its destructive ‘dispossessive’ urge” (p. 551). Similar to Amin (2004) and Allman (2007), Mojab and Carpenter (2011) raise concerns over the use of liberal ideology within neoliberal restructuring:

The ‘liberal’ component of the term, popular since the 1980s, hides the harsh reality of the last two decades—wars, genocides, crimes against humanity, trafficking of children, rise of new slavery, war on women, resurgence of neofascism and fundamentalism, ecocide, growth of the military-industrial complex, increasing poverty, de-industrialization and starvation. (p. 551)

Thus, even though the war on terror has perpetuated further violence and destruction, especially devastating for women and girls, it is seen by many as a ‘humanitarian’ intervention. Moreover, Harvey (2007) explains that liberal concepts such as ‘freedom’ and ‘individual liberty’ have proven to be of great importance to neoliberal theory, especially in bringing about change.

To conclude this section, the literature above helped provide a broader geopolitical context within which the war on terror was able to be waged on in Afghanistan. This war is an integral component of financialized capitalist restructuring which also deploys militarism in order to achieve its aims. Imperialist and colonialist relations are also intensified, specifically through militarism (direct coercion) and neoliberal economic policies. Moreover, the war on terror has proven to be not only profitable but also a means through which colonialist relationship of exploitation are maintained. Thus, instability in the periphery is now profitable and vital to the maintenance and survival of capitalist relations of power. In
the next section, I explore some of the narratives that have provided a justification for wars. Mainly I examine how women in advanced capitalist states as well as conflict zones, have been implicated in the war on terror.

**Implication of Women in Militarized Financial Capitalism**

**Maintenance of patriarchal order through war**

Mies (1986) explains that patriarchy is not something which existed before capitalism, and similarly, women’s exploitation and oppression cannot simply be explained through a discussion of capitalism alone. Instead, she emphasizes the interconnectedness of both patriarchy and capitalism through the term *capitalist-patriarchy*. She elaborates: “[I]t is my thesis that capitalism cannot function without patriarchy, that the goal of this system, namely the never-ending process of capital accumulation, cannot be achieved unless patriarchal man-woman relations are maintained or newly created” (p. 38). She defines patriarchy as more than just “the rule of fathers” (p. 36) because, as she explains, it also “includes the rule of husbands, of male bosses, of ruling men in most societal institutions, in politics and economics” (p. 36).

Similarly, Moghadam (1991) explains that the asymmetry of gender is a universal facet, with women discriminated against by law and custom in many parts of the world: “Gender is a cultural construct of sex roles, a definition of ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ and of the prerogatives of male and female” (p. 7). Moreover, it is culturally and historically bound and “commonly a function of power relations and the social organization of inequality” (p. 8).

Hunt and Rygiel (2006) explain that the war on terror “is produced, constructed, and waged on highly gendered terrain” (p. 3). Similarly Carol Cohn (2013) asserts that “war is a
profundely gendered practice” that “is also symbolically and practically linked to norms of masculinity” (p. 22). She adds further: “Despite this deep association with masculinity, however, women’s labor has always been central to war making” (p. 22). Similarly Taber (2014) clarifies that while militarism privileges masculinity, and even some women over others, it does so by manipulating the meanings of both femininity and masculinity and thus makes it more difficult to detect its “fundamentally patriarchal consequences” (p. 2).

Imperialism, according to Chew (2008) helps intensify the gender gap both within the United States and especially overseas where it “enables foreign and indigenous patriarchies to collude in aggravating women’s oppression” (p. 77). Men in the US military, for example, are conditioned to devalue, objectify, and demean traits traditionally associated with femininity and adopt a violent masculinity which glorifies domination. Imperialist development, therefore, increases the risk of (re)producing gendered ideologies and social relations that could further exacerbate women’s living conditions (Yonge, 2010).

Mohanty, Pratt, and Riley (2008) contend that America’s imperialist wars are not only gendered but also racialized and sexualized and “waged through military and economic policy to advance and consolidate the profit-driven system of capitalism” (p. 3). Mohanty et al. (2008) draw attention to not only the practice of patriarchy but also of historical colonial practices through the waging of the present wars: “US militarization has meant a new mobilization of historically embedded colonial practices and rhetoric of male superiority and white supremacy; of female vulnerability, inadequacy, and inferiority, and of the subjugation of oppressed masculinities of men of colour” (p. 3).

The authors illustrate that women’s roles in wars are portrayed through the execution of diverse roles. Such roles include, as resisters, victims, perpetrators, supporters, or critics.
Moreover, Mohanty et al. (2008) explain that their participation is “always influenced by the construction of gender operating in and around their lives” (p. 6). Specifically, notions of the proper practice of femininity have profound impact in how women are perceived and how those perceptions shape their limited role in society. For example, they maintain that women are made invisible and therefore not to be heard from or seen. The case might also be that their bodies are ‘hyper-visualized’, meaning that they must be “focused on to be counted, battled over, and controlled. On the other hand, views of the female body recede so that constructions of femininity are more prominent in obscuring the motivations of militarized masculinity, in providing ongoing means of justification, or in shaming the enemy most egregiously” (p. 7). This linkage of war to colonial history, and also the dichotomous and asymmetrical construction of men (as superior) and women (as inferior) can be contextualized and better understood through an analysis of Orientalism and construction of the Muslim woman in the past and presently in the war on terror being waged in Afghanistan.

Colonialist/orientalist narratives of women as justification for war

Hunt and Rygiel (2006) maintain that war stories are often told in order to “camouflage the interests, agendas, policies and politics that underpin the war in order to legitimize and gain consent” (p. 4). The purpose of these stories is to help give “order to wars that are generally experienced as confusion” (p. 15). They clarify that often, familiar dichotomies are used in order to “give order to the otherwise confused and controversial realities of war” (p. 4). Thobani (2003) explains that the language that was used to construct the ‘enemy’ in the war on terror echoed “colonial constructs of the native as barbaric and dangerous, whose colonization was not only justifiable but also welcome, in the cause of bringing them into civilization and democracy” (p. 402). This carving of the world into ‘us’
(West/civilized) and ‘them’ (Muslim/uncivilized), Thobani asserts, is a “remapping of the colonial divide in the current age of Empire, articulated once again through the discourse of the civilized West and barbaric Islamic world” (p. 402).

Said (1978) explains that the division of the world between the civilized (West) and uncivilized (Muslim world) is rooted in European colonization of nations that were imagined as less developed. Europeans, according to him, saw their race as not only superior but also felt it was their duty to ‘civilize the less developed lands and peoples (Said, 1978). Edward Said called this process Orientalism, and defined it as an encounter between the Orient (uncivilized/East) and the Occident (civilized/West). The Orient, Said contends, lives “in a different but thoroughly organized world of his own, a world with its own national, cultural, and epistemological boundaries and principles of internal coherence. Yet what gave the Oriental’s world its intelligibility and identity was not the result of his own efforts but rather the whole complex series of knowledgeable manipulations by which the Orient was identified by the West” (p. 40). Knowledge of the Orient, Said explains “creates the Orient, the Oriental, and his world” (Said, 1978, p. 40). Orientalism therefore “is knowledge of the Orient that places things Oriental in class, court, prison, or manual for scrutiny, study, judgement, discipline, or governing.” (p. 41). Moreover, it was through the construction of the Orient as irrational and different, that Europeans and the West saw themselves as rational, virtuous and normal (p. 40). Through such representations, Said asserts, “the Oriental is contained and represented by dominated frameworks” (p. 40).

Thus, colonialist constructions of Muslim women as ‘inferior’, ‘powerless’ and ‘victims’ polarizes them from Western women who are placed in a position of power and superiority (Mohanty, 2003; Narayan, 1997). The rescuing of Muslim women, Zine (2004)
maintains, has been an important part of Orientalist narratives about Muslim women who are always constructed as needing to be saved or rescued from the backwardness of their culture, religion, men and/or society. Mohanty (2003) explains that such binary politics played an important role in the construction of Afghan women as powerless and Western women as possessing power, and thus robbing Afghan women of their historical and political agency. Razack (2004) explains that presently there is a ‘showdown’ between good and evil and people are drawn into it because it draws on an identity that is racially structured (p. 155). Helping Others, she explains, is a “paradigm that allows us [in the West] to maintain our own sense of superiority” (p. 155). Razack goes on further to suggest that the alliance between racism (through Orientalism) and first world dominance create powerful narratives which enable ordinary citizens to enter (violent) fantasies of racial superiority.

Moreover, Khan (1998) illustrates that Muslim women are often expected to enter political spaces in order to demand what they need. However, within these spaces, they are confronted by the regulating discourses of Islam and Orientalism; as a result, they find themselves inserted into predetermined discourses and practices that shape their agency and determine their strategies of resistance. She explains that these discourses present Others as belonging to cultures that are not only abnormal and/or inferior, but also ahistorical, homogenous, and unwilling to change. Similarly, Bhattacharyya (2008) elaborates that the ‘us/them’ dichotomy created by the West not only polarizes Muslim and other women, but also serves to define how the supposed freedoms of women can be embodied and displayed (p. 50). In other words, women’s freedom, though constructed on racist/colonialist assumptions, are still located within capitalist-patriarchal relations. The ‘favoured woman’ according to Bhattacharyya (2008) is expected to demonstrate her freedom through a
physical display with implication of sexual auctioning and participation in consumer markets (p. 51).

**Reclaiming feminist struggle in the war on terror**

Critical feminists have also raised concerns over the coupling of feminism and the war on terror (see for example, Abu-Lughod, 2009; Kandiyoti, 2005; Riley, Mohanty & Pratt, 2008). Such an approach, they argue does not challenge women’s human rights violations or improve their living conditions. Bhattacharyya (2008) explains that some of the key justificatory narratives that surrounded the war on terror were taken from progressive social movements particularly the defence of women’s rights. Bhattacharyya (2008) explains: “[in the war on terror] the abuse of women and the denial of their rights has been used as a marker of barbarism and as an indication of societal sickness, a sickness requiring intervention” (p. 19). These justifications, she argues, makes it difficult to differentiate between claims made by ‘real’ feminists because feminist scholarship, lobbying and activism are part of the war on terror’s articulation of feminism. “Well-rehearsed debates of feminism in relation to such issues as difference and transnational relations have been appropriated for the racializing project of the war on terror” (41). Bhattacharyya (2008) explains that a shift has occurred in feminist struggle because of the war on terror’s incorporation of feminism within its efforts. She reveals that this is evident when one compares feminism of the past (which was limited to passive portrayals of femininity limited to the home) and now, as an active envoy of Western feminism that also advocates for a freedom which is market-friendly (p. 49). Even extreme violence, as the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq demonstrate, have been justified as a feminist intervention.
The war on terror reveals the continuity of imperial legacies by incorporating historically racist articulations of Others to ultimately restore existing hierarchies and to reproduce the status quo. Specifically, existing relations of power are reproduced and maintained through the justification of the war on terror as a ‘just’ war, being fought to protect women’s rights. Moreover, by linking women’s freedom and equality to the market, the war on terror reveals itself as an important mode of financialized capitalist expansion in the region (for example, the continued ‘necessity’ to occupy Afghanistan). This observation is important to my study as it provides background for the increased attention that women’s learning has received since 2001. Another important observation is understanding the ways in which feminists themselves have taken up the cause of gendered oppression, particularly in the non-Western world.

**Interrogating ‘universal’ and ‘particular’ feminisms**

Mohanty (2003) is critical of Western feminism for situating third world women’s advancement and empowerment within capitalist relations of power. Instead, she argues, ideas and beliefs of global capital must be denaturalized and historicized so that exploitive social relations and structures are made visible (p. 124). Addressing ahistorical or naturalized accounts, Mohanty explains, require being attentive to the myth of capitalism as ‘democracy’ and also in being aware of the histories of others. Similarly, Narayan (1997) explains that Western feminists often construct third world contexts as uniform, monolithic spaces with no internal cultural differentiations, complexities or variations.

Moreover, defining third world women in terms of their ‘problems’ or ‘achievements’ in relation to an imagined free white liberal democracy effectively removes third world women from history, “freezing them in time and space” (p. 7). Mohanty (2003) is especially
critical of liberal feminist assumptions of women as a ‘sex class’ because, she feels such grouping does not speak to the experiences of women in the third world. Mohanty (2003) elaborates:

The application of the notion of women as a homogeneous category to women in the Third World colonizes and appropriates the pluralities of the simultaneous location of different groups of women in social class and ethnic frameworks; in doing so it ultimately robs them of their historical and political agency. (p. 39)

However, Mohanty (1991) clarifies that ‘Western feminism’ is a term that can also be applied to non-Western writers writing about their own cultures. In other words, they too might write about women in their culture in a way that situates women of the West as the norm. Mohanty sees this as the core of the problem in the framing of third world women, because such constructions enable power to be exercised over people in those contexts.

Mojab (1998)’s critique of ‘universal’ and ‘particular’ feminisms build on this idea, as she too warns against the dismissal of ‘Western’, and privileging the ‘particular’ or local as more ‘authentic’ or ‘unique’. Such dichotomization, according to Mojab, “denies the universal significance of the theoretical and practical gains won by two centuries of feminist movements in the West” (p. 19). Instead, Mojab urges feminists to see both particularism and universalism as “closely intertwined, and at the same time conflicted” (Mojab, 1998, p. 26). More important, this dichotomy further suppresses local women’s own struggles “for freedom and their subordination to the imperatives of religious, ethnic and national traditions of patriarchy” (pp. 19-20).

This understanding of the particular (local) and universal (global) as intertwined is an important lens through which to understand how Afghan women enact agency, as they continue to live in a context where their identities have been at the centre of the West’s
justification for invading Afghanistan, but also local socio-historical practices of gendered segregation and exclusion, especially in the field of education (a theme I will address further in Chapter 4). Centering on the ways in which Afghan women enact agency, is an important entry point toward understanding how women negotiate these interlocking processes of power and gendered hierarchies.

**Redefining agency**

Mahmood (2001) explains that a feminist focus on third world women’s agency helped provide a crucial corrective to scholarship on Muslim women, specifically, by countering their mainstream Orientalist constructions as submissive, passive, or victims, who were “shackled by structures of male authority” (p. 205). Moreover, there is a small body of literature that has emerged in recent years, countering mainstream constructions of Afghan women as passive victims of wars, or the present occupation as a war for women’s rights (see for example, Abu-Lughod, 2002; Hirschkind & Mahmood; 2002; Daulatzai, 2006). Rostamy-Povey (2007), for example, explains that Afghan women “have been inventing different ways of coping with life, under the most extreme forms of coercion, fear and high levels of uncertainties” (p. 294). Some of their coping strategies included finding ways to stand up to injustice “imposed on them by religious dogma, nomadic existence and imperialist domination” (p. 309). This counter-narrative of Afghan women is important due to the fact that they challenge Orientalist notions of Afghan women that continues to present itself within the context of mainstream literature that generally focuses on Muslim women, providing a specific reference to Afghan women.

Mahmood (2001), however, warns that even such counter narratives to mainstream portrayals of Muslim women, frame agency in a way that accounts for agency as a resistance
to male. Mahmood (2005) warns that within this articulation, is a liberal assumption about human beings having an innate desire to be free, or that “human agency primarily consists of acts that challenge social norms and not those that uphold them” (p.6). Instead, she emphasizes the importance of contextualization by asking whether it is possible “to identify a universal category of acts—such as those of resistance—outside of the ethical and political conditions within which such acts acquire their particular meaning” (p. 9). Agency, according to Mahmood (2001), should not be seen “as a synonym for resistance to relations of domination but as a capacity for action that historically specific relations of subordination enable and create” (p. 203). She elaborates:

If the ability to effect change in the world and oneself is historically and culturally specific, (both in terms of what constitutes “change” and the capacity by which it is effected), then its meaning and sense cannot be fixed a priori, but allowed to emerge through an analysis of the particular networks of concepts that enable specific modes of being, responsibility, and effectivity. (2001, p. 212)

Mahmood (2001) maintains that although it appears women are not resisting or enacting agency, the reality suggests the opposite. In fact, women may be resisting agency within the parameters of their lived realities. She writes: “what may appear to be a case of deplorable passivity and docility from a progressivist point of view, may very well be a form of agency—one that must be understood in the context of the discourses and structures of subordination that create the conditions of its enactment” (p. 212). How then, does one account for women’s lived experiences as agency, while simultaneously being cognizant of their intertwining relation between the contexts within which they unfold? This idea is especially concerning as McNay (2004) warns that sometimes experiences are used by feminists to reinforce dichotomization. McNay explains:
The granting of an epistemological privilege to experience in this way is a contentious strategy because it pushes feminism dangerously close to the unexamined empiricism which does not scrutinize the conditions that determine how experience relates to knowledge. (2004, p. 178)

Instead, McNay (2004) explains that while experience is fundamental to accounts of agency, it “must be understood in relational terms rather than in ontological sense as the absolute grounds of social being” (McNay, 2004, p. 175). This attention to the relational, or the discourses and structures of subordination (Mahmood, 2001), is especially important considering the complimentary and reinforcing relation between global capitalism and global/local patriarchy discussed earlier in this chapter.

In order to break away from dichotomization and develop an understanding of agency that situates women’s experiences in the larger structures and relations of power, it is useful to incorporate Mojab’s (1998) analysis of a dialectical approach. She defines her approach in the following manner:

[A dialectical approach] recognizes the individuality and particularity of each woman and each feminist movement, each with its specific historical context, but at the same time acknowledges that, even in their uniqueness, they share common struggles against capitalist and precapitalist patriarchy. (p. 27)

Within this approach, agency and structure are seen as inseparable, and instead as always united but also “always in conflict” (Mojab, 1998). Neither agency, nor identity exist “outside the complex web of socio-structural relations—relations that are increasingly becoming global while remaining local” (p. 27). However this is not to suggest that identity or agency is static. On the contrary, Mojab clarifies that both change, and therefore both agency and identity “are capable of challenging structural constraints” (Mojab, 1998, p. 27). This possibility for change arises because of the tension or contradictions that exist within
dialectics, an idea that I develop further in this chapter when I explore the importance of historical materialism to this research.

In this section, I have explored the relation between war and gender in order to provide an understanding of how women are implicated in imperialist, capitalist wars. Specifically, women’s lived experiences of subordination and gendering are both useful to the justification of war and occupation, especially in the war on terror, which has made these links more explicit by claiming to be fighting to save women in countries like Afghanistan. Similarly, these efforts gained support through existing (racist/Colonialist) practices and beliefs about the Muslim world, as evidenced through Orientalist portrayals of women and men living in those contexts. Feminists of colour in particular, critiqued such dichotomization, highlighting its racist, colonialist and capitalist dimensions. Finally, I challenge traditional notions of agency as an act of resistance to relations of power, through the exploration of a dialectical approach to account for the complex, intertwined, and conflicting ways in which relations of power operate in women’s lives, and more importantly, how women navigate through them. In the next section, I will examine the important role that learning institutions play as gendered sites that are increasingly militarized, and where relations of power not only operate but are also maintained, reproduced, and ultimately challenged.

Educational Reforms as Reproduction of Imperialist Order

Purpose of education in conflict zones

In war-affected contexts, education is seen as a crucial building block in human development thereby making it a necessary response (Tebbe, 2009). It is seen as having the potential to address and transform fundamental social inequities and injustices (Pigozzi,
1999; Seitz, 2004), to help invigorate war-torn economies, cultivate peaceful civil relations and help foster societal reconciliation (Maclure & Denov, 2009). In 2010, the Inter-Agency Network for Education in Emergencies released a report which highlights further the importance of education in conflict zones, claiming that “education can help produce the benefits of inclusive and constructive integration of individuals and communities, socially, politically and economically” (2010, p.1). The report, however, emphasizes the importance of how education is designed and implemented in achieving this aim: “depending on the nature of design and implementation, education also has the potential to perpetuate or entrench dynamics of fragility” (2010, p. 1).

Similar sentiments are raised by Bush and Saltarelli (2000) in their discussion of the two faces of education in conflict zones. They describe these as ‘negative’ and ‘positive’ faces of education. The ‘positive face’ includes increased aid and attention to education, state-led efforts to re-integrate different groups of people, provide linguistic tolerance in contexts where there are many different groups of people living together, cultivate inclusive citizenship, and provide education for peace programs and practice as an explicit response to state repression. The ‘negative face’ includes uneven distribution of education in which case education is used as a weapon in cultural repression, denial of education as a weapon of war, manipulating history for political purposes, manipulating textbooks, negative self-worth and hating others, segregated education to ensure inequality, lowered self-esteem and stereotyping.

Both the positive and negative faces of education focus mainly on common occurrences inside the borders of a nation. Novelli, (2010) and Shalhoub-Kevorkian (2008), focus specifically on the influences of international actors on educational reforms in conflict
zones. Mainly, they assert that through international development aid is closely linked to the foreign policies of the country providing the aid. Others have also noted this linkage that was especially prevalent after WW2, whereby aid was allotted to nations based on where a country stood in the great cold war confrontations (see for example, Lundborg; 1998; Wang, 1999). Similarly, Novelli (2010) attests that aid is provided less upon the basis of perceived humanitarian need and more on political alliance “that often led to a blind eye being turned to human rights violations and repressions in ‘friendly’ states” (p. 454). Thus policy, in the form of aid, came to be expressed in terms of international law and human rights (Hilhorst, 2004).

These notions of aid and educational development are complicated further when examined within a context of capitalist development both in the West and particularly in the developing world. For example, even within advanced nations such as the United States, formal educational institutions have been critiqued for maintaining the existing unequal social order. Carnoy (1975), for example, asserts that schools bring students from a traditional hierarchy to a capitalist hierarchy where they become alienated from their daily realities, and instead become dependent on foreigners, whether of a different social, political, economic, or cultural group. Carnoy (1975) writes:

Schooling brings people out of a hierarchy in which they may be servants rather than their own masters (slaves and serfs) but may also have an important degree of choice and control over day-to-day work activities (farmers and artisans) into a different hierarchy where their roles are determined on the basis of different criteria, but in which they are dependent on working and social conditions determined by others. Through that dependency, they lose personal choice and, therefore, a form of freedom. (p. 14)
Similarly, Carnoy raises concerns over the common assumption that education can contribute towards the social or economic development of a society. Instead, he contests that “increasing the average level of schooling in the population without altering the class distribution of schooling maintains the present income structure [...] unless conscious efforts are made to redistribute wealth and income” (p. 9).

Likewise, Herrara (2008) explains that since the 1990s, neoliberal ideology has come to play an important role in educational reforms. Some of these reforms, according to Herrara (2008), include liberalization, marketization (which includes the adoption of free market policies in running educational systems) privatization and an alliance between schools and businesses, decentralization of the funding and governance of school system, an emphasis on standards and testing, and finally, market-driven changes that favour individual performance. Therefore, education has been appropriated to support a capitalist economic and political order instead of addressing the social and intellectual needs of a society.

Echoing Carnoy’s (1975) critique of the benefits of education, Magnusson (2013) also suggests that even in advanced nations like Canada, HE has failed to improve economic conditions of students, especially since the cost of education is increasingly placed upon students, and students are finding themselves taking on private-for-profit credit debt, as well as other forms of debt to cover increasing tuition costs. Describing Canadian universities, Taber (2015) raises concerns over the increasing presence of militarist discourses on campuses where both “gender and militarism work together to distort learning in higher and lifelong education” (p. 242). Taber explains that as universities become increasingly corporatized and militarized,
not only do spaces for dissent and critical inquiry shrink, but it becomes even more difficult to problematize notions of patriotism and democracy (Taber, 2014).

Mojab and Carpenter (2011) draw connections between capitalist restructuring and development initiatives in conflict zones more explicit in their discussion of how learning is constructed and practiced in these contexts. Specifically, they explain that through the rhetoric of ‘democracy promotion’ advanced capitalist states (re)produce the imperialist order. This is done through the dislocating and disconnecting of learners from their material reality of war, militarization, occupation, social inequality and poverty. Mojab and Carpenter (2011) call this process ‘learning by dispossession’ and define it as “the ways learning in capitalist social relations produce new skills and knowledge as well as alienation, fragmentation of self/community and confuses learning with the idea of capitalism and imperialism” (p. 561). The effect “of dispossession is to create the conditions through which the learners’ experience is presented ‘upside down’. As a result, they explain, social relations are inverted and capitalist social relations are legitimized, perpetuated, made desirable and naturalized as the option of human social organization” (p. 561).

Mojab and Carpenter (2011) warn that such processes not only alienate students from their lived realities, but ultimately they serve to maintain existing social inequalities and contradictions. This understanding of learning as a way of restoring capitalist order is particularly important as capitalism also maintains patriarchal relations. In the next section, the relation between these two systems is explored through an examination of schools as gendered institutions.
Schools as gendered institutions

Schools are sites where gender relations are reproduced (Apple, 1985; Leach, 2003; Stromquist, Lee, & Brock-Utme, 1998). For example, Stromquist (1991) explains that the state is both gendered and a gendering institution by saying, “[I]t is gendered in the composition of its authorities and it is gendering through its management of ideology and economic relations (1991, p. 122). As a result, Stromquist (2012) informs us that girls experience many gendered disadvantages, and more importantly little is done to address this inequality. She writes, “[a] key explanation for the enduring disadvantages women experience is that the educational content and experience that girls and boys have within educational systems do not challenge explicitly the gender regime of their respective societies” (p. 163). Stromquist clarifies that girls’ gendered experiences do not suggest that states will always be oppressive towards women, but rather that the state’s parameters give priority to heterosexual males who carry the highest prestige in society.

According to Stromquist, Lee and Brock-Utme (1998), schools are powerful ideological institutions that transmit dominant values and function as mechanisms of social control. This idea is illustrated when the authors state that, “[s]chools transmit values that not only reproduce class but also maintain gender structure” (p. 397). Moreover, Stromquist (2012) explains that the ideologies of femininity and masculinity are deeply engrained within the educational system to the point where challenging them would require explicit targeting rather than assuming that they will naturally become part of people’s reflection as they attain higher levels of education (p. 164).

Moreover, there have been other concerns raised with regard to the assumption that education can serve as means of empowerment for women (Hausmann, Tyson, & Zahidi, 2010; Murphy-Graham, 2009). For example, Murphy-Graham (2009) explains that
educational attainment and employment plays a small role in changing women’s status within the home. Similarly Hausmann, Tyson, and Zahidi (2010) gathered data from 134 countries examining four dimensions of empowerment. These dimensions included economic participation and opportunity, educational attainment, health and survival, and political empowerment. The results reveal that education solely did not produce assertive women who were equipped with the capacity to question their gendered experiences of social relations of power or seek ways to challenge their subordinate status within society (cited in Stromquist, 2012). Considering that women enact agency differently in different contexts, and that social relations have differential effects on different social groups or individuals (Pratt, 2012), it is possible that it did have influence on other aspects of their lives. However the study is important because it speaks to commonly held assumptions within dominant educational discourses regarding the positive impact of education on women’s lives. One assumption is that education improves women’s lives financially, an approach that is actively forwarded within WB policies in the Global South.

Despite these challenges, Apple (1985) reminds us that although schools do produce and reproduce existing relations of power, they are also located within larger nexus of social relations, and therefore can serve to provide a significant terrain over which serious actions can take place (p. 10). This analysis is important to keep in mind as we examine the forces of militarized neoliberal restructuring in influencing educational reforms, especially in poorer nations and how these reforms materialize in the lives of women pursuing HE in Afghanistan, specifically in responding to gendered relations of power.
Neoliberal restructuring of HE

Hill (2003) points out that since the 1980s, educational institutions around the world have been reforming according to neo-liberal policies. Herrara (2008) explains that some of the reforms that have occurred under neoliberal restructuring include: liberalization, marketization (which includes the adoption of free market policies in running educational systems) privatization and an alliance between schools and businesses, decentralization of the funding and governance of the school system, an emphasis on standards and testing, and finally, market-driven changes that favour individual performance.

Similarly, Naidoo (2003) maintains that through neoliberal restructuring, HE has been repositioned as a ‘global commodity’, mainly due to its large size, which Wayne Ross and Rich Gibson (2007) estimate to be worth over $1 trillion dollars a year globally. Naidoo (2003) explains that neoliberal restructuring is based on the assumption that the contemporary higher education system has become too large and complex for the state to sustain its position as a sole regulator and funder, that market competition within and between universities will create more efficient and effective institutions and that management principles derived from the private sector which monitor, measure, compare and judge professional activities will enhance higher education functioning. (p. 250)

Leathwood and Read (2009) explain that the growing importance of knowledge economies has had a profound impact across the world. HE as an industry, they assert, can now be sold in the global marketplace, as knowledge is commodified and packaged into smaller marketable units in a modulized curriculum. Likewise, Naidoo (2003) explains that “[g]overnment policies have portrayed intellectual capital in the era of knowledge capitalism as one of the most important determiners of economic success and as a crucial resource in the scramble for global profits” (pp. 250-251). Similarly, Taber (2015) writes:
The masculinization, corporatization and militarization of universities has implications for the type of education that students receive, resulting in graduates who may be less likely to critique the ways in which their education, and society, supports a systematically violent status quo. (p. 241)

Naidoo (2003) is also critical of the common-held assumption amongst advocates of neoliberal economic policy that access to HE improves a country’s social or economic wellbeing especially in its commodified form. Naidoo (2003) writes, “Unfortunately, preliminary observation of the effects of commodification indicate that in the present context, the historic trends in inequity and declining quality in large segments of higher education system are likely to be exacerbated” (p. 256).

In international contexts, financial institutions like the World Bank (WB) have become major players in structuring educational systems according to neoliberal ideology (Torres & Schugurensky, 2002). In fact, Kiely (2007) explains that neoliberal policies are part of the package that makes up the post-conflict reconstruction effort. Similarly, Torres and Schugurensky (2002) explain that in “WB documents, educational problems of developing countries tend to be understood as the result of inadequate investments, poor planning, institutional inefficiency, and misallocation of resources” (p. 439). In addition, they point out that educational reforms were previously the responsibility of the United Nations. Now they are dominated by the WB.

However, Torres and Schugurensky (2002) assert that the WB’s structural adjustment policies, whereby local governments are encouraged to adopt neo-liberal policies in exchange for aid, have generated criticism due to their failure to bring positive change. This argument was supported in Meltzer’s (2000) examination of WB projects in Africa, which revealed that there was a 73% failure rate (p. 1). Similarly, Collins and Rhoads (2008) conducted a study
of WB’s HE policies in Uganda and Thailand, and found that although HE was receiving important resources through the WB, the end results demonstrated an exacerbation of existing inequalities in both countries.

For women, Morley (2009) notes that gains have included a general increase in the enrolment of women in HE. However, she explains that within these institutions, women continue to face gender-based discriminations. Furthermore, Morley explains that the increased enrolment of women is often in subjects that are associated with low-wage sectors of the economy. Efforts to include women, Morley (2009) argues, are based on the assumption that equality involves allowing women access to male-dominated disciplines or extending men’s education to women. Within this logic, success is defined as “crossing a gendered threshold to become more like a man, rather than removing the gendered code from the activity” (p. 48).

Kilby and Olivieri (2008) raise similar concerns by stating that neoliberal restructuring reduces men and women to individual consumers and workers, which gives the illusion of equality. However, this is actually a move away from women’s equality because it does not actually address structural inequalities or imbalances in power. Rather, she maintains, such an approach simply adds women to the existing system. Stromquist (1998) argues that even the WB frames women’s education as an individualized solution to problems of inequality, rather than “the need to be treated equitably in social and cultural forms (Stromquist 1998, p. 98). ‘Self-reliance’, which Stromquist insists is encouraged and promoted by the WB, does little to address the material and structural challenges women face.
A focus on HE reforms reveals strong influences of capitalist development through neoliberal ideology. In nations dependent on foreign (Western) aid, educational reforms are a necessity in order for them to acquire important financial aid. Through major financial institutions like the WB, Western capitalist states possess the capacity to pressure under-developed and especially conflict-ridden zones, according to their own political needs. Such an approach has been criticized for further deteriorating the living conditions of local populations. Yet, despite these warnings, neoliberal restructuring continues to be an element of the aid package provided to conflict zones.

Conceptual Framework:
A Materialist Informed Transnational Feminist Approach

Throughout the course of this study, feminist principles are utilized as a guiding framework. Specifically, my feminist position draws from transnational feminism, which is much more aligned with power constructs in society. I situate my feminist approach within the framings highlighted by third world feminists like Mohanty (1991), who advocates for a transnational feminism guided by historical materialism. Notably relevant is Anderson’s (1991) concept of an ‘imagined community’ which is explained as a group of diverse women “woven together by the political threads of opposition to forms of domination that are not only pervasive but also systemic” (cited in Mohanty, 1991, p. 4). This ‘imagined community’ is built not on biological or cultural alliances, but rather political ones. It challenges homogenous configurations of third world women which are based on assumptions of a common ‘gender’ ‘race’ or ‘nation. Instead, Mohanty (1991) explains that it is third world women’s oppositional political relation to sexist, racist and imperialist structures that constitute their commonality and thereby forms the basis for an alliance (p. 7). Also, a
transnational feminist lens challenges the “contradictions and dangers inherent in a feminist project where “difference is only allowed to unfold according to external standards” (Nagar & Swarr, 2010, p. 4). This lens also explores the connections between histories and struggles of different women against racism, sexism, colonialism, imperialism and monopoly capital (p. 4).

In order to engage a feminist critique that is anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist Mohanty (2003) suggests the need for a transnational feminism that “ draws on historical materialism, and centralized racialized gender” (p. 231). Transnational feminism considers the historical and hierarchal nature of power relations. Similarly, Mojab (1998) encourages feminists to also consider the ways in which global hierarchies unite with, and (re)inforce local relations of power (which are also historical and hierarchal). She advocates for a historical materialist analysis that is also dialectical, in order to account for the contradictory yet intertwined nature of both global and local power. I examine the significance of this approach to my work, by first defining historical materialism, the historical significance of dialectics within Marxism, and then specifically the dialectical historical materialist approach proposed by Mojab (2010).

**Historical materialism**

Historical materialism is a framework that challenges ahistorical and depoliticized framing of gender and gender-based inequalities in society (Roberts, 2012). Hennessay and Ingraham (1997) explain that historically, “the oppression of women and people of colour through patriarchal and racist ideologies has been necessary to and embedded in this fundamental structure of capitalist production” (p. 5).
Historical materialism not only aims to understand the world but to change it through an understanding that these practices of oppression are ‘integrally connected’ (p. 4). Hennessay and Ingraham (1997) also emphasize the importance of connecting analysis of women’s local contexts to “a global social system whose very premise is that some women benefit at the expense of others” (p. 3). A historical materialist critique therefore demonstrates that “apparently disconnected zones of culture are in fact materially linked through the highly differentiated, mediated and dispersed operation of a systematic logic of exploitation (Ebert, 1996, p.7).

Patriarchy, as discussed previously in this chapter, plays a powerful and instrumental role in ‘enabling’ capitalist expansion, at the expense of women. For example, Ebert (1996) maintains that patriarchy serves as a regime of exploitation “that naturalizes socially constructed gender differences in order to deploy the social relations of production in class societies in ways that reproduce and legitimate the domination and exploitation of one gender by another” (p. 4). The historical devaluation of women’s work in capitalist development, is particularly seen as the root cause of their secondary status (Benston, 1997). Moreover, Hennessay and Ingraham (1997) explain that for capitalist expansion, women’s labour continues to be “a primary source of capital accumulation” (p.1). For example, even though women are commonly perceived to take the primary role in completing housework, including childcare, their contribution is not considered ‘real work’ because it cannot be exchanged for money (Benston, 1997).

Since capitalist societies are based on commodity production, women end up having different relations to production than men. Even when they do participate in commodity production, for example working, “as a group they have no structural responsibility in this
area and such participation is ordinarily regarded as transient” (Benston, 1997, p. 19). Ebert (1996) emphasizes the importance of a materialist critique for any transformation of patriarchal capitalism because it allows us to identify reliable knowledge of social relations and institutions we hope to change: “[N]o serious transformative social change can come about without knowledge of the existing social contradictions” (Ebert, 1996, p. 5).

This call for understanding ‘existing social contradictions’ is further highlighted by Mojab who links the importance of wars to capitalist expansion. In addition, this idea also draws attention to the ways in which these wars have further accentuated indigenous patriarchies. She explains that capitalist wars have also “unleashed the patriarchal forces of nationalism and religious fundamentalism globally”, forming an ‘unholy alliance’ (Mojab, 2007a, para. 8). Thus Mojab warns feminists against romanticizing the ‘particular’ or local through an exaggerated focus on agency, experience and/or locality that reduces “patriarchy to questions of culture and religion” (Mojab 2007a, para. 12), and as a result fails to see the ways in which local and global patriarchies are in fact connected and sustain one another. Bannerji, Mojab and Whitehead (2010) explain further:

We are witnessing how the imperialist design of ‘freeing repressed and burka-clad or hijabed women’ has given rise to the counter agenda of repressive religious measures imposed on women by Islamic radicals[…] Though justifiably angry over invasions of their homelands and destruction at all levels extending from the economic to the symbolic, they do not hesitate to counter racializing imperialism with an equally racist and homogenizing religious-cultural nationalism […] We are now in a situation where neither the self-identifying ‘west’ nor the ‘east’ has anything positive to offer the affected women. (p. 266)

To overcome these challenges, Mojab (2010) calls for a feminism that is not only material and historical, but also dialectical, an approach that I explore further below.
Dialectics

Dialectics can generally be described as a way of thinking or an approach “that understands things through their own development, change, and movement, and, in their relation and interconnectivity to all other things” (Shannon Brincat, 2014). Ollman (1998) explains that it is generally accepted that everything in society is connected in one way or another, or that change is occurring in some form or another. However, these connections are not evident when individuals attempt to make sense of the world. Instead, they isolate and separate them and treat them as static. Ollman (1998) explains:

The connections among such parts, like their real history and potential for further development, are considered external to what each one really is and therefore not essential to a full or even adequate understanding of any of them. (pp. 339-340)

A dialectical approach, however, starts “by taking the whole as given, so that the interconnections and changes that make up the whole are viewed as inseparable from what anything is, internal to its being, and therefore essential to full or even adequate understanding of any of them” (p. 340). This challenges the working of capitalist restructuring, which attempts to break existence into fragments, and offers one-sided or partial realities of things (Ollman, 2003). Moreover, individuals are encouraged within the capitalist mode of understanding “to focus on the particulars that enter their lives—an individual, a job, a place—but to ignore the ways they are related, and thus to miss the patterns—class, class struggle, alienation, and others—that emerge from these relations” (Ollman, 2003, p. 3). A person is simultaneously a part of the world (its object) and also apart from it (as subject) (Sauvayre, 1995). Furthermore, what may be perceived as “separate parts and facts must be appreciated as a distortion, or as an abstract or incomplete picture of the systemic whole” (Sauvayre, 1995, p. 148).
Within this unity however, exist contradictions and it is within these contradictions that a possibility for transformation arises (Brincat, 2014). A dialectic approach “emphasises the contradictory sides of things or the unity of opposites—the conditions pertaining within a thing that are opposite to each other, and yet, at the same time are both dependent on, and presuppose, each other” (Brincat, 2014, p. 588). It is this contradiction that is the dialectic, and it is within this moment, this dialectic that a possibility for change or transformation can arise. Brincat (2014) explains:

Only when contradiction has reached incompatible relations of contrariety, where it is so entrenched that is constantly encountered in social relations, and only where social forces strong enough to sublate the contradiction exist, that the inducement of a movement of change becomes even possible. Dialectics focuses on the immanent social forces surrounding such contradictions, as opposed to prognosticating the likely or desired outcome. (p. 600)

Brincat (2011) explains that individuals “can opt to change the contradiction or opt for the status quo and continue to exist, however unstably, within a state of contradiction” (p. 682). Both change and transformation are important possibilities within a dialectic approach and it is through an understanding of the contradictions that they can be overcome. But these contradictions, according to Marx, as well the social processes in which they arise, must be understood as historical developments.

According to Marx, to use the dialectical approach in a meaningful and transformative way involved moving away from being seen as something conceptual or formal, concerned only with categories of thought; instead, it should “be seen as an active means of reflecting on processes in human history and society” (cited in Brincat, 2014, p. 591). Thus, dialectics allows us to expand our notion of gathering an understanding of something, but rather, the processes by which it has come to be, and the broader interactive
contexts within which they are formed (Ollman, 2003). For this reason, Marx viewed dialectics “in its essence critical and revolutionary” (Marx, 1958, p. 20, cited in Ollman, 2003). It is revolutionary because it “enables us to grasp that as agents as well as victims, in this process in which everyone and everything is connected, we have the power to affect change” (Ollman, 2003, p. 20). Similarly, it is critical “because it helps us to become critical of what our role has been so far” (Ollman, 2003, p. 20).

It is this possibility of understanding a phenomenon, or a problem, in a critical way that not only enables us to realize what contradictions are present, but also recognize possibilities for transformation or change, that I turn to a dialectical historical materialist approach in my study. The current financialized mode of capitalism continues to use war to accumulate profits and power, and justify these actions through discourses of humanitarianism, development, or security. It is a critical moment for us to examine how these adverse practices collide with local practices of exclusion, specifically in the lives of women.

**A dialectical-historical-materialist approach**

Mojab (2010) defines *dialectical-historical-materialism* as a Marxist feminist approach through “which we not only recognize the particularity and individuality of each and every woman’s experience but also acknowledge the commonalities among women wherever they are located across all spectrums (p. 221). This approach views universality and particularity as “both inseparable and in conflict with each other” (p. 221). For example, both ‘war’ and ‘peace’ can be understood as two opposites of one unity; likewise, the unity of masculine imperialist peace is the continuation and reappearance of the masculine-imperialist war (p. 222). Thus, in countries such as Afghanistan, where the development and peace
processes operate within a neoliberal, racist and patriarchal agenda, Mojab advises feminists to be aware of how this unity might make them (implicitly) complicit in the masculine-imperialist agenda.

It is this emphasis on the interconnectedness of various workings of powers that is important to further my understanding of women’s lived experiences in ‘post-conflict’ Afghanistan. Specifically, I believe that the interlocking of various social arrangements, both new and old, local and foreign, is crucial to understanding the context of the participants’ lives. As noted earlier in this chapter, conservatism and violent attacks on women and girls pursuing education, and also working, have gained increased attention. This is a reality that needs to be examined with the specific focus on external influences so that the source of subordination is not hidden behind isolated notions of religion or culture (Mohanty, 1991).

A transnational feminist analysis drawn from a dialectical historical materialist approach enables me to situate women at the center of their lives as actively engaged in the various intersecting boundaries of power relations. Through such a framework, it is possible to see the intersections of various socio-political and economic forces that operate to limit women’s emancipation, and at the same time, map the ways in which they navigate through them. For example, while a transnational feminist lens allows me to capture the importance of women of colour as active agents who navigate terrains that are shaped by local and global relations of power, a dialectic historical materialist approach allows me to enhance this understanding, by examining closely the tensions arising from this collusion, and more specifically documenting their agency through the ways in which they navigate.
Conclusion

This chapter looked at three bodies of literature in order to provide an understanding of the context within which Afghan women are pursuing HE and how this agency is impacting their gendered lives. The first part of the literature review provided with an understanding of the current war on terror, revealing its strong relations to capitalist development. Specifically through its imperialist stage, and in the form of financialization, investing in the war-economy is an important means through which present-day capitalism ensures surplus is not wasted, and profits continue being accumulated. The war on terror, as an important element in the present militarized and financialized capital accumulation process, exploited women’s suffering to justify the invasion of Afghanistan, and was able to ‘sell’ this exploitation through existing racist and colonialist narratives about women in the Global South. Orientalist logics therefore helped create an imagined hierarchy that placed the West in a position of power, and also provided it with the justification to wage a violent war without much opposition. Finally, an examination of educational reforms and neoliberal restructuring provides a vivid example of how capitalist relations of power unfold in the daily lives of individuals, specifically of women. This approach is anti-capitalist, as it addresses the importance of wars in present-day capitalist accumulation; it is also anti-imperialist, as it draws attention to the continued importance of uneven geographic divisions, racism and colonialism for capitalist expansion; finally, as a feminist lens, this approach maps the different ways in which women participate in and challenge or contradict these conditions.
Introduction

This chapter provides a brief historical glance at key moments in Afghanistan’s development as a modern state, followed by a more detailed account of these developments in the field of education (specifically HE). It is important to note however, that in order to understand the history and complexity of the development of Afghanistan and the relevance of these developments require important observations and detailed analyses that are beyond the scope of this chapter. Therefore, my account of historical developments are very brief and limited to events that I believe are significant to this study. These historical developments are divided into 4 sections. Section 1 has two sub-headings. The first, Afghanistan Background, provides a brief overview of the country and the second part, Development of Modern Afghanistan: A history of Superpower Rivalry and Internal Disarray, explores historical developments through 4 important themes. They include: Formation of an Afghan Nation-State: 1774-1919, From an Afghan Monarchy to a Republic: 1919-1978, Soviet Occupation, Civil War and Religious Fundamentalism: Afghanistan from 1978-2001, and finally, Developing a ‘Mimic’ State: Afghanistan Since 2001.

Section 2 of this paper provides an overview of the development of formal education by highlighting two different types of educational systems operating in Afghanistan (traditional/Islamic and Formal/Western), and a detailed focus on the development of HE. Section 3 examines three important challenges that have continued to be plague formal education. These challenges include; Quality and Access, Gendered Contestations, and Foreign Influences. Section 4 explores HE developments since 2001, highlighting a shift
within these reforms, towards adopting neoliberal policies. I explore the adoption of these policies through the following three themes: Militarization of HE, World Bank’s Restructuring of HE and finally, Commodification of Women’s Learning. The chapter will then conclude with brief summary.

**Afghanistan Background**

Afghanistan is located within Central Asia, lying between China, Pakistan, Iran and the former Soviet Union (presently, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan). It is home to a diverse group of people belonging to various ethnic, linguistic socio-economic and religious backgrounds. The largest ethnic groups include: Pashtuns (50%), Tajiks (25%), Uzbeks (7%) and Hazaras (6%) (Karlsson & Mansory, 2007). Although there are over 40 languages spoken in the country, only two of these languages (Pashto and Dari) are official. As of 2009, Afghanistan’s population was estimated at around 26 million people, of which an estimated 18 million (72%) lived in the countryside, another 5 million (22%) in urban centers and over a million (6%) were nomadic (CSO & MOWA, 2012). Women constitute almost half of the population at 49%.

Traditionally, Afghanistan’s economy has consisted mainly of agriculture and animal husbandry. The country is also embedded with a great deal of poverty and there is an annual GDP of 8.2%, which ranks as the lowest in the world (World Bank, 2005, cited in Mcnerney, 2009). According to the World Bank, prior to the war that plagued Afghanistan in 1979, Afghanistan was self-sufficient in food and also a significant exporter of agricultural products (2001, p. 2). Prior to this time, over 80% of Afghan farmers cultivated their own land (Karlsson & Mansory, 2007).
Islam is the religion that is most commonly practiced in Afghanistan (85% are Sunni sect and 15% are Shia sect), and religion continues to play a central role in everyday life, including socially, economically, culturally and educationally (Karlsson & Mansory, 2007). “Islam defines the frame of reference for social behaviour, rights and obligations, moral values and ethic principle” (Karlsson & Mansory, 2007, p. 147). As a patriarchal society, Afghanistan is also characterized by a strict separation of gender, and women’s subordinated position to men. This subordination, according to Karlsson and Mansory (2007) is a result of values that “often reflect economic conditions as well as labour division necessities” (p. 144). Thus, men not only have control over women, but are also dependent on them, economically and socially.

Patrilineal kinships based on the father’s side are important markers for maintaining identity along with a strong identification and affiliation with their local village or qaum (a group whose members share a common patrilineal descent) (Karlsson & Mansory, 2007). These affiliations have traditionally been very strong and have helped provide an important source of support “in a society without government institutions” (p. 133). Particularly during wars, Afghans mobilized through these affiliations against foreign occupiers (Emadi, 2010).

Afghan society is also characterized as a collective group where individual interests are dominated by those of the group. Karlsson and Mansory (2007) explain:

An Afghan child grows up learning from the very beginning to think about herself or himself as part of a “we”, a unit to which s/he belongs for life and from which it is not possible to voluntarily separate. This “we” exists at various levels, from the family level to the ethnic (e.g., Uzbek), the national (Afghan), and the international (Muslim) level. (p. 141)

This identity of Afghans as an ethnically diverse group, dispersed throughout Afghanistan, separated along socio-economic markers, and with little communication and/or
transportation between the different communities. As well, Afghans serve allegiance to their own clan or tribe, which has historically played a significant role Afghanistan’s internal and external affairs. Below I examine the complex and interweaving ways in which local and foreign affairs have continued to influence the development of Afghanistan.

**Development of Modern Afghanistan:**

**A History of Superpower Rivalry and Internal Disarray**

**Formation of a nation-state: Afghanistan from 1774-1919**

Throughout Afghanistan’s history, there have been constant confrontations with various superpowers seeking dominance over the region, all anxious to gain dominance over the region in order to strengthen and expand their empires. Misdaq (2006) describes the country’s location as both a blessing and a curse:

> It has been a curse for lying on the main east-west division and since the Russian’s interest in a warm water, north-south route connecting the Middle East and Europe with the Indian subcontinent, and the Central Asian mass with the Indian Ocean and the Arabian Gulf. As a result, throughout history the area known as Afghanistan has been traversed and occupied by foreign forces. (p. 166)

On the other hand, its geography is considered a blessing because, even as it attracted various civilizations and imperial powers over the centuries, the country’s rugged terrains and tribal system (where communities are loyal mainly to their own kin-based communities) have made it difficult for empires to maintain their power and influence. As a result, although many civilizations and imperial powers have made attempts to invade, occupy and seek dominance over this region (for example, Alexander the Great in the fourth century BC, Genghis Khan in 13th century, Timur-e-Lang in the 14th century, the Moghuls in the 16th and
17th century, Persians in the 17th and 18th century), many Afghans take great pride in acknowledging their failures. Misdaq (2006) explains:

> Its location is a blessing, because of its mountainous features and the resilient character of its people. Many ambitious rulers and their armies from Alexander the Great to Chengis (Genghis) Khan, and after that a spate of Muslim hegemonists, including Tamerlane, the Moghuls, the Safavids, then the British, the Soviets (now the Americans and their coalition) have been dealt defeat at the hands of those within the country. All these powers in their own times discovered the impossibility of ruling over Afghanistan. (p. 166)

Although Afghanistan was never formally colonized, the rivalry between the great empires was an inevitable circumstance, specifically the ‘great game’ of Great Britain (from here on Britain) and Tsarist Russia (from hereon, Russia) in the 19th century and the Cold War politics of America and Russia in the 20th century. These conflicts set the groundwork for the wars and destructions that followed in the 1980s, and present-day American-led occupation.

Afghanistan was declared a state in 1747, under the leadership of Ahmad Shah Durrani, who is credited for turning the varying factions of Pashtun tribes under a centralized state called Afghanistan, or land of the Afghans (Emadi, 2010). Even though Afghanistan has always been home to diverse ethnic groups, as well as diverse Pashtun tribes, the country was founded and ruled by its largest ethnic group, the Pashtuns. The Pashtuns too however, have historically been divided amongst different tribal groups, and were often in struggle with each other for power and rule over the country. These tensions, particularly amongst the ruling Pashtun tribes, further weakened the state’s attempts to create a strong centralized government (Misdaq, 2006). Throughout the 18th and 19th century, divisions along tribal lines would play an important role in hindering the development of a strong central state, or maintaining its influence outside of the capital. Emadi (2010) explains that in order to
maintain their power some of these leaders followed “a policy of divide and conquer, and
exploited religious, tribal, and ethnolinguistic differences to pit one ethnoreligious group
against another in order to maintain their rule” (p. 5).

These ethnic divisions and rivalries were finally addressed explicitly by Amir Abdur
Rahman, another Pashtun leader who ruled Afghanistan between 1880 to 1901, and “who
like no other ruler before him succeeded in establishing a discourse between state and all
other ethnic groups in the country” (Misdaq, 2006, p. 227). His approach was to develop a
“horizontal relation of the state and its citizens” (Misdaq, 2006, p. 227), and thus his efforts
are seen as founding the country as a nation-state. The ruler Amir Abdur Rahman, attempted
to strengthen the central government and also involve the people through parliaments in the
everyday affairs of the state.

This was a difficult endeavor to accomplish due to the fact that Afghanistan’s
geography has historically made communication and transportation between the different
communities of people challenging, and thus causing individual communities to rely on their
own resources for survival. Moreover, steep mountains and deep narrow valleys have not
only kept communities separated and even isolated but also suspicious of each other (Emadi,
2010, p. 1). Ultimately, these efforts would fail to maintain unity in the country, and tribal
and ethnic divisions would continue to challenge subsequent leaders and their leadership.

During the 18th and 19th century, these internal tensions were hindered further by
imperialist powers like Britain and Russia, who saw them as opportunities in helping them
maintain their influence in the country. Emadi (2010) explains:

The struggle for power among Pashtun rulers caused them to form alliances
with imperial powers to defend their rule by receiving financial, political, and
military support for their adversaries and ethnic communities fighting for their
rights and political and economic equality. (p. 5)
Both Britain and Russia saw Afghanistan’s location as strategically crucial to their respective empires in India and Central Asia. Neither country hesitated in exploiting the situation by providing aid and support to the state in order to “advance their own agendas [and thus] expanding their political, cultural, and economic domination of the country” (Emadi, 2010, p. 9). Britain made an unsuccessful attempt to invade Afghanistan twice, first in 1839 (ending in 1842) and then again in 1878 (ending in 1881). The purpose of these invasions was mainly “to extend the border of India to the Amu River (which formed the border between Afghanistan and Russia) or to have the kings and Amirs in Afghanistan subservient to British demands” (Misdaq, 2006, p. 287). Specifically the second Anglo-Afghan war was provoked when Afghanistan attempted to improve its ties with Russia (Emadi, 2010).

The two countries continued to play an important role in the Afghanistan’s internal affairs for the rest of the 19th century and early 20th century even as Afghanistan had maintained neutrality between the two superpowers. Both Britain and Russia had accepted the country’s role as a ‘buffer state’, or “a free and independent country” (Misdaq, 2006, p. 68), and agreed not to interfere in its internal politics. It was a promise neither of the empires would keep. For example, in 1919, under the leadership of King Amanullah (grandson of Amir Abdur Rahman), Afghanistan was declared an independent and sovereign state in April, 1919. A month later, Britain launched a major offensive marking the third Anglo-Afghan war (Emadi, 2010). Once again accepting defeat, Britain was now forced to recognize the country’s independence, and this war would be the last it waged against Afghanistan.
From an independent monarchy to a republic: 1919-1978

After becoming an independent monarchy in 1919 under the leadership of King Amanullah, the country established three constitutions (developed in 1923, 1931 and 1964), that would form the basis of a modern functioning state. Afghanistan developed its first constitution in 1923, which formed the basis for a formal structure of government, and “set the role of the monarch within a constitutional framework [as well] attempted to regulate state-Islam relations” (p. 43). Afghanistan was now able to gain “the freedom and responsibility to shape its foreign policy independently” (Magnus & Naby, 1998, p. 40), even as both Russia and Britain continued to remain active in the region.

King Amanullah continues to be recognized as the “pioneer of modernity” in Afghanistan, especially for introducing Western-style developments in the country, including formal education for girls, and emancipation of women in general. Although King Amanullah met fierce resistance towards his policies (resulting in his abdication in 1929), the reforms continued throughout the next 5 decades, albeit at a slower rate than the sudden and fast approach that King Amanullah had used. These Western-style changes were supported mainly by ruling elites in urban centres, and contributed towards an increasing drift between mass rural populations and the small elite populations. The tensions were especially fierce, and in fact continue to be so, when the issue of women’s emancipation was involved. Magnus and Nabi (1998) explain:

In visible ways, Kabul especially drifted further from the realities of the social context of the countryside. Encouraged by the extended royal family, women not only continued to receive secondary education in large numbers at girls’ schools, but they also formed an increasingly large proportion of the coeducational university student body. (p. 49)
Emadi (2010) explains that the development that occurred between these years, which was articulated and implemented mainly by the ruling classes, were reflections of their own narrow class interests. Emadi provides two important reasons that resulted in the alienation of civil society:

(a) the ruling class did not allow members of the middle and lower classes to participate in the country’s politics and play a role in the day-to-day decision-making process and (b) they monopolized key economic and industrial enterprises as well as import-export activities. (2010, p. 85)

As a result, the ruling class continued to rely on imperial powers and foreign businesses in order to continue with their reforms and maintain their power. During this period, Britain was replaced with the United States, as the next major superpower opposing Russia in the larger geopolitical landscape. Exclusively through financial aid (and technical support), that the two countries were able to exert control and an engaged presence in Afghanistan. Magnus and Nabi (1998) explain that throughout the 1950s and 1960s, “Afghanistan became a peaceful battleground of the Cold War, with the Soviets and the Americans in rivalry based on the value of their respective foreign aid programs” (p. 62). Since Afghanistan lacked the skills and resources needed to modernize the country’s economic infrastructure, the ruling elites turned to both the United States and Russia to help in these efforts.

Emadi (2010) explains that the United States was especially interested in supporting “the educated liberal social strata within Afghanistan’s ruling class because it considered this group an effective agent for serving U.S. interests, in part because they worked against the efforts of the more reactionary conservatives.” (p. 80). Russia on the other hand, competed with American aid by widening its own influence through political, economic and military
support and like the United States, also provided financial aid for the modernization of educational institutions.

A significant turning point occurred in the 1970s when Afghanistan was declared a Republic and no longer a monarchy. During this time, Afghanistan also shifted towards the Middle East and attempted to strengthen its ties with them (a region which had geopolitically gained vital significance for the West during this time), and free itself from its heavy dependence on Russia (Magnus & Nabi, 1998). This unsettled Russia immensely, and it did not take long for them to respond by assassinating President Daoud, through a coup organized by its puppet regime, the People’s Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA), declaring leadership of the country on April 30, 1978. It was a significant turning point for the people of Afghanistan, marking the beginning of a war that would claim millions of lives, collapse of the country and its basic social fabrics. I examine some of these consequences in the next section.

**Soviet occupation, civil war and religious fundamentalism: Afghanistan from 1978-2001**

During President Daoud’s rule, Afghans had experienced a new level of democratic freedom that allowed them to form oppositional parties and activism against the ruling parties. One such group was the PDPA, a Marxist-Leninist inspired organization that comprised of two main groups, the *Parcham* (flag), comprised mainly of non-Pashtun middle-class, and the *Khalq* (the people), and comprised mainly of middle-class and peasants (Misdaq, 2006). Emadi (2010) explains that upon seizing power in 1978 with the help of Russia (serving as its ‘cliental’ regime’), the PDPA “used the coercive state machinery to
eliminate people who opposed its policies of building a Soviet-style system of governance” (p. 6).

Opposition and resistance to the PDPA was intense, especially due to the fact that the Iranian revolution was also taking place during this time. Russia’s fear of the infiltration of Islamism further compounded this opposition. They feared the spilling over of armed resistance into Afghanistan after the fall of the Shah of Iran in 1978-79 (Gregory, 2004). These fears caused Russia to intervene militarily in order to “sustain and defend the cliental regime” (Emadi, 2010, p. 6). Their approach however, was not only violently repressive, but it also sparked a movement of resistance that would ultimately defeat the occupation but also plant the seeds of fundamentalist style, religious-driven politics in the country. Gregory (2004) writes:

The state’s continued campaign of forced secularization and violent repression fanned the flames of a resistance movement that drew tens of thousands of Muslims to Afghanistan […] to join jihad against the Soviet occupation and its client government. (p. 34)

During this time in particular, both Pakistan and Saudi Arabia would come to play a significant role in Afghanistan, by encouraging the resistance against the Soviet ‘infidels” or non-believers and thus intensifying the “militarization of the region” (Gregory, 2004, p. 35). Both countries however, were driven by personal interests beyond religion, albeit the fact that religion was their main strategy of fighting the occupation. For Saudi Arabia, the priority was to enhance its credentials as the centre of the Islamic world against the aggressive claims of its rival Iran which was dominated by Muslim Shias (unlike Sunni Muslims in Saudi Arabia and Afghanistan).
Similarly, Pakistan gave most of its financial support to an extremist faction of the militias fighting the Soviet occupation, as they were not interested in keeping Pashtunistan, a disputed region lying between Afghanistan and Pakistan that Afghanistan was forced under British rule, to ‘give’ to Pakistan (while it was still a part of India) under a contract that had expired in 1993. The military aid and support that Pakistan was providing came from the United States, which also saw the resistance as an opportunity to further its own political gains. In their viewpoint the anti-Soviet resistance was an important avenue for defeating Russia’s influence in the region. The United States was concerned that the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan “as a calculated strategy intended to acquire control over a major portion of the world’s oil resources, posing a direct threat to the security of the region and the United States” (Emadi, 2010, p. 164) and thereby threaten its regional allies. Moreover, their support for extremist factions of the resistance movement “not only satisfied Pakistan’s rulers but also Saudi Arabia, determined to enforce a stricter form of Islamic interpretation in the region (Gregory, 2004), matching ‘dollar for dollar’ the amount (approximately $75 million annually beginning in 1979) of financial and military aid America was channeling through Pakistan.

By the time the Russians had accepted their defeat and withdrew from Afghanistan in 1992, they had killed over 1.5 million Afghans, forced over 2 million Afghans to flee to Iran, another 3 million to Pakistan, hundreds of thousands to the West and Europe, and also planted millions of mines throughout the country (Misdaq, 2006).

Following the Soviet withdrawal was a violent and bloody civil war between various ethnic and religious groups which would claim further destruction and violence throughout the country. These warlords were divided along social, religious and ethnic divides, and
enjoyed support of the same external powers that had waged a proxy war (through their financial support to the resistance against the Soviets), and now against each other, destroying whatever was left of the country. Emadi (2010) explains that these new Islamic fundamentalists were the same individuals who had been hailed as “freedom fighters” by the West in the 1980s, but were now engaged in a bloody civil war that would lead “to the destruction of the country’s infrastructure and transformation of Afghanistan into a wasteland” (p. 175).

The Taliban emerged during this time (in 1994) to oppose and condemn the barbaric killings and destruction of the warlords. Many people initially perceived the Taliban as a sign of hope due to the fact that their rhetoric centered on restoring law and order, and also ridding Afghanistan of the different factions fighting in the country. They were welcomed at first by the people of Afghanistan. However, soon the Taliban unleashed their own strict interpretation of the Islamic sharia law. Trained in religious madrassas in Pakistan, the Taliban were mostly young men who had grown up in refugee camps, surrounded by the radicalized versions of Islam that the United States, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan had actively endorsed during the Soviet occupation. The United States had also developed religious textbooks through the University of Nebraska that linked Islam to extreme violence and hatred towards non-Sunni Muslims. Millions of these textbooks were taught to Afghan children in refugee camps, as well, due to a lack of textbooks, to school children in Afghanistan. These textbooks were in active use in the areas where the Taliban had grown up as refugees (Spink, 2005).

By 2001, the Taliban had established their rule through most of Afghanistan and were condemned internationally by human rights groups, feminists, and others, for their ill
treatment of men and especially women and girls (who were banned completely from working or attending schools). The people’s resentment towards their brutality would once again prove strategic for the United States, which used the international community’s condemnation of the Taliban atrocities to wage the present occupation.

**Formation of a ‘mimic’ state: Afghanistan since 2001**

American-led forces invaded Afghanistan in 2001, putting an end to Taliban brutality. Similar to when the Taliban had first gained power, there was also hope amongst many in the international community and inside Afghanistan that the invasion would free Afghanistan from war and brutality and finally put the country on the path of recovery and peace. However these hopes were quickly shattered as the United States allied itself with the Northern Alliances (NA), a coalition of some of the same warlords who had engaged in active brutality against innocent civilians during the civil war period. Emadi highlights that the United States “put aside its own stated values when it formed an alliance with the NA, the anti-Taliban coalition force that is equally responsible for the destruction of the country and violation of human rights” (p. 206).

Over the next 14 years, Afghanistan would continue to face threats of violence from the Taliban, as well increasing insecurity, growing gaps between the rich and poor, lack of opportunities for employment, and continued lack of development of basic social structures. As I explored in Chapter 2, this war on terror has proved to be profitable for capitalist states such as the United States and its allies, but disastrous for Afghans. Moreover, Chishti (2014) describes the Afghan state in the present occupation, as a ‘mimic’ state, or “a partial and fragmented state that is only expected to resemble or merely ‘perform’ liberal political democracy, rather than attain full statehood” (pp. 100-101). On the one hand, Chishti
explains, a central liberal democratic state is supported. However on the other hand, the very foundations of a strong state are undermined and prevented, a contradictory relation that is typical of (neo)colonialism. The country remains heavily dependent on foreign aid and assistance, with peace and stability still far from sight.

To summarize this section, I have highlighted some of the important developments since the establishment of the Afghan state, as a means to provide context and understanding for the continued presence of violence, insecurity and under-development, as well the presence (and interests) of foreign preoccupations with Afghanistan. The problems of the past, mainly the centralized nature of the Afghan state, division along social lines (including ethnic, religious, class, geographic, and gendered), cause internal instability on the one hand, and opportunities for foreign superpowers to intervene on the other. The relationship between the Afghan state and foreign empires benefitted mainly the ruling factions, as the Soviet and present occupation shows, it is ordinary citizens who pay the price through their life or their basic human rights. Moreover, country’s strategic location ‘at the crossroads of Asia’ continues to be of importance to foreign superpowers, and their interests in Afghanistan, assured often in the form of financial aid, have materialized at great social, ideological and physical costs. In the next section, I examine this relation by exploring in detail the development of formal education in Afghanistan, and the ways in which aid and attention to this field, reflect foreign and local ruling class interests.

**Development of Formal Education**

**Traditional (Islamic) and formal (Western) education**

There have traditionally been two main types of educational systems that have operated in Afghanistan (Karlsson & Mansory, 2007). The first, Islamic education, arrived to
Afghanistan in the 7th century when Islam was first introduced in the country (Ekanayake, 2004). This type of education has existed since then, often taking place throughout Afghanistan, in homes, mosques and informal schools called madrasas (Samady, 2001). The madrasas were attached to mosques, (or took place within the mosque itself), and every township or village, had a mosque (Karlsson & Mansory, 2007). As a result, many children, including young girls were able to attend these classes. Some of these madrassas also offered subjects other than Islam, including writing, poetry and literature, history, science and traditional medicine; however those classes were often limited mainly to boys (Samady, 2001). Samady also explains that “[t]hese institutions were supported by parents, local communities, religious and tribal leaders and through private resources” (p. 588).

Formal education, also referred to as ‘modern education’ (Samady, 2001), or ‘Western education’ (Baiza, 2013; Emadi, 2010), commenced with the establishment of the first secondary school for boys in 1903. It was under the leadership of King Amanullah’s father, King Habibullah, that this Western-inspired system was introduced to Afghanistan. Baiza (2013) explains that this new form of education was “Afghanistan’s copy of the European model of education” (p. 44). Furthermore, even though this system may not be described ‘modern’ especially presently, “the term ‘modern’ has [nonetheless] become the identity of [this] new form of education, by which it is known and [also] differentiated from madrasa education” (p. 44).

This type of education however, was limited mainly to the children of the Afghan Monarchy and extended family members. An estimated 98% of the population during this time, were considered formally illiterate (Gregorian, 1969). During King Amanullah’s rule
educational programs were further developed and modernized “at an unprecedented level” (Baiza, p. 74). Baiza notes:

[King Amanullah] gave education a high priority by expanding and modernizing modern education into a national education system, which included primary and secondary schools, vocational and occupational schools, higher education through the School of Habibia and other primary, secondary, technical and occupational schools across the country. (p. 74)

On the other hand, education for girls was a sensitive topic among many conservative groups in the country. As a result the development of their education was a fluctuating process that that experienced growth between 1919-24, suspension between 1925-8, and destruction in 1928-9 (Baiza, 2013). It was a sensitive area that was treated with great caution by the government.

Despite these challenges, more primary and secondary schools opened in the 1920s, along with an adult educational centre for women. Also, in 1931 a new constitution made primary education compulsory for all Afghans, and was provided for free at all levels (Samady, 2001). Moreover, education was placed under the direct control of the state as it continued to expand throughout the 1930s and 1940s. The number of students enrolled in these schools increased from 1590 students in 1930 to 95,300 students in 1950. Among these students, 4350 were females (Samady, 2001). Despite these developments however, only 6% of Afghan children between the ages of 6-12 were enrolled in schools by the 1950s.

After World War 2, more investments were made in education as the government focused on the systematic expansion and improvement of education quality. However, the government was much more careful not to push these efforts (notably women and girls’ education) as they did not want to upset religious leaders or tribal chiefs who in the past had formed strong opposition to King Amanullah’s reforms. Education took a much more
politicized turn during this time, as efforts were made to please local elites through favouring of their ethnic and religious backgrounds, at the expense of other minorities.

Foreign aid provided key support for these development initiatives, especially from countries like the United States, Germany and Russia (Samady, 2001). Afghanistan released its first development plan for the years 1955-1961, which focused further on the development of primary education. Another 5-year plan followed in 1962, this time focusing on secondary schools and HE institutions. A third plan, from the years 1976-1983, focused mainly on the development of human resources through technical and vocational education. However, this plan was discontinued after the Soviet invasion in 1978 (Samady, 2001).

During the Russian-Afghan war and internal conflicts that followed, lasting from 1978 until 2001, few advancements were in the field of education. Although there was a brief period in the 1980s, under the leadership of the PDPA which “considered education an important instrument for fostering the economic and social transformation of Afghanistan” (Samady, 2001, p. 592)

Since 2001, enrollments are once again on the rise, and the state has prioritized the education of males and especially females. I examine these trends next through my focus on the development of HE and recent reforms in this field.

**Higher education**

In 1932, the establishment of the Faculty of Medicine marked the beginning of the first university in the country. In the 1940s, the Faculty of Medicine expanded to include Law, Science, and Letters (Samady, 2001). In 1946, these faculties would form the first university in the country, which was Kabul University. The demand for HE began to emerge
as primary and secondary education became mandated by the government. In 1968, the first Constitution of Universities was created, Article (1) of which stated:

The principle objective of the university are the preservation, dissemination and advancement of knowledge; strengthening personal and social responsibility in youth; and training youth to realize Islamic, national, legal and political values in order to serve Afghan society and mankind. (cited in Samady, 2001, p. 59)

The government recognized the importance of HE in contributing towards the development and well-being of Afghan society. Similarly, in 1977, the Ministry of Higher Education was established in order to better serve the rapidly increasing demands for HE. Development plans followed, giving particular attention to rural populations, a vast majority of which did not have access to HE.

During the years of war, development in the country had come to almost a complete halt due to the fact that many buildings and university functions were close to being in complete ruins. Also, student enrollment and attendance declined drastically as a result of the violence that followed and the displacement to neighbouring countries. Table 1 demonstrates the drop in the number of male and female students who were enrolled in HE between 1950 to 1995.
Table 1

**Enrolment in Higher Education (1950-1995)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1950</td>
<td>396</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>476</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1960</td>
<td>1,540</td>
<td>157</td>
<td>1,697</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1965</td>
<td>2,805</td>
<td>646</td>
<td>3,451</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1970</td>
<td>6,697</td>
<td>1,135</td>
<td>7,832</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1975</td>
<td>10,575</td>
<td>1,681</td>
<td>12,256</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1977</td>
<td>11,463</td>
<td>4,684</td>
<td>16,147</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980</td>
<td>13,000</td>
<td>5,000</td>
<td>18,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1986</td>
<td>19,182</td>
<td>3,124</td>
<td>22,306</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>16,864</td>
<td>7,469</td>
<td>24,333</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1995</td>
<td>7,700</td>
<td>3,000</td>
<td>10,700</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Adapted from “Enrolment in Higher Education” by Samady, 2013.

Enrollment was particularly high during the Soviet occupation because that was a period when education (particularly of women and girls) was prioritized by the Soviet-backed PDPA. Baiza (2013) explains that the two factions of the PDPA, Khalq and Parcham, “both had a tradition of propagating their ideologies through the educational institutions long before emerging to power in 1978” (p. 147). Using schools as sites for political ideologies blurred the lines between politics and education. They had also declared “the equality of women and men in all social, economic, political, cultural, and civil aspects” (Emadi, 2002, p. 100).

In order to achieve this aim, the PDPA had launched literacy classes throughout the country, especially targeting rural areas where illiteracy was over 80%, and also
where a vast majority of the population lived. It was the first time such an aggressive literacy campaign was introduced outside of urban centres. For a brief period in the 1980s, women were able to take advantage of this support. It was a short-lived period however, as opposition to the PDPA mounted quickly, and women too found themselves organizing against the increasingly violent and oppressive regime (Emadi, 2002). With the escalation of civil wars in the 1990s, enrollment of women in particular dropped drastically; by 1995, it had dropped for both men and women by almost 50%.

By 2001, there was very little left of HE institutions as most of the infrastructure had been destroyed by wars, and many of the faculty and students had either fled the country or were killed in the wars. In 2002, an emergency meeting organized by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), in collaboration with the Ministry of Higher Education (MoHE), discussed the needs and long-term goals of HE, and also to create a national consensus on educational policy (UNESCO, 2002, p.6). Since then, there have been some improvements as institutions were rebuilt and expanded. Also, the Afghan government links the development of HE as pivotal “in post conflict recovery and development in Afghanistan” (MoHE, 2013, p. 14).

Presently, the number of HE institutions, both public and private, continues to increase along with the demand for it (MoHE, 2013). Since March 2013, there were 31 public HE institutions and 73 private (MoHE, 2013). Public HE institutions include universities, polytechnic and institutes and higher teachers’ colleges. Moreover, most of the degrees offered are at the Bachelors level, with only two universities offering Master-level degrees, including Kabul University (public) and American University of Afghanistan
(private) (Baharustani, 2012). The MoHE is expecting continuing increases in the demand for HE, and also increasing challenges in meeting these demands. The next section highlights some of the challenges that the development of education continues to face.

**Persisting Challenges**

Formal education has endured considerable challenges from the moment of its inception. Many of these problems are a consequence of the country’s poor economic situation, geography, lack of qualified teachers and wars. Even when formal education was ardently pursued by the Afghan state, its development was still limited to urban centers mainly (Gregorian, 1969). Thus while some developments have occurred since 2001, there are many challenges that continue to persist, and in some cases have worsened. Three of these persisting challenges include: *Quality and Access*, *Gendered Contestations* and finally, *Foreign Influences*.

**Quality and access**

The relation between quality and access to education has often been uneasy and intertwined since the beginning of its development. Gregorian (1969) explains that even when formal education was made compulsory, it was limited mainly to children who came from upper class families living in urban centers. This trend has been continuous throughout the years. Since it was promoted mainly by the Afghan rulers, its role as a ‘social mobilizer’ was further enhanced (Ekanayake, 2004). Schools from the very beginning served as sites where intellectual classes loyal to the ruling families would be trained and recruited (Ekanayake, 2004). A majority of upper middle class intellectuals had received formal education in Afghanistan, with some sent for further studies abroad (Emadi, 2002). This
trend has persisted over the years particularly among females as formal learning institutions are often located in urban centres, and therefore not accessible to a vast majority of women.

Furthermore, throughout the 1920s, increasing demands amongst the elites were impacting the quality of education as there was a severe shortage of qualified teachers and resources. To overcome this challenge, King Amanullah sent many high school graduates, including girls, to foreign nations so that they could further enhance their learning and skills. The King also recruited teachers from other countries, a trend that continues to be prevalent over the years. Many of these teachers were from universities in India, America, France and Germany in order to improve the quality of learning at universities (Samady, 2001).

Prior to the outbreak of war, there was an increasing steady demand for education. However, since 2001, there has been an exponential increase for demand and enrollment, especially among girls. Table 2 displays this growth for the years 2002 until 2012.

**Table 2**

*Growth of Student Enrollment in Afghanistan (2002-2012)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>General Education</th>
<th></th>
<th>Higher Education</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>1,700,000</td>
<td>700,000</td>
<td>2,400,000</td>
<td>27,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>2,700,000</td>
<td>1,300,000</td>
<td>4,000,000</td>
<td>24,500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>3,500,000</td>
<td>1,900,000</td>
<td>5,400,000</td>
<td>30,600</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>3,900,000</td>
<td>2,300,000</td>
<td>6,200,000</td>
<td>48,200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>4,300,000</td>
<td>2,700,000</td>
<td>7,000,000</td>
<td>62,900</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>5,300,000</td>
<td>3,284,000</td>
<td>8,584,000</td>
<td>81,785</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Adapted from “Growth of Student Enrollment in Afghanistan” by Samady, 2013.
For example, enrollment in general education increased from 2.4 million to 8.6 million students, 38% of which were female, compared to around 29% in 2002 (Samady, 2013). In HE, the number of students increased from 31,200 in 2002 to 101,000 in 2012, of which 19% were female, compared to 13% in 2002. Moreover, the number of HEI institutions also increased from 6040 in 2002 to 14,456 in 2012.

In 2013, the MoHE raised concerns over the continuing trends amongst donors who prioritize the development of primary and secondary education over HE (MoHE, 2013). This is particularly concerning as the number of high school applicants seeking university admission is already beyond the limit of both the public and private HE institutions. HE continues to be considered as severely under-sourced in meeting demands despite some development (Miwa, 2005; Romanowski, McCarthy, & Mitchell, 2007). In addition, as admission increased, the quality of education is further compromised by the fact that instructors with only a baccalaureate degree are then hired to teach (Mcnerney, 2009). There is also strong political pressure on MoHE to continue expanding rather than to improve the quality of existing institutions (Mcnerney, 2009).

Presently, MoHE continues to struggle with limited funding, lack of qualified staff and resources, and more urgently, meeting demands of new graduates. In 2011-2012, 150,000 highschool students completed the university entrance exam, of which only 82,718 were able to secure their enrollment (68,253 public and 14,465 private) (Baharustani, 2012). Almost half of the students were not able to secure a spot at any university even though they were qualified for admission. These numbers are expected to increase for the years 2013 as over 180,000 students are expected to take the university entrance examinations, 27,000 of whom will be accepted (Mcnerney, 2009).
Therefore, both quality and access are areas of concern that are not new to the development of formal education, especially in HE. However, since 2002, with some advancements, there are new concerns as the educational system continues to struggle with quality of education, and access to young high school graduates. Even with the opening of non-profit and for-profit HE institutes, both quality and access continue to plague educational advancement.

**Gendered contestations**

Schools in Afghanistan often served as a battleground for varying political agendas and foreign ideologies (Roozbeh, 2008). However, the education of women and girls continued to raise the most concern and opposition. The King’s pursuit for the right to education among females in the 1900s lead to a division in ideals among the population. Such a divide was presented between those who idealized his Western types of modernization and those who wanted to preserve their traditional values and beliefs (Karlsson & Mansory, 2007). Those opposing the King viewed women’s education as an attack on their religious and cultural values, especially since King Amanullah had introduced other reforms alongside, as challenging existing social practices (for example, limiting the number of wives to four as per Islamic law, giving women the right to divorce, or to study abroad and therefore travel alone).

These oppositions would reach another high level during the era of the PDPA reforms, which also challenged existing social practices (for example, banning arranged marriages, banning dowry), alongside their aggressive efforts to eradicate illiteracy and increasingly pursue women and girls’ education. Resentment, opposition and suspicion of the
PDPA was especially great when during this era, Islamic education was replaced with Soviet-inspired curricula (Banzet et al., 2007).

My research with Afghan-Canadian mothers living in Canada in 2004 revealed that negative perception of education of girls continued to impact how these mothers felt about their daughter’s education and that these feelings were based primarily on their experiences and memory of the Soviet-era gendered reforms (Akseer, 2007). While the mothers did not prevent their daughters from gaining HE, they worried constantly about the possible ‘corruption’ or damage it might do to their identity as Muslim or as Afghans (Akseer, 2007). Their stories of corruption were mainly ones that they had heard during the Soviet occupation, and consisted of rumours that they had heard in their villages about women being encouraged through schools, by the PDPA, to act ‘un-Islamic’ or ‘unlike an Afghan’.

Despite these challenges, however, many Afghans perceived women and girls’ education as progressing and blame mainly the wars for its interruption (Azemati, 2011). Since 2002, progress has continued as the enrollment of women and girls continues to increase every year. However, war continues to impact their learning, which has been increasingly militarized, as they not only experience the direct physical impact of the occupation, but also their learning is linked to the (success of) the US-led occupation (Novelli, 2010). Similarly, those who oppose the occupation through violence (for example, the Taliban), see the increasing attention on women and girls education as “an unwelcome advance of modernity and alien culture (Harmer et al., 2011, p. 212).

The increase in enrollment has also lead to a parallel increase in violence and attacks directed towards women and girls’ education (Banzet et al., 2008; Human Rights Watch, 2006; Jones, 2009). Security concerns are complicated further through the Provincial
Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) whereby military personnel also conduct development work, including building schools (Harmer et al., 2011). As a result, attacks on such schools, as well as government-led schools are much more frequent than community-based schools (Harmer et al., 2011). In 2009, CARE International found that “[g]irls’ education is clearly targeted more than boys” (p. 2) and that “the main perpetrators against the education of girls are the armed insurgency or internal community members” (Glad, 2009, p. 2). Furthermore, the report also states that of all the schools that were attacked, 40% were girls and 28% boys “which clearly signals a gender bias in the attacks” (Glad, 2009, p. 2). The report also notes that such violence has been increasing in recent years, leading to the closure of over 1,150 schools between 2006-2008, and from 2008-2009, the killing of students and teachers doubling (Glad, 2009). The report further states that for girls, it is least likely that they continue attending schools once their institution has been attacked.

To conclude, female access and participation in formal education has always generated controversy. The Afghan state has remained determined over the years to continue encouraging their inclusion. However, while the state may be moving forward with its reforms, it also continues to face resistance, particularly from those who actively oppose the current government. The tensions between those who want to move forward, and those who oppose these changes, have turned the development of education in to a militarized arena where their respective political ideologies seem to be connected directly to whether or not women and girls can continue learning. In order to better articulate these tensions, it is important to examine the historical processes through which the Afghan state has been able to pursue its interests of educating (and emancipating in general) women and girls. In the
next section, I examine some of these processes through an exploration of foreign aid towards the development of formal education in Afghanistan.

**Foreign influences**

As explored earlier in this chapter, the Afghan state has always depended on foreign support and aid for its sustenance. Particularly during the cold war rivalry of the United States and Russia, greater emphasis was placed on providing aid to the development of education. These efforts have long been recognized as linked to the donor nation’s own geopolitical interests, especially in Afghanistan, as aid provided an opportunity to “ensure control of this political strategic location in Asia” (Spink, 2005, p. 196). Specifically since the 1970s, the two areas that the United States and Russia focused on “included large infrastructure development and the education system (Spink, 2005, p. 197). Both countries saw importance in influencing educational reforms in order to serve their political interests. Russia, for example, through its ‘sovietisation’ of the Afghan curriculum, attempted to remove religion and replace it with Soviet-inspired communist ideologies. This “caused the Afghan population to distrust the educational system and schools were seen as vehicles for promoting communist ideology rather than Afghan values” (Banzet & Geoffroy, 2006, p. 7).

The United States also recognized the importance of education in furthering their political agenda, mainly to spread anti-communist ideology. Thus, they provided the University of Nebraska with a $60 million dollar grant to develop jihadi textbooks. As I explored earlier in this chapter, these textbooks taught a very violent militant ideology of Islam, including hatred of the different sects within Islam (Spink, 2005). “As a result, the more fundamentalist militant sects of Islam, which had previously been closely controlled and restricted, were permitted to spread and now received a massive amount of international
support” (Spink 2005, p. 198). Moreover, a shortage of textbooks that accompanied massive re-enrollments in 2002 revealed that these jihadi textbooks were still in use inside Afghanistan (Jones, 2009).

Mcnerney (2009) notes that since 2001, international donors have continued to play an important role in the development of education in Afghanistan. Afghanistan is dependent almost entirely on foreign aid for its functioning. Also, between 2001 and 2007, over 15 billion dollars in donor aid was provided to Afghanistan. However, only 4.4 billion was channeled through the Afghan government’s accounts. This has raised concerns over the legitimacy and effectiveness of the government as donor-led projects often run parallel to government-led ones, and as a result, further weakening the government’s position by providing “a parallel educational system over which the government does not have much control” (Karlsson & Mansory, 2007, p. 188).

Another possible threat to the weakening position of the state is the creation of PRTs, established by the United States to help “extend the authority and presence of the Afghan government across the country” (Chishti, 2014, p. 11). However, PRTs have been considered very controversial as they blur the lines between the military and aid agencies (Kolhatkar & Ingalls, 2006, cited in Chishti, 2014) as military personnel do the work (for example, building schools) aid agencies. This is particularly alarming as most learning centers that are offered through aid agencies are often favoured (and considered safer for girls) over state-owned schools (Glad, 2009).

Since 2001, the World Bank (WB) and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) have been the largest financial donors providing both financial and technical support to HE (Mcnerney, 2009). Mcnerney notes that the WB in particular is
pushing for “a free-market system that emphasizes local authority to make decisions” (p. 94), an approach that is in contradiction to the traditionally centralized system of HE. Furthermore, these organizations often support projects to individual universities “that have no governmental oversight” (Mcnerney, 2009).

As a result, Mcnerney (2009) warns that through aid, donors continue to play an important role in prescribing the development agenda for Afghanistan and also supporting its own polices to shape the country:

Afghanistan has macro level goals established by international agencies, and most ministries rely heavily on technical support from outside. As a result, Afghanistan cannot completely control its own destiny, and will not be able to until it can establish a level of financial dependence. Until then, donor policy continues to shape the country according to the global nation state model based on democracy and a market economy as exemplified in the developed countries. (p. 74)

Dependency on foreign aid is particularly alarming as the Afghan state continues to lack the means through which it could generate its own income and therefore support the development of institutions like HE. Mcnerney (2009) states: “As long as higher education remains tied to the finances of a financially weak central government, the financial resources of the higher education sector will remain minimal, leaving the universities unable to meet the challenges of increasing quality and improving access” (p. 94).

In summary, the development of formal education has historically been dependent on foreign aid, and this trend has not only continued, but rather intensified since 2001 as the country is attempting to recover from decades of war and destruction. However, such aid always came with a price as it was often provided in exchange for reforms that continue to favour the country providing the aid. The politicization of aid therefore, continues to raise concerns, particularly for women and girls, whose access is threatened due to such foreign
involvements. The next section examines some of the outcomes of recent reforms introduced mainly through educational aid, particularly by leading donor to HE, the WB.

**HE Post-2001: A Turn to Market Ideology**

The needs of HE continue to be an extensive and ongoing challenge for the government to fulfill. There has been some important improvements such as both MoHE and the international community have showed consistent commitment towards the development of HE, and see it as an important part of the rebuilding process in the country. However, as the previous section highlighted, educational foreign aid, which is the main source of sustenance for HE in Afghanistan at the moment, is introducing and implementing reforms that do not necessarily address the needs of the country, but rather support the needs of those occupying the country. I examine some of these reforms to illustrate the influences of neoliberal ideology on HE through the following three observations: *Militarization of HE*, *World Bank’s Market-Driven Restructuring of HE* and finally, *Commodification of Women’s Education*.

**Militarization of HE**

The importance of investing in HE in Afghanistan has gained momentum both at the national and international level since the invasion in 2001. As I explored in Chapter 2, such undertakings reflect global trends, as donor agencies have found aid as effective means through which to accomplish its political agendas in the Global South. However, in post-conflict contexts like Afghanistan, development initiatives are convoluted with the war itself, thereby causing the language of these reforms to reflect the overall objectives of the war on terror and the West’s security agenda in the region. As Novelli (2010) notes, “[r]ather than working around wars and conflicts, international development organizations have learnt how
to work within them, and alongside them” (p. 456). In other words, the insecurity in the country does not necessarily sit at the opposite end of the agenda of the development organizations, but rather is incorporated into their reforms.

In some of the educational reforms introduced in Afghanistan, a theme of religious violence or conflict is clearly indicated, along with an emphasis on the need to monitor and control it, an important objective of the war on terror agenda in the region. Such reforms are introduced through both the Ministry of Education (MoE) and MoHE. For example, in 2003, MOE released a curriculum framework that was developed in collaboration with USAID, United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). This framework interweaves the purpose of education with the problem of religious extremism and locates solutions for it through market ideology. For example, the framework states: “when young people enter the world of work, as a result of the implementation of the new curriculum, they will be good Muslims, civilized human beings and true, self-reliant Afghans” (Ministry of Education, Department of Compilation and Translation, 2003, p. 11).

The MoHE contrives a similar approach in its reforms post-2001. For example, in 2003, MoHE teamed up with UNESCO in order to address the rebuilding and reforms needed for HE (MoHE & UNESCO, 2004). The meeting was the beginning of a process that would result in the creation of the first HE development plan in almost 30 years. The outcome of this meeting was a study examining the present status of HE in order “to make informed recommendations on a comprehensive set of political choices for restructuring and rebuilding the whole HE system” (MoHE & UNESCO, 2004, p. 14). The report made
explicit the link between neoliberal ideology and HE by stating that “[t]here is a close connection between growth in knowledge and economic growth” (p. 6).

Like MOE, the MoHE also shares common visions of the purpose of HE with those occupying the country. For example, the MoHE states its mission is to “facilitate equitable access to higher education to all who are academically qualified, establish innovative institutions that provide high quality teaching, research and service; produce graduates who are competitive in a global economy; contribute to the economic growth, social development nation building and stability of the country (MoHE, 2009, p.4). HE is also linked to not only “economic rejuvenation of Afghanistan” (MoHE, 2009), but also as an ‘undisputed’ factor in reducing poverty and promoting prosperity (ANDS, 2008, p. 1).

Finally, Rosen (2011) explains the role of the international community to rebuild Afghanistan as something that “goes beyond simple technical reform, focusing instead on the deeper levels of Afghan deputies’ personalities” (p. 152). Rosen explains that since 2008, the United Nations has introduced an organized mentoring program which provides workshops and training to all the ministries, including MoHE. By focusing on the individual rather than the institution, Rosen explains that the ministers and deputy ministers are coached into neoliberal policies through an emphasis on “the individual civil servant and his or her personal attitudes and dispositions as key to the development of Afghan governance (p. 155).

Rosen (2011) states:

Coaching resembles the neoliberal conception of institutional development as organized around the individual’s personal dreams, desires and ambitions. The [coaching project] taught coachees to visualize personal ambitions, to set realistic personal goals, to compete, to think of themselves as subjects in a competitive system, to manage personal barriers to professional development. The coaches worked systematically to create images of the future for the coachees. They shaped dreams about a better future with better lives for the civil servants and for Afghanistan. (p. 167)
In conclusion, HE has experienced some improvements through the attention it has received in the last decade. However, these efforts reflect themes which suggest a militarization of education as it is linked explicitly to the overall political ideologies and justification for the US-led war and occupation in Afghanistan. This militarization of education is done not only at the policy level, but targets individual leaders and policy makers, to ensure success of its neoliberal restructuring initiatives in Afghanistan. The next section examines the mannerisms in which the WB has taken a leadership role in this approach.

**World Bank’s restructuring of HE**

The WB has played a central role in restructuring educational policies towards market-friendly reforms throughout the developing world (Lincove, 2009). Afghanistan is no exception as the WB continues to be the largest foreign financier of HE in Afghanistan (Mcnerney, 2009; MoHE, 2013). According to the WB, some of the principles that guide its reconstruction strategy in Afghanistan include “quick wins” in order to generate income and to promote economic recovery and political stability; moreover, its goals are also to ensure “continuity between humanitarian and reconstruction/development activities, and also [recognize] the nexus with peace-building state formation and security” (World Bank, 2001, p. 12). Gender equity, and private sector-led growth are also considered “a central pillar of the reconstruction strategy” (World Bank, 2001, p. 12). The WB portrays Afghanistan in the report as offering “a unique opportunity to undertake courageous reforms that may not be possible in other countries where the key actors in the higher education community have entrenched positions that make change difficult if not impossible” (World Bank, 2005, p.2).
In other words, the damage and destruction of war, which had left institutions like HE in a non-functioning state, along with present uncertainties made it much more easily accessible for the WB to introduce and carry out their reforms, than in poor nations where there was still a functioning system in place.

The WB saw the development of education as part of its long-term commitment to Afghanistan. Within the reconstruction process, private sector growth was prioritized throughout different sectors as WB felt that the “high cost of reconstruction and likely constraints on the availability of external funding mean that a private sector-oriented approach is called for” (World Bank, 2001, p. 18). Notably, public-private partnerships were seen as effective solutions for ensuring services were widely reached. Other solutions included bypassing the government and providing services instead through non-governmental organizations (NGOs), UN agencies or donor-controlled contractors. The WB sees HE as “crucial to producing future skilled professionals” (p. 1) and in effect, a priority in the reconstruction process.

The Afghan government echoes these sentiments towards neoliberal restructuring even though it contradicts previous and existing policy trends. For example, the Afghan state declared that its economic vision was “to build a liberal market economy” (ANDS, 2006, p. 3) by developing “an enabling environment for the private sector growth” (ANDS, 2006, p. 3). Some of the ways that the government plans to generate this growth include “sale of public land for housing and use of revenues for government investment in infrastructure and urban development […] divestment of state owned enterprises” (ANDS, 2006, p. 12), and significant direct foreign investments into the mining sector. These plans contradict Article 9 of the 2004 Afghan Constitution which clearly states that mines and other underground
resources and cultural heritage are properties of the state (cited in Karlsson & Mansory, 2007). Although these changes are a profound break from previous practices in the country, the Afghan state showed no hesitation in accepting them. As previously discussed, Afghanistan has relied heavily on foreign aid for its development, particularly in the field of education. It is not surprising to see that they have showed a continued willingness to accept reforms in exchange for aid.

This submission of the state to foreign influences is also reflected in its adoption and implementation of privatization. Paterson, Blewett, and Karimi (2006) explain that for the Afghan government, privatization is now one component of “a broad spectrum of economic reform and restructuring aimed at building an enabling environment in order to promote private-sector-driven growth” (p. 2). Thus, a number of state enterprises, including education, are being considered to be sold to private actors (Paterson et al., 2006, p. 5). The MoHE follows these trends in its first strategic plan, stating: “There is a close connection between growth in knowledge and economic growth” (MoHE & UNESCO, 2004, p. 6). Similarly, WB suggests that a major challenge facing HE in Afghanistan is its lack of relevance and linkages with the economy: “[HE] institutions in Afghanistan don’t have a tradition of linkages with the productive sectors. Faculties and departments work in isolation from employers[…] Creating such linkages and conducting tracer studies on a regular basis will be an important aspect of improving the relevance of higher education programs” (World Bank, 2005, p. 2).

The WB viewed the process of rebuilding HE as a critical step for Afghanistan to have “good governance, institutions that are accountable and a thriving private sector” (WB, 2005, p. 4). In 2005, the Afghan government had “requested the bank to play a lead role in
helping the government design a long-term higher education development program which can mobilize various foundations, private sector contributions and foster linkages with high quality universities abroad” (WB, 2005, p. 5). One of WB’s first major project in developing HE was the *Strengthening Higher Education Project* (SHEP), in 2005. The objective of this $40 million dollar project were as follows: first, “[t]o improve livelihoods, reform governance and public administration and enable private sector development through human resource development at the tertiary education institutions” (WB, 2005, p. 13). These objectives were to be accomplished through university partnership programs, which included 5 Afghan universities, teamed up with various foreign universities (see Table 3). Similarly, the second objective of SHEP was to increase institutional autonomy and accountability and improve efficiency and data-based decision making (p. 13).
Table 3

*University Partnerships Supported by SHEP/WB*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No</th>
<th>Local Institutions</th>
<th>Partner Institutions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Kabul University-Faculty of Engineering</td>
<td>Kansas State University, USA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Kabul University-Department of English</td>
<td>Kansas State University, USA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Nangarhar University-Department of English</td>
<td>San Diego State University, USA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Balkh University-Department of English</td>
<td>Kansas State University, USA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Herat University-Faculty of Engineering</td>
<td>University of Hartford, USA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Kabul Polytechnic University-Department of Electrical Engineering</td>
<td>University of Brighton, England</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Kabul University-Faculty of Sciences</td>
<td>Delhi University, India</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Herat University-Department of Computer Science</td>
<td>Technische Universitaet Berlin, Germany</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Afghan Universities- Faculty of Economics &amp; Management</td>
<td>Ruhr Universitaet Bochum, Germany</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Balkh University- Faculty of Engineering</td>
<td>Asian Institute of Technology, Thailand</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Nangarhar University-Faculty of Engineering</td>
<td>San Diego State University, USA</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Source is Ministry of Higher Education (2009).

To illustrate, Nangarhar University (Afghanistan’s second largest University), partnered with San Diego State University (SDSU) for a 3-year partnership that cost over $1.9 million dollars. The purpose of this project was to help Nangarhar University develop a Bachelors program in English. Some of the duties of SDSU included short-term intensive summer faculty development programs at SDS, expansion of computers and the Internet at NU, and intensive English learning programs for the faculty. This partnership is an indication that
assistance is provided mainly for market-related fields, such as English, Engineering, and Computer Science.

Some of the other reforms that have already taken place under the guidance of the Bank including, the establishment of the first private universities in Afghanistan in 2006, along with the introduction of charging students’ fees (mainly at the private level and for night classes in public universities, but it is being pushed by the Bank for public universities as well) (Mcnerney, 2009). Since then, there have been rapid increases in the number of private universities. As of March 2013, there were 73 private universities throughout Kabul, and 31 public universities (MoHE, 2013). Private universities were created at the request of WB mainly to help HE address its capacity challenge, and absorb rapidly increasing demands for HE. Moreover, private universities are perceived as providing much more clearer connections between learning and the job market (Mcnerney, 2009).

In summary, WB has played an important role in the restructuring of HE in Afghanistan. The recommendations and objectives that have been put in place and reflect a strong turn towards neoliberal ideology. The next section focuses on the influences of neoliberal restructuring on Afghan women’s learning.

**Commodification of women’s learning**

In the last decade, education for females has gained considerable attention. Specifically, the Taliban’s abuse of women’s rights, including a ban on their education or employment, had not only generated international outrage, but also served as one of the main justification and support for the US-led invasion (Deo, 2014). As I explored in Chapter 2, colonialist narratives about Muslim women not only helped the West invade in the first place, but these narratives continue to operate in privileging the West’s continued ‘need’ to
stay and fight for their protection. Thus ‘gender equality’ has become an important and popular term. Cornwall (2010) refers to such words and their popularity as ‘buzzwords’, meaning that they do not have precise meanings or measures, but are used regularly in development discourse. The 2004 Afghan Constitution for example, introduced the inclusion of females, as a group that experiences gendered marginalization throughout the country. However, the Constitution provides limited information on the reasoning behind their marginalized status, or a justification for addressing the issue. Historically, when Afghan rulers made attempts to address women’s emancipation, it was often temporary and passed in decrees or demonstrated through actions (as King Amanullah’s wife did through unveiling her face in public). Due to the sensitive nature of this issue, this topic was avoided from being included in the Constitution. These sensitivities were especially explicit when reforms dominantly reflected Western values over local ones. This was especially the case during King Amanullah’s reforms and the Soviet occupation. As discussed earlier in this chapter, these sensitivities are not only historic but also continue to shape the present values and beliefs of many Afghans.

Since 2001, however, this topic has become an integral component of the reconstruction process. The WB specifically, as the leading donor in the reconstruction process, has introduced reforms that engage directly with women and girls’ participation in this process. For example, the Bank’s reconstruction plan for Afghanistan, states the following: “[t]here is an urgent need for technical and vocational education to provide skills for national reconstruction and to assist the insertion of youth, women, ex-combatants and others into the labour force” (WB, 2002, p. 2).
It did not take long for the Afghan state to implement these values. For example, in its 2004 Constitution, the state prioritizes, for the first time ever, the importance of women and girls’ education. Article 44 states: “The state shall devise and implement effective programs to create and foster balanced education for women, improve education of nomads as well as eliminate illiteracy in the country” (The Constitution of Afghanistan, 2004). Women are linked vaguely to the overall policy of the state, without any recognition of fact that women have traditionally experienced exclusion from formal education, differently than males.

The MoHE takes a similar approach in its 2010-1014 Strategic Plan, where the issue of women’s education is prioritized. However through a vague and generalized understanding of the complex history of women and girls’ relation to formal education. The plan states:

Given the inherent inequalities that exist in any society including Afghanistan, the Ministry has to ensure equal and fair opportunities for all those who are eligible to enter the higher education system. In particular, emphasis will be placed on poor students with potential, the physically challenged, rural people, gender equity, and others who have been particularly disadvantaged in the past. Special attention needs to be given to increasing the number of women students and women in higher education teaching positions (MoHE, 2010).

Once again, women are grouped with other minorities as a ‘minority’ issue, even though gender intersects with all other identity markers. Women are also encouraged to participate through traditional roles (teachers), a step that might contradict the Ministry’s intended goal achieving equality.

While these changes indicate a progression toward recognition of the importance of gender equality, there is also an active objective to link their emancipation or equality to the market. As a result, the positive outcome of education for example is linked to job security...
and participation in the market. Moreover, their lack of participation in the market, is seen not as a socio-historical process of deliberate exclusion, but rather as “[d]ue to the lack of education, particularly post-elementary education, [as] women lack the skills and experience required for many occupations” (ANDS, 2011, p.3). Structural and institutional barriers to women’s participation both in education and the job market are not acknowledged. This is particularly concerning due to the limited access of HE restricted to only a small percentage of women. The 1% of Afghan women who have access are women who often come from higher socio-economic statuses (Mcnerney, 2009).

It appears that these reforms do not reflect the deeper and historically contested relation between formal education and gender in Afghanistan. Instead, there is a new shift towards neoliberal policies that suggest the domination of foreign policy objectives rather than local needs or realities. This idea is particularly alarming as illiteracy continues to be widespread in the country, with prejudices towards women and girls’ education not only present but actively on the rise (Glad, 2009). The reforms introduced to address this problem do not engage with these concerns, but rather introduce new agendas revealing the commoditized nature of women’s learning.

**Conclusion**

This chapter provided an understanding of the development of formal education in Afghanistan, focusing mainly on HE and reforms that have taken place since the US-led occupation of Afghanistan. In order to provide further context, the first two sections present an overview of the development of Afghanistan, a look at the development of formal education, formal education, detailing specifically post 2001 reforms of HE in the country, and finally, the key challenges that this field continues to face especially with regard to
women and girls’ education. In the next chapter, I discuss my research methodology and methods.
Chapter 4
Methodology

Designing a Materialist Informed Transnational Feminist Study

My motivations for choosing to study Afghan women’s lives through their educational journeys was both political and personal. Politically, I became increasingly concerned over the West’s portrayal of Afghan men and women in the aftermaths of September 11, 2001. Initially, like many others in my family, the attention Afghanistan was receiving from the international world seemed promising. Afghanistan had already been devastated by war for years and there was barely any attention to the plight of the people living under the horrors of the Taliban and Northern Alliances. However, it soon became apparent to me that the West was driven by its own agendas and their focus was not entirely to help rebuild Afghanistan. I was particularly bothered by ahistorical, racist accounts of women and men’s lives, presenting their (limited) history and present challenges through a lens that served Western propaganda more than the needs of the people. Liberal notions of empowerment were also circulated, causing further concerns among many of my family members living in Afghanistan, who in reality were now dealing with further threats and violence, through the West’s occupation and violence.

Personally, I was becoming increasingly alarmed by the success of the West’s occupation in selling these racist and colonialist narratives about women and men. My visit to Afghanistan in 2004 was a painful reminder of my own experiences of war years earlier when the Soviets had invaded Afghanistan. There were tanks on public roads and civilians were not allowed to move when foreign military personnel were in sight. If they did, they would be shot on the spot. When I visited my relatives, their financial situation had further
deteriorated. Many of my relatives were forced to return from Pakistan since Afghanistan was no longer considered ‘at war’, but there was nothing to return to. The Soviet invasions had shattered their homes and their fields, leaving nothing to build it with. When I arrived in May 2004, the main source of income, opium, was banned from being grown. Since then, the situation has deteriorated even further as there are no other alternatives for generating an income. People in our village are barely making enough only to survive.

On the other hand, my personal experiences of war from the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in the early 1980s, I have also witnessed firsthand the resilience of my family, particularly the women. Since almost everyone in our village had fled to Pakistan after the Soviet invasion, households were run by women for the first time because men were either dead or fighting the Soviet occupation, including my father. As such, I witnessed my mother, my aunts, and other female relatives finding creative ways to look after their families, with their limited resources. Even more troubling for me has been witnessing my female relatives not having access to education years after the Taliban were overthrown and Afghanistan was ‘liberated’ by the West.

There is also a return among some of the men in our village to ‘preserve’ and ‘protect’ what they see by the West as an attack on their culture and their religion by further restricting their mobility and how they dress. They have been so disconnected from what happens in the center of Afghanistan, Kabul, that almost everything is viewed with suspicion, especially if they challenge existing social norms. For example, I spoke with a young girl who was dressed similarly to her elderly aunt. When I teased her for dressing like ‘an old lady’ and she explained that the women in her house were all ordered by the house elder (a male) to dress this way, including inside the home. This control surprised me due to my
childhood memories of the importance and freedom to choose what a woman wanted to wear inside her home. I came to the realization that the ‘progress’ or development that was apparently happening in Afghanistan, had not only remained limited to Kabul, but also, the people living outside the cities were feeling disconnected and threatened by them, thereby resorting to stricter practices of gendered segregation for example.

These aforementioned experiences have prompted me towards a dialectical historical materialist and transnational feminist lens because these approaches link my concerns of colonialism, imperialism, and patriarchy to the increasingly asymmetrical relations of power between ‘local’ and ‘global’ contexts, and the important role these relations play in the subjugation of women. A feminist approach challenges the notion that “all women are the same and positioned evenly in the social landscape” (DeVault & Gross, 2012, p. 208), and instead highlights the significant role that global unequal relations of power play in the subjugation of women in the Global South (Collins, 2000; Mohanty, 2003; Narayan, 1997). Structures and ideologies that oppress women are challenged within a feminist approach, through a focus on gender-based stereotypes and biases, reclaiming women’s subjugated knowledge, documenting their lives, experiences, and concerns (Brooks & Hesse-Biber, 2007).

Because feminist research also works to change the oppressive contexts within which women are located, Grewel and Kaplan (2000) consider it essential to not only understand and map unequal, uneven and complex relationships between women, but also their (and our) relationship to histories of colonialism, patriarchy and racism. It is an approach that understands the diversity among women, acknowledges their particular social, historical and cultural locations, and also promotes justice and well-being of all women (Hesse-biber,
At the same time, feminist theory rejects using positivist paradigms that claim value-free research methods, objective researchers, or the notion that social reality is unchanging (Hess-biber, 2006).

Transnational feminism explores the links among the histories and struggles of women against racism, sexism, colonialism, imperialism and monopoly capital (Mohanty, 1991). This approach recognizes communities as historically and geographically concrete but within boundaries that are fluid (Mohanty, 1991). For Mohanty (1991), a critique of colonialisat relations is essential to feminist struggles of women in the third world. She explains, feminist struggles are waged on at least two interconnected levels: the first is ideological (addressing questions of representation, womanhood, femininity) and the other is material, experiential daily life (focusing on the micro politics of work, home, family, sexuality, etc. Colonial relations of rule “form the backdrop for feminist critique at both levels (1991, p. 21).

Swarr and Nagar’s highlight three objectives that transnational feminism can achieve as a method of analysis. These objectives include:

1. Attend to racialized, classed, masculinized, and heteronormative logics and practices of globalization, capitalist patriarchies and the multiple ways in which they (re)structure colonial and neocolonial relations of domination and subordination.

2. Grapple with the complex and contradictory ways in which these processes both inform and are shaped by a range of subjectivities and understandings of individual and collective agency.
3. Transnational feminism can interweave critiques, actions and self-reflexivity and help resist making assumptions about what might constitute feminist politics in a given place and time (2010, p. 5).

These objectives helped guide my methodological framework and analysis. Specifically, in planning my data collection process and analysis, I aimed to maintain my ability to acknowledge and challenge power relations within these processes. The following three feminist principles guided me through my methodological framework and analysis. These principles included a feminist understanding of the role of the researcher (Reclaiming role of Researcher), the participants (Interrogating Constructions of Research Participant as ‘Other’), and the relationship between the two during the research process (Re-articulating the Researcher-Researched Power Dynamics).

**Reclaiming role of researcher as ‘native informant’**

In feminist research, it is important for the researcher to locate herself and include her personal history as part of the process through which understanding and conclusions are drawn (Stanley & Wise, 1993). As a racialized woman who continues to have linkages with her place of birth, I have always felt conflicted over my identity as an ‘Afghan-Canadian’. I found it easier to call myself an Afghan than a Canadian. In fact, I have never identified myself as a Canadian while living in Canada because of my personal encounters with racism and an increasing awareness of being an ‘Other’. Emotionally I have often felt isolated from this culture because I felt stronger connections to my Afghan roots.

However, while visiting Afghanistan, after years of living outside, my notions of being an Afghan, were challenged as I became aware of the ways in which I was different from women who had been living there. I came to see aspects of my life as privileged even
though I did not see them that way while growing up in Canada. This awareness became more profound when I went back as a researcher, and I continued to struggle with assumptions about my life as privileged in a materialist sense. However, I struggled with this notion of privilege about myself, with other experiences of gendered, classed, raced exclusions. In positivist notions of the researcher/participant relationship, my identity as an ‘insider’ might have been seen as an advantage, as Spivak (1999) points out, white capitalist culture accepts native informants to the extent that they ‘museumize’ or ‘exoticize’ their places of origin (p. 398). Likewise, Khan (2005) explains further that in the West, we are often expected to do research on our homelands. However in the homeland, we are not considered authentic enough. This expectation puts native informants under pressure to be ‘cultural ambassadors’ for their culture (Su, 1999, p. 35) or act as ‘authentic’ authorities on their culture (Khan, 2005, p. 2032).

Similarly, the native informant’s position is seen as precarious because of their status as the ‘authority on the third world women’. However that authority “is continuously deferred to the Western academy for legitimization” and thus reveals our “complicity in reproducing the master narrative about the third world peoples” (p. 2025). Similarly, Sprague (2005) explains that often ‘local’ researchers cannot speak with authority about their cultures unless they have been trained in Western schools because “locals have to be taught to see their own people and life ways through a different lens; they have to learn to objectify their own kind” (p. 114). Instead, Khan (2005) suggests that as native informants, we must ensure not to make claims about producing “authentic knowledge”, but rather “complicate the process of knowledge production” (p. 2023). Complicating essentialist notions of knowledge production is especially important as women of colour who write about third world cultures
or people are often “not only on the perimeter of the male academy but also on the fringes of liberal feminism” (Khan, 2005, p. 2023).

In order to reclaim my role as a ‘native informant’ so that I am not complicit in further distorting or subjugating Afghan women’s lived experiences, I drew from the work of feminists of colour who saw their marginalized positions as sites of privilege rather than victimhood. For example, Collins (1986) explains that marginalization enabled black feminists like herself, to ‘tap’ into their marginal position in order to produce a “distinctive analysis of race class and gender” (p. 515). Similarly, bell hooks (1989) explains that the marginalization of black people’s lives created “a space of radical openness” (p. 206), and a site which “nourishes one’s capacity to resist” (p. 207). For hooks (1984) also, living on the edge meant that “we understood both” (p. 11) dominant and marginalized cultures. This articulation is aligned with my personal belief and experiences of Afghan women. I do not consider them to be passive victims as agents of change, but as actively trying to resist and survive oppressive and depriving conditions. This understanding of Afghan women contradicts and rejects colonialist constructions that promote deliberately racist and false identities of Afghan women’s lives.

Although I highlighted the advantages of being an insider as a ‘native informant’, I also realize that this status does not necessarily result in “achieving an insider understanding on the part of even the most sympathetic researcher” (Sprague 2005, p. 65), since multiple relations of domination interact in shaping life chances and consciousness. The mechanisms of gender will be impacted by other workings of power, including race, class, and sexuality. Therefore, sharing some aspect of identity with the researched does not guarantee “common experiences or interests” (Zavella, 1996, p. 141). On the contrary, important differences and
privileges between researchers and the researched can be masked. Similarly, ‘insiders’ may also be held “more accountable to community norms for personal behavior restricting where they can go, with whom they can go, and under what circumstances (Sprague, 2005 p. 64).

This was certainly a reality for me as I was also limited to the same gendered restrictions in terms of mobility, as many of the participants living in Afghanistan. For example, I had to be chaperoned by a male family member while conducting most of the interviews. I also chose to be covered in the same way as my participants as a means to avoid harassment or negative attention towards myself or the participants. However, this was often challenging as I was pregnant at the time, limiting my ability to sit on the floor or move around while being draped in large headscarf, customary traditions in an Afghan home.

Zavella (1996) explains that often as insiders we are also expected to produce analyses that are not critical of our communities because we are held to a higher standard of loyalty due to ‘insider’ status. I felt that I could relate to this expectation because of the fact that some of the participants shared very concerning experiences. For example, at least two participants identified themselves as victims of sexual harassment from their professor, who threatened to fail them if they did not give in to his advances, thereby unjustifiably affecting their grades. The participants were very concerned and worried that they would fail their course, but were too afraid to speak about this topic with family for fear that their families would pull them out of university. It was difficult to listen to this information and ‘stay quiet’ as per the participant’s requests. On the other hand, I also cognizant of the dangers of raising such an issue with administrators or with the families, and knew that the girls’ access to the university would be terminated. It was a difficult situation to ignore but I had to respect my participants’ wishes as it would have further jeopardized their lives.
Interrogating constructions of research participants as ‘other’

Traditional research in social science uses a positivist approach that promotes a sharp dichotomy between the researcher and the participant, and also “focuses attention on strategies that researchers might use to [help them] enforce that dichotomy (Sprague, 2005, p. 33). This dichotomy hides the asymmetrical and exploitive dynamics between the researcher and the participant as those with social privilege (researcher) often have control over the production of knowledge, thus resulting in systematic bias. Similarly, Khan (2005) maintains that dichotomization between first world women and Muslim women more generally “reinforces views of orientalism […] and discourages an examination of the West and east as interconnected” (p. 2024). Such dichotomization, according to Khan, freezes “the [O]ther in time, both there and here” (Khan, 2005, p. 2024).

Similar to Khan (2005), Dill (1983) critiques the dichotomy between the researcher and the participant, a practice she considers a product of patriarchal strategy of divide and conquer and the continued importance of class, patriarchal and racial division. These sentiments are also echoed by Thobani (2003) who adds that the dichotomizing of the Other is “a remapping of the colonial divide in the current age of Empire, articulated once again through the discourse of the civilized West and barbaric Islamic world” (p.402). Ultimately, such either/or thinking implies a relationship of not only domination and subordination, but also of inferiority and superiority (Collins, 1986). Representations that emanate from such understandings erase the work and agency of women in those contexts who are actively involved in transforming their worlds (DeVault & Gross, 2012).

The transition from binary representations, particularly between first and third world women, enable feminists to examine how anti-women practices manifest themselves in different locales (Khan, 2005). Feminist theorists like Haraway’s (1988) concept of ‘situated
knowledges’ in particular has been helpful to me as she acknowledges the importance of objectivity from an angle that demands accountability from the researcher, and sees their knowledge as partial, embodied and situated in particular subject positions and social contexts. Haraway (1998) explains: “Feminist objectivity is about limited location and situated knowledge, not about transcendence and splitting the subject and object. It allows us to become answerable for what we learn to see” (p 583). This understanding was helpful in my interaction with the participants as it helped me to be conscious and therefore attempt to address my status as a ‘knower’ and instead focus on the processes that enabled me to arrive at different understandings than my participants. It also helped make explicit the hierarchal tendencies prevalent in traditional social science research, and instead emphasize the importance of situating women’s differences “within a historical, cultural, generational context” (Chodorow, 1996, p. 43).

**Rearticulating the researcher-researched power dynamics**

The researcher-participant power dynamics have been an important concern amongst feminist researchers. However, even the research methodologies proposed by feminists (for example, greater intimacy, and increased collaboration among the participant-researcher) raise ethical dilemmas that can result in potential exploitation of participants (Kirsch, 1999). Even when researchers make explicit attempts to address power dynamics (for example by giving ‘voice’ to participants), researchers still maintain power over the process. Sprague (2005) provides three ways in which researchers hold power. These ways include:(1) the researcher has more control than the researched over the process of research and how the relationship is constructed; (2), the researcher has power over interpretation and
representation of others; and finally, (3) researchers often have more social power than those that they are researching (p. 55).

One way that feminists addressed these issues is by attempting to ‘give voice’ to their participants. This approach is problematic because it essentializes notions of power. For example, it is possible that the participants might already have power, or that they may have more power than the researcher in certain sites or situations, and thus by essentializing power, the researcher might privilege hegemonic discourses over critical ones (Sprague, 2005).

Also, Bloom (1998) challenges feminist assumptions about power as always residing with the researcher. According to her perspective, such conceptions of power do “not help us to understand power as complex, contextual, fluctuating, and above all, relational” (p. 35). Instead, she urges feminist to see power as “situated and contextualized within particular intersubjective relationships” (p. 35). This understanding of power is important for my research due to the fact that one of my goals in this research was to document the experiences of women even in the most oppressive and marginalized conditions. Mendez and Wolf’s (2012) articulation of research sites as “transnational spaces” was especially useful as this view takes into consideration the global political and economic processes and power differentials responsible for shaping social relations. They emphasize the importance of moving away “from a unidirectional view of power and assumptions that seriously underestimate the capacity of people in the Global South to mobilize discursive tools of resistance and politics while mischaracterizing first world feminist researchers as constituting a homogenous category (p. 642).
One way that the power dynamics between the researcher and participant can be mapped, is for feminists to maintain a reflexive awareness about the research process (DeVault, 1999). Reflexivity begins with an understanding of the importance of one’s own values and attitudes in relation to the research process (Hesse-Biber, 2006). It is a “process through which a researcher recognizes, examines, and understands how his or her own social background and assumptions can intervene in the research process” (p. 129). In effect, “[l]ike the researched or respondent, the researcher is also a product of his or her society’s social structures and institutions” (Hesse-Biber, 2006, p. 129). A reflexive awareness enables feminist researchers to approach the research process not as a simple encounter, innocent of identities and lines of power, but rather as “always embedded in and shaped by cultural constructions of similarity, difference and significance” (DeVault & Gross, 2012 p. 215). Reflexivity also “keeps the researcher mindful of his or her personal positionality and that of the respondents (Hesse-Biber, 2006, p. 117).

Reflexivity acknowledges how a researcher hears and interprets women’s accounts, and also acknowledges their own concerns through the analysis. This method troubles the notion that women’s stories are “straightforwardly a source of truth” (DeVault & Gross, 2012, p. 210) and also helps researchers challenge or explore further contradictory accounts. As a result, I kept a research journal throughout the data collection process in order to keep track of my ideas, feelings and questions. Understandings of power as multifaceted and situated were especially helpful as it helped me to move away from essentialist notions about the participants’ role in the study or my own as an ‘expert’. I was able to include my own thoughts and feelings about the interviews and also use these to guide future interviews. For example, I realized after the first two interviews that asking participants about their ethnic
background made the participants uncomfortable and some felt it was not relevant to their educational experiences. As a result, a number of them did not want to disclose their ethnic backgrounds, even when it was obvious to me which group they belonged to. It was at this point that I became much more aware of my own ethnic background. Even though I belong to the Pashtun majority, I have not experienced ethnic tensions in the same way that some of the participants seemed to have. I have spent most of my life in a city where my family was the only Afghan family for many years. By the second interview however, I realized that I had to make the question optional even though I continued to feel discomfort every time the topic of ethnicity came up. Throughout the rest of the interviews, I was careful not to bring the topic of ethnicity up specifically as it was not of direct importance to my research question. However, if the participants brought it up, then I included this content in the analysis.

**Data Collection and Analysis:**

**A Materialist Informed Transnational Feminist Approach**

My aim in this study was to provide a space for participants to share their experiences and accounts of their lives as they impacted their learning. The reason I chose a feminist mode of inquiry is because I wanted to highlight the importance of hearing Afghan women share their own accounts of their own lives. I saw transnational feminism as an important lens to incorporate into my methodology. Specifically, I agreed with Alexander and Mohanty (1997) when they elucidate that “grounding analysis in particular local feminist praxis is necessary but we also need to understand the local in relation to the larger cross-national processes” (xix). I believe this is crucial for understanding the Afghan women’s education as it is an issue that reflects not only the present financialization of capitalist restructuring in
‘post-conflict’ countries like Afghanistan, but also Afghanistan’s own historically contentious debates and divisions over women and girls’ education.

Also, it is important to note that often local practices guised as ‘cultural’ or ‘religious’ may be forms of patriarchies designed to further exploit women. Therefore, a dialectical historical materialist approach is critical for feminists to be aware of, so that they do not become implicit in local racist and/or colonialist agendas. This is especially important as often, “patriarchy in its most brutal forms is disguised in a rhetoric of anti-colonialism in an idiom of authentic cultural identities and traditions” (Bannerji & Mojab, 2003, p. 2). While historical materialism provides an important approach for interrogating taken-for-granted assumptions about the local or global social arrangements, as well the importance of historical arrangements that continue to exploit women, it is Mojab’s call for a historical materialism that is also dialectical, which I felt was most relevant to my study as it adhered the ‘local’ to the same critical lens that is often demanded of the ‘global’. This approach “recognizes the individuality and particularity of each woman, each feminist movement, each within its specific historical context but at the same time acknowledges that even in their uniqueness, they share common struggles against capitalist and precapitalist patriarchy” (Mojab, 1998, p. 27). In order to mobilize this approach, I encouraged the participants to discuss their experiences outside of the school and discuss their families’ educational background, experiences of living under the Taliban (or as refugees in neighbouring countries), and share their future aspirations.

My understanding of the participants stories was also shaped by Mahmood’s notion of agency, which she explains is not only enacted in the form of resistance to structures of power, but instead a capacity for action that historically specific relations of subordination
enable and create (Mahmood, 2001). This was particularly important in helping me contradict neoliberal notions of Afghan women’s empowerment’ and agency (which were limited mainly to resisting local ‘cultural’ beliefs and practices) on the one hand, and progressive feminist accounts of Afghan women’s agency as resilience and confrontational (towards foreign occupations and wars) (see for example, Rostami-Povey, 2007; Daulatzai, 2006). Mojab (2007) warns that an emphasis on ‘agency’ ‘voice’ or ‘experience’ has reduced patriarchy to question of culture and religion, and thus “patriarchy as an institution of women’s subordination is separated from capitalist relations of exploitation, from imperialist domination, and from the rise of nationalism and fundamentalism” (Mojab, 2007).

The increasing militarization of imperialism “has unleashed the patriarchal forces of nationalism and religious fundamentalism” and formed an ‘ unholy’ alliance (Mojab, 2007b). Feminists in Canada, Mojab asserts, must address both these forces as both imperialism “and fundamentalism often collaborate and cohere in suppressing and exploiting women” (Mojab, 2007b). Through my exploration of Afghan women’s agency, I wanted to pay attention to the ways in which the local and the global enhanced each other, in further asserting control over women’s lives.

**Intensive (in-depth feminist) interviewing**

Feminists have used interviewing as an important method for gathering data. Reinharz (1992) for example points out that interviews with women are particularly important as women’s knowledges have historically been ignored in society. She writes:

> Interviewing offers researchers access to people’s ideas, thoughts, and memories in their own words rather than in the words of the researcher. This asset is particularly important for the study of women because in this way—learning from women is an antidote for centuries of ignoring women’s ideas altogether or having men speak for them (1992, p. 19).
Oakley (1981) raises concerns that interviewing methods are often discussed in methodology textbooks because she sees them as coinciding with traditional patriarchal culture. She elaborates that “the paradigm of the ‘proper’ interview appeals to such values as objectivity detachment, hierarchy and science as an important cultural activity which takes place over people’s more individualized concerns” (p. 38). This idea, Oakley argues, enforces gender stereotyping, as women are characterized often as “sensitive, intuitive, incapable of objectivity and emotional detachment [and men as] superior through their capacity for rationality and scientific objectivity” (Oakley, 1981, p. 38).

Feminist In-depth interviewing on the other hand “interrogates the challenges of communication and the inherent contradictions in the desire to give voice to others” (DeVault & Gross, 2012, p. 206). Oakley (1981) explains that a “feminist interviewing women is by definition both ‘inside’ the culture and participating in what she is observing” (p. 57). By operating both reflexively and relationally, feminist researchers are able to capture agency of participants and also locate the socio-political contexts within which researchers themselves are located. This is particularly important as research relations are “never simple encounters, innocent of identities and lines of power” (DeVault & Gross, 2012, p. 215). Moreover, a transnational feminist lens enables researchers to “produce self-reflexive and dialogic critiques of its practices rather than a search for resolutions or closures—not to reproduce exercises in narrow “naval-gazing” but always in relation to overlapping hegemonic power structures at multiple temporal and geographic scales” (Nagar & Swarr, 2010, p. 9).

Hesse-Biber (2006) highlights the different types of interviewing that can be applied in research. These types include informal (little structure and open-ended questions),
unstructured (only a basic interview plan is included and instead leads are taken from respondents with an overall topic in mind), structured (where the interview has total control over the agenda of the interview and all respondents are asked the same questions), and finally semi-structured (a specific interview guide with a list of questions that need to be covered in a particular interview).

I selected semi-structured interviews because I wanted to ensure that I was able to cover key topics with all the participants. In order to make the most of my time with participants, I created an interview guide that enabled me to encompass all areas of my interest. This guide included demographic information about their families, their childhood experiences of formal education, the challenges they experienced on campus, how their lives were influenced by their education, and finally, their understanding of Western constructions of Afghan women. I included questions about previous educational experiences (for example elementary and secondary) in order to develop a ‘map’ of their journey towards higher education.

Utilizing in-depth interviewing is also important for understanding lived experiences of individuals “subjective understandings an individual brings to a given situation or set of circumstances” (Hesse-Biber, 2006, p. 118). It encourages “co-creation of meaning” (Hesse-Biber, 2006, p. 132), which was very important as feminist interviewing gives the same level of priority to the voice of the researcher and their impact on the process and outcome of the research, as it does to the participant.
Research site and participants

I interviewed 19 students (see Table 4) from seven different universities, including nine participants across three private institutions and ten participants attending four different public universities. They were all female, ranging in age from 17 to 25.

Table 4
Summary of Participants’ Backgrounds

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Language</th>
<th>Year of program</th>
<th>Place of birth</th>
<th>Employment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ayesha</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Pashtun</td>
<td>Pashto</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Afghanistan</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarah</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>Uzbek</td>
<td>Other</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Iran</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marium</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>Tajik</td>
<td>Dari</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Pakistan</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tabasum</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>Dari</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Pakistan</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tamana</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>Pashtun</td>
<td>Pashto</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Razia</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>Afghan</td>
<td>Dari</td>
<td>Completed</td>
<td>Afghanistan</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nadia</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Pashtun</td>
<td>Pashtun</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Pakistan</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zarlakhta</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Pashtun</td>
<td>Pashto</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Afghanistan</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sonia</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Tajik</td>
<td>Dari</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Afghanistan</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ariana</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Pashtun</td>
<td>Pashto</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Afghanistan</td>
<td>NO</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marzia</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Wardak</td>
<td>Pashtun</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Afghanistan</td>
<td>NO</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seema</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Khogyani</td>
<td>Pashtun</td>
<td>Completed</td>
<td>Pakistan</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shaista</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>Pashtun</td>
<td>Pashtun</td>
<td>Completed</td>
<td>Pakistan</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sofia</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Pashtun</td>
<td>Pashto</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Pakistan</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sheenkai</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Pashai</td>
<td>Pashai/Dari</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Afghanistan</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zarmeena</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Pashtun</td>
<td>Pashto</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Afghanistan</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The participants’ universities were located in Afghanistan’s capital, Kabul and in the city of Jalalabad, located in the province of Nangarhar, over 100 kilometers east of Kabul. In Kabul, the participants included seven females from the American University of Afghanistan (AUAF), which is the most expensive and well-sourced private not-for-profit university. Three participants were enrolled at Kabul Education University, and one at Kabul University; both of which are public, free of tuition, and have been in existence for a few decades. In Nangarhar province, four students attended Nangarhar University, which is Afghanistan’s second largest (after Kabul University) and oldest public tuition-free university. Two students attended Nangarhar Education Department, which is also public and tuition-free. One student attended Khorasan University and another Speenghar University, both of which are private and for-profit.

Most of the women lived in the same city where their university was located, with the exception of one student who lived in residence, and two students who said it took them over an hour to travel to their university. At least 14 students described their ethnic identities as Pashtun (with two who spoke Dari at home), two identified themselves as Tajik (speaking Dari at home), two as simply Afghan (speaking Dari and Pashto), and one as half Turk and half Indian (speaking a combination of Persian, Hindi and Turkic at home). While most of the students were registered students at the time of the interviews, four had graduated within the last few months and were currently working full time. Of the 19 participants, 13 were born in Afghanistan, one in Iran and five in Pakistan. During the war (including the Soviet-Afghan war, and during the Taliban era), 15 of the participants had fled as refugees to
Pakistan or Iran and returned only after the fall of the Taliban regime. As a result, most had completed their elementary schooling in Pakistan or Iran, and six of the participants had also completed their secondary schooling there. All of them had enrolled in HE in Afghanistan for the first time.

Only four participants provided specific reference to their socio-economic status; three of the participants identified themselves as ‘very poor’ while one participant identified herself as ‘upper middle class’. Almost all of the students who had attended a private university (currently enrolled or recent graduate) were working with foreign organizations (only one worked with a local school). Among those who had attended a public university (currently enrolled or recent graduate), only one was currently employed (with a foreign organization as well). Finally, each participant was asked explicitly about the education level of their parents. On the paternal side, four participants had a Master’s Degree from overseas, 11 participants had an undergraduate degree from Afghanistan, two participants had graduated from grade 12, and one participant’s father had deceased before she was born. For maternal education attainment, five of the participants had an undergraduate degree from Afghanistan, four had studied up to grade 12, two had completed elementary school and eight had no formal education (though over half of these could read the Quran, and some could also write). In terms of employment, only one father was unemployed, and six mothers were currently employed.

Due to the diverse backgrounds of the participants, it was often difficult to place them into particular categories because their experiences were intertwined with other factors. For example, one participant who came from a wealthy background faced much greater gendered restrictions than other participants of similar economic backgrounds. Similarly, a participant
from a very poor background, facing severe challenges as a female, was able to work with a foreign organization, something extremely uncommon (and risky) in the area where she lived.

**Participant recruitment**

Prior to visiting the research sites in Afghanistan, I developed inclusion criteria which included the following:

- The participants all had to be female. Though men can be included in feminist research, I was interested exclusively in the experiences of women, as their lives were the most politicized since 2001.
- I wanted participants of various backgrounds, including geographic, socio-economic, ethnic, and/or religious. This factor was especially important because I wanted my data to ‘speak to me’, in order to generate new and diverse ideas. I did not think this would happen if I interviewed participants of very similar backgrounds.
- The participants could be at any stage of the HE process, including those who had recently completed university. I was interested in experiences of HE since 2001. Although women’s enrollments are increasing, their representation within the overall population remains minor. Through the inclusion of new graduates, I felt I could still investigate my research concerns. Only one participant was ineligible for the study due to the fact that she had completed her university degree prior to 2001.
- Participants were required to meet face-to-face with me and also provide me with consent to audio-record their interviews. Because I was using a semi-structured
approach, it was very important for me to be present and actively participate in the research process. Also, since time constraints allowed only for one interview, audio-recording was crucial toward preserving their stories that were shared both by participants and myself and also to enrich the analysis later on.

Through the use of social media, I shared a poster (see Appendix A) containing brief information about my study and criteria for participant selection. I was able to get in touch with individuals who were interested themselves, or knew of someone who would be. I exchanged further information about the study, and answered their questions about the purpose and length of the interview. Shortly after I had made contacts with the women, I was able to communicate through email with 6 potential participants, and set times for interviews through email. I also requested they help me find other participants, and they became an important source in helping me locate more participants. In some instances, I also sought the help of family and friends in Afghanistan to provide me with assistance in locating participants in locations that were further away from where I was staying (Kabul).

I realized the importance of trust through this process, as almost every participant that I interviewed was recommended by someone who had met or known me personally. In one instance, a woman was recruited by someone not familiar with me. When I shared my purpose, she decided that she did not want to be audio-recorded because of privacy concerns (despite my assurance that I ensure her confidentiality in every way possible). Eventually we both decided that it would be better if she did not participate.

I met the women in places and at times that were convenient to them. Our meetings were conducted mainly on university campuses since those were the most accessible places to conduct interviews. Prior to the interview, I reminded the participants about the purpose of
the study and that I would be recording them with a tape recorder. I gave them time to review the consent form (see Appendix B), which was translated in the local official languages. I assured them that I would maintain their privacy. I also encouraged them to use pseudonyms during the interview (which some of them did). Once they understood and provided consent, we found a quiet space to conduct the interview. Each interview lasted from 1.5 to 2.5 hours. I had a general list of questions (see Appendix C) that I made sure I covered through the interview. However, the order was always different, and depended largely on the content of the participants’ responses. I also asked many questions that were follow-ups to what the participant were sharing. This style of questioning is encouraged in feminist research as it allows for new information to emerge (Charmaz, 2000; Hesse-Biber, 2007). I started the interviews with broader questions and narrowed down to questions that were important to my study (Weiss, 1994). For example, I started with general demographic questions about their lives prior to starting university, and then more focused questions that related to my research problem. These questions related mainly to their understandings of the impact of HE on their lives.

Memoing in particular proved to be crucial at the start of the interview process until the analysis was completed. Kemp explains that memoing (keeping notes) throughout the research process allows the researcher to trace how their data does or does not fit together. He states: “[m]emoing will help you track your project’s progress, and it is also a fine time to jot down any hunches and ideas you might have about connections within your data” (cited in Hess-Biber, 2006, p. 144-145). Also, memoing is helpful in helping the researcher become more reflexive about their own positionality and how this might affect the research process (Hesse-Biber, 2006). Thus, I kept a journal from the beginning of data collection, until I
completed my analysis. This process helped me organize my thoughts, as well as actions, including in revising the questionnaire based on previous interviews. For example, some of the participants talked about issues that were only relevant within their particular institution or city that I was not aware of; so in the subsequent interviews, I would inquire further about that point. This is a strategy supported by in-depth feminist interviewing, which encourages researchers to re-evaluate interview guides after 10 or more interviews, as doing such provides major assessments of what is learnt or needs further exploring (Hess-Biber, 2006).

**Data analysis**

Once I completed all the interviews and returned to Canada, I transcribed them all in to a Microsoft Word file and printed them for coding. In qualitative research, including feminist interviewing, coding is seen as an important way of ‘getting close to data’ (Hess-Biber, 2006). I coded the data in three stages. In the first stage, I coded the transcripts according to the structure of the question. For example, there were a number of components that were consistent amongst all the interviews, including educational background, parents’ educational levels, life during the Taliban era (whether it was in exile or in Afghanistan), and their lives since 2001. In the second stage, I looked closely at codes from the first stage, and created a map of the participant’s experiences. For example, I coded them according to their socio-economic backgrounds, their present lives (for example if they were employed or not), and also their abilities in order to compare and contrast the transcripts with one another. In the final stage, I looked closely at the coding from the first and second stage, and did a critical reading of their narratives, by comparing and contrasting their responses in relation to the literature I was examining in my research. I often moved back and forth between the layers of codes, as well the interview itself, to see how the participants’ responses remained
consisted or different. It was at this stage that I brought together my own experiences (by comparing my own notes from the interview, but also ones I kept while coding the transcripts) and impressions of the participants, with relevant literature from my research.

I coded the data according to common themes and ideas based on notes and observations I documented while memoing. Throughout the memoing process, I kept note of relevant research that supported and conflicted with my findings, and in the process helped develop detailed notes. These notes were especially useful in forming a list of codes. I then imported all the files in to NVivo and applied the codes I had developed through memoing, and also noted new ones. I developed a comprehensive list of codes, which I then began to categorize according to major themes which I initially explored as separate chapters. This process initially enabled me to see my data in relation to the literature, and monitor my overall analysis. This process resulted in three major themes, each followed by three subthemes which I present in chapter 4.

**Limitations of the Research**

In feminist research, the researcher plays an active and contributing role in the data gathering and analysis of the research. I knew that I could not separate myself from this study because, as I explained in the beginning of the chapter, I feel both personally and politically invested in what and how Afghan women’s lived experiences of foreign occupation, and more importantly, how they interpret its impact on their lives. Choosing transnational feminist methods informed by dialectical historical materialism helped me contextualize my participants at various socio-historical and political junctures. A feminist approach involves a commitment from researchers to form a relationship with participants (Oakley, 1981). While I acknowledge the importance of this idea, time and other constraints meant that I could
interview each participant only once. In a number of instances, after completing an interview, I was sometimes left with new questions, but could not return to the participant to explore them further. In some instances I was able to maintain communication through e-mails. This procedure proved to be helpful in retrieving further clarifications. However, overall it would have been useful to spend more time with the participants in order to understand better their lived accounts of their lives. As a result, while I have tried to the best of my ability to make the data as rich as possible, it is possible that a follow-up interview might have generated different results due to the increase of participants’ increased trust. The potential for an opportunity to share more information have been present as well.

Conclusion

This chapter provided an understanding of the methodology used in the data collection and analysis process. My methodology was framed by a transnational feminist lens informed by a dialectical historical materialist approach. This framework provided tools for understanding my role as a ‘third world’ feminist or ‘native informant’, interrogating essentialist/colonialist constructions of the participant as Other, and finally the power dynamics between the researcher-searched in the research process. For data collection and analysis, I used feminist in-depth interviewing which is an important method of gathering rich and exploratory data from participants, particularly useful in understanding their daily lives. A transnational feminist lens guided me throughout the research process by ensuring that I asked questions examining different power hierarchies, and also during analysis, where I explored participants’ responses in relation to the data I had explored in Chapter 2. The next chapter entails the analysis of the participants’ responses.
Chapter 5
The Militarized Nature of Learning

Introduction

Every participant I interviewed was born at a time when Afghanistan was already in a state of war. The Soviet occupation of the 1980s, for example, is a period in which many of the participants were raised. The bloody civil war of the 1990s, as well as Taliban’s violation of women’s rights were factors that directly influenced the lives of many of these participants. Experiences of war, displacement, violence, and uncertainty were familiar to many of the participants. What became apparent from their stories was the pervasive consequences, both physical and ideological, of the conflict on these individuals, especially their educational experiences. The conflicts had complex influences on their lives that were detrimental in many ways but also provided new opportunities. Through learning, the participants were able to grasp new opportunities for advancement. However these opportunities were intertwined with the larger conflict in Afghanistan and its ramifications. In order to map the complexity and intertwining between their learning and the different conflicts, I explore their experiences of schooling through three subthemes. The first theme, From Living in Exile to Coming Home: A Journey of Hope and Entitlement, discusses in detail their experiences of living and studying during the Taliban regime (during which many had fled as refugees to Iran or Pakistan), and moving back to Afghanistan after the US-led occupation. The second theme, Navigating through Old and New Dilemmas While Living under Occupation, focuses specifically on their daily life experiences of living under the present occupation, and how this intersects with their learning. Finally, the third theme, HE
as a Medium for Disrupting Constraints, explores how HE facilitates with their daily experiences of gendered subordination.

From Living in Exile to Coming Home: A Journey of Hope and Entitlement

During the Soviet-Afghan war in the 1980s and the civil wars that followed in the 1990s, millions of Afghans fled the country, making them the largest refugee population in the world (UNHCR, 2010). During this time, over 60% of the population fled from Afghanistan and took refuge in Pakistan (UNHCR, 2010). This trend continued during the Taliban era as well. Since Afghanistan and Pakistan shared a border, it was not surprising to see many Afghans, particularly from rural provinces, choosing to flee there, due to their common religion and similarities in culture and traditions. It was also not surprising then, that among the 19 participants I had interviewed, 14 were either born in or had fled as children to Pakistan. In Chapter 4, I discuss the centralized process of educational development in Afghanistan, with schools limited mainly to urban centres. Those who lived in rural parts did not enjoy the same kind of access. Thus, when they fled as refugees, they were able to access schools set up by NGOs in Pakistan as well as Iran (where another 2 million Afghans had fled).

Particularly for girls, the traditional restrictions that they would have experienced back home were lessened due to displacement of communities and a breakdown in traditional practices (Marsden, 1996). It was also a place where families of upper or middle class backgrounds, could continue to support their families, including through employment opportunities with international humanitarian organizations that were set up to look after the refugees. This was the story of my family as well. After fleeing in the early 1980s, my father was able to secure employment with the United Nations, and through that job, he could
support us and our immediate families fleeing villages that were targeted specifically during the Soviet war. Moreover, since Pakistan had an educational system that was far more advanced than the one in Afghanistan, I could attend a fee-based school that taught better quality of education than the one I briefly received in my homeland. I was not surprised to hear that the experiences of the participants were similar.

Living in exile, whether Iran or Pakistan, was an experience that provided them with more opportunities than they had available to them in Afghanistan, as well, more stability. Seema, for example, explains that living in Pakistan with her immediate family gave herself, and the rest of her family a sense of freedom from the joint family system, within which they (like most other families) lived in Afghanistan. She was able to attend school because of this freedom. She also did not have to worry about her male relatives, who played a dominant role in her life back in Afghanistan. Seema explains: “In Pakistan, you know, we were alone. Our tribe, extended family, they were not there, so no one knew what we were doing”.

The same relatives who had gone to such great lengths to prevent her and her sisters from going to school in Afghanistan, also migrated to Pakistan soon after her family, and like her family, they also allowed their daughters to attend ‘Afghani’ schools. These were schools specifically set up by NGOs for Afghan refugees. However, when the families returned, they decided to pull their daughters out of school. Seema explains: “In Pakistan, they [Seema’s female cousins] were our classmates but when they came here to their own country, then they [Seema’s uncles] said that people talk too much, and it wasn’t as easy to move around, so they [her uncles] decided not to let them continue”.

Unlike Seema, and many of the other participants, some families chose to stay in Afghanistan during the Taliban rule. Ariana does not explain why her family chose to stay,
but she expresses a sense of pride that her family ‘did not flee’. She also explains the lengths her parents (both of whom were educated) took to ensure that she would have an education. Ariana was enrolled in one of many ‘secret schools’ organized by women and men during the Taliban era. These schools were developed in response to the Taliban’s ban on female education and employment. These schools not only helped educate thousands of girls (and boys), but they also empowered women to oppose the fundamentalist rules of the Taliban. Rostami-Povey (2007) explains that through these strategies, women “were also empowered politically as they realized their ability to organize secret schools and gatherings and create networks of solidarity to save their communities from total disintegration” (p. 7). Ariana explains her experiences of attending one of these classes:

I have studied elementary [school] in pieces. During the Taliban regime […] the schooling I did during this time was hidden. It was secret. My family really wanted me to study. We would take some Islamic books with ourselves, which we would take from the boys school. And hidden [inside] were our books. And this was completely [secret]. I studied in Pashto language. Then my father thought that wasn’t good for me, because I was only one student for one teacher, and I was very small. My father didn’t like that. When my brother would come home from school he would talk about his classmates, and I would ask my mother, ‘how come I don’t have classmates?’ […] so then after that my father told me to go to Pakistan and live with my aunt. I was 9 years old and it was very difficult for me, and I remember I was crying, but they really wanted me to go. So I have studied up to grade 6 in a public school in Pakistan.

Although Ariana did not want to be away from her family, she explains that this was an important move because she was able to attend a conventional school and have classmates to openly play with.

Zarlakhta, another woman whose family chose to stay in Afghanistan, describes her childhood as split between spending time in the capital and in the countryside. Although her family lived permanently in the city, they owned property in the village, to which they
returned during the civil war and the Taliban era. Her family decided to stay at the time, because her older brother was enrolled in Kabul University and her parents did not want to interrupt his studies. However, she could not attend because there was too much insecurity and her parents did not want to risk sending her to a ‘secret school’ due to the risks involved. Instead she moved back to her village with her mother and was forced to participate in traditional gendered roles, which she did not enjoy. Zarlakhta explains her childhood as lonely and depressing because she spent her days ‘doing nothing’. “I was just living [in her village] and I was helping my mom in the house. Usually when daughters don’t go to school you know, they help out at home.” As a girl from the city, she was not used to such chores and did not look forward to completing them. She felt more depressed when a relative and her children, who were living in Pakistan at the time, came to visit her and her family.

I will tell you a story. My aunt she was living in Pakistan, she came here only for summers. Her daughter and I were playing outside and she said, ‘oh you are illiterate you don’t know anything’.

The aforementioned experience confirmed Zarlakhta’s own feelings of inferiority and shame which she associated with illiteracy and the rural life in general. She became more determined to pull herself out of her situation by finding ways to go to school: “I told my mom, ‘when will I go to school and become educated? When will that time come?’” It was soon after this experience that the Taliban were ousted, and Zarlakhta was able to move back to the city with her family and attend school: “When the Taliban left, we came to Kabul and I got the opportunity to go to school”. Her strong determination to learn and earn good grades was reflected in the following quote: “So finally my position went high, and now she [cousin living in Pakistan] is still in school but fortunately I am in University.” For Zarlakhta, education was a tool she could use to establish a status for herself within her family.
Particularly, her admission to university was recognized by herself and her family, as a marker of her enhanced status. Although Zarlakhta does not mention the socio-economic background of her cousins, she describes her own background as middle-class, with an educated father and mother (who worked as a doctor in the village and no longer ‘needs’ to work because her sons and husband are working) an older brother, all of whom provided her with a network of support that she needed to continue on.

They’ve always convinced me and encouraged me to go to University. They never told me that I can’t, like there are some parents who don’t give money to their children to take concor [entrance examinations] preparation exams; but my parents didn’t do this with me. Even my brother he has always encouraged me. They also convinced me that I should go on with my studies.

The support Zarlakhta received was not only emotional but also monetary, due to her need to register for classes that prepared her for the University’s entrance examination. These classes were available in the city and would cost money, which her family did not mind providing her with.

Both Zarlakhta and Seema were able to access resources (although at different stages of their educational journeys), because of the socio-economic background of their families, including the fact that both had University-educated parents. Thus, their experiences are still unique, a vast majority of Afghans do not share this background, and therefore would not have had the same choices as Seema or Zarlakhta had they stayed during the Taliban rule in Afghanistan.

On the other hand, the participants who had completed their elementary (and some secondary) education in Pakistan, were also able to access new resources and skills that they would not have been able to secure in Afghanistan. Shaista, for example, elaborates that while she was living in Pakistan with her family, she was able to not only complete her
secondary education, but also take extra specialized courses in English and Information Technology. These skills would help her immensely when she returned to Afghanistan. Through these skills, she was able to find work with an international organization, and also enrolled in a prestigious private University, where she was able to acquire important skills needed for the job market. Shaista explains: “We did English courses when we were going to school in Pakistan. But when we came here, I did a 6-month journalism course while I was in university, and I also did an IT and CCNA certification. So that’s why, through those experiences I am able to work here [with an international NGO] and teach IT.” Although Shaista’s skills and education are quite exceptional in comparison to her peers, she is still not happy with the choices available to her in Afghanistan. She feels that if she had stayed in Pakistan, she would have been able to achieve even more:

I think if I had this much education in Peshawar, I would have accomplished so much more. My capacity would have been much greater. I mean even now I am planning to pursue a Master’s degree, and for that I have to make sure my English is very good. So if I was in Pakistan, I probably would’ve gone straight for my Masters and accomplished so much more. But here there are too many limitations.

Also, as I discuss in Chapter 2, neoliberal policies have accompanied many of the educational reforms that have been in place since 2001. Some of these policies have resulted in the need to address the needs of the ‘market’, specifically the needs of the international organizations that currently dominate the market. One such need is the knowledge of English language (and computer literacy skills), which as Phillipson (2008) explains, has a long history of being a fundamental policy in U.S. expansionism. Specifically, since the war on terror, both English and computer literacy skills have been an important means through which both men and women have been able to secure employment. Thus, it was not
surprising to see that out of the 9 participants who held well-paying jobs, 8 had taken extra English and Computer courses in Pakistan, Iran, and Kabul. Ayesha for example is currently employed, and makes enough money to cover her high tuition costs and help out with her family’s financial needs. She explains that coming to Afghanistan with the English language skills that she had gained in Pakistan, equipped her with more opportunities to work and options for places to study. “When I came here, the opportunities I had, not just as a student, but also as an employee, I probably would not have had them anywhere else.”

Marium also reflected positively on the experiences and skills she brought back from Pakistan:

Actually I have worked with the United Nations and I did not have any work background but the reason why they gave me the job was because my English was good and I also knew computers. Even though I didn’t have any work experience or background. And after that, I worked in the ministry of rural rehabilitation […] because all of their system are like, they are getting in English. In [local] government I have not worked, because their salary is not so high and international is high.

Tamana also explains that because she was able to attend an English medium school and take computer courses in Peshawar, she had no problems finding employment when she came to Afghanistan. Even before she had enrolled in University, Tamana was able to work in various positions with different foreign organizations. Through these opportunities, she was able to cover the high costs of her tuition at AUAF: “In 2005 I started my first job and at the time I wasn’t quite 18 […] this is the seventh year that I have been working, in various [organizations].”

While employed, she realized that she needed specific skills: “When I took my first job, I realized I needed more education. I had very little I mean nothing after grade 12”. She explains that she decided to attend AUAF after realizing, while working amongst her foreign
co-workers, that she still lacked certain skills. “I felt inadequate education wise. I felt I should study more, so I decided to come here [AUAF.] By the time I started getting ready to start school at AUAF, I had some savings”. Tamana explains further that through her work, she was able to help her family buy a home in the city.

Tamana’s ability to contribute towards her family’s needs, and also secure higher paying jobs, with the acquisition of new skills and knowledge, affirms Tamana’s belief that advancement can happen mainly through the market; and the role of education, is to assist in this process. Tamana explains: “We can't afford to stay behind in studies. Because you know the more you study, the more opportunities you can have, your demand in the market increases, and you can get a good salary.” It is not surprising to hear Tamana describe progress in terms of her participation in the market, as this is one of the main ideologies guiding both educational reforms and efforts to address women’s subjugated status in the country. Tamana’s realization at work that she needed more skills, describes the financialized nature of learning, where students are in constant ‘need’ of acquiring new skills (and spending more money doing so), at a time when investment in public goods is decreasing at the expense of privatization (Magnusson, 2013). Afghanistan is already facing major concerns with regard to the inability to absorb over 50% of high school graduates in to Universities, or provide them with employment. As a result, the ‘need’ to continue accessing (and spending more money in) more skills not only reinforces a classed hierarchy, but also places responsibility on the individual themselves.

Another participant, Tabasum echoes Tamana’s experiences, explaining that through the skills and education she too had obtained in Pakistan, she was able to secure a well-paying job with the United Nations. “A project I was working on, I was teaching English to
the ministry staff, our staff, and also people from the public.” Unlike the other participants however, while Tabasum recognizes the important role that English played in her securing employment, she has become increasingly concerned with the emphasis that her University places on learning the language. She is especially bothered due to the fact that many of her friends and fellow classmates are not fluent in English, and therefore are not able to participate or complete the assignments properly. Tamana explains:

There are even students who have really good ideas but they can't share them with anyone. That's a problem, and also that has created problems many times between the student and the teacher because the students wanted many times to express, for example theory A, but the teacher got theory B, so that created miscommunication. In exams even, students know the answer, but they don't know the words in English. But the University is based on English language, the textbooks too, and every student is expected to be able to speak and write in it. English shouldn't be a problem for you, that's what they presume, but it isn't the case.

Although Tamana sees the benefits of English, she is concerned and especially uncomfortable with the emphasis and assumption her University and professors place on its knowledge. It is a moment of contradiction for her. On the one hand, she actively participates in and benefits from her University’s use of English as a medium of instruction; on the other hand, she sees that this experience is just as harsh as it is useful to her. Tamana does not take any measures to address her concerns even though she described herself earlier as ‘not afraid to speak up’. Yet she refuses to accept what she feels is unjust and unfair treatment of some students. As Brincat (2014) explains, it is within such contradictions that a possibility for transformation can arise (the dialectic), and it is up to the individual to decide what she wants to do (transform it or maintain the practice).
Although Tamana does not address these concerns with her professors or her institution, she still enacts agency by raising concerns about it during an interview that was being conducted in English. She was well aware that the person who was interviewing her, was also someone on the privileged side of the discussion.

Life in exile provided opportunities for the participants that were not accessible to those who had stayed behind. While they enjoyed the benefits of these opportunities, they were not thrilled to be returning ‘home’. The situation that they returned to was far worse than they had imagined (or heard about through relatives). Like many non-Afghans, the participants heard stories through the media and from relatives, about the Taliban’s atrocities towards women, and as a result worried immensely for their own lives, the possibility of losing the freedoms they enjoyed in Pakistan, upon returning. Marium, for example, heard rumours on what the Taliban did to women that worried her immensely:

Well before when I was coming [to Afghanistan], I was worried because in Pakistan, women and men, they are not as it is here. In Pakistan, the men and women don’t have the same gender issues as here, not as much. As much as they have here. Of course I was worried about that. I was thinking, when I come here what will people say, the gender issues, all that.

For Marium, life in Pakistan was still a better ordeal than Afghanistan, despite Pakistan’s history of religious extremism that existed mainly in Marium’s place of residence. Marium was particularly concerned about moving back to her familial network, a place where she would be surrounded by her extended family (and who unlike Marium’s immediate family, she stayed in Afghanistan during the Taliban regime. She feared what they would say. Given the fact that she was making plans to enroll n university, she expressed feelings of fear of her family members’ opinions: “And my relatives might say ‘oh she is a girl how come she is studying university, she’ll get married, this and that.’” Marium assumed
that unlike her close family, her extended family maintained more traditional conceptions of being a female and feared that they would restrict her to those boundaries.

Although she feared what her extended family might say or do, Marium was able to assert enough control to carry on with her own goals and her own beliefs about being a female. Specifically, by enrolling at AUAF, Marium was able to build the courage to stand up for her beliefs and what she wanted to do with her life: “Well, I went on with my life, what I believed in and here I am.” Marium was relieved when she joined AUAF as a student: “It is different there [AUAF]; there is no gender issue there, and there is no discrimination against girl or anything. Everything got better after I joined AUAF.” Marium was amazed and grateful for AUAF, a place that did not resemble the rest of Kabul as she knew it.

Ayesha on the other hand, had similar misconceptions about Kabul, but when she returned her experiences were different. Unlike Marium, Ayesha was surprised to see that women were able to exercise certain freedoms. For example, they were employed, and going to school; something she had feared she would not see in Afghanistan. “Before I moved here, I thought there wouldn’t be much here. But when I came here, the opportunities I had, not just as a student, but also as an employee, I probably wouldn’t have had them anywhere else.” Like Marium, Ayesha is especially content with her life as a student at AUAF:

The environment here is very good, it’s very open. There is no issue of why are girls in the classroom. They are together with boys, sit together, and socialize. There is a volleyball team where boys and girls are mixed, and the head is a girl[...] there is no difference that this person is a boy or a girl. There are thank God, many chances for girls to participate in things.

Unlike other Universities (both private and public), AUAF was indeed very different. Even as I toured the campus with some of my participants, I was amazed at the degree to which women could freely participate on campus, socialize with male colleagues. But most
importantly I was surprised at the quality of the classrooms and resources available to students. It was evident from my brief observation, that the University was well funded (including funding by local Afghan businessmen), and shared a ‘Western-style’ philosophy of participation on campus.

The participants attending AUAF also explained that selecting this particular university, above other public and private universities was mainly because of the quality of learning and resources. However, many also explained (or hinted) that there was a clear social difference in the kinds of students who attended AUAF and those who attended other Universities. For example, when I asked Nadia why she had chosen to attend AUAF, which had the highest tuition in the country, over a place like Kabul University [KU], which offered tuition free of charge, she explained her reasons:

Nadia: “I didn’t like KU because first of all I had problem with Dari and Pashto, like reading and writing. Second, I have heard that the environment there is not good. Some of the professors are not as educated. And plus the students there are not as good.
Spogmai: Can you give an example of that?
Nadia: Well they say that more than education, students focus on having relations with each other. It’s like they don’t have good quality education. Instead they focus on other stuff, like their fashion. I heard another story that there was a professor, who was really old and disabled, and there was a pretty female student who was intelligent. The professor said that if you don’t come with me, I will cut your grades. Then I heard a lot of other stories too, but this was really shocking for me.

Although Nadia has not experienced these encounters first hand, the stories are enough to convince her that KU was not a good place. Moreover, the threats that she feared at KU, are ones that would directly impact her own status as a female, and possibly ruin her reputation as a respected individual. Her perception of KU indicates her desire to not only separate herself from others, but also to place her choice, and ultimately herself, above
others. She does not mention class differences between KU students and AUAF students, even though that is a prevalent marker of difference, and Nadia herself comes from an upper-middle class background.

The fact that Nadia does not ‘see’ the socio-economic differences is understandable to some degree, as traditionally, Afghan society has organized itself along tribal lines (Emadi, 2010). The idea of a middle class, became especially prominent through the development of formal education. Specifically, educational attainment became a means whereby an individual from a poor background could seek a higher social status (Ekanayake, 2004). Thus, it is not surprising to hear Nadia and many others at her University that I have interviewed, talk about social differences in relation to their educational levels, or lack thereof.

In sum, living in exile provided participants with many opportunities that they may not have had if they had stayed in Afghanistan. There is also great optimism amongst the women to increase their academic knowledge because of the benefits that are promised. The university is a site of pride and empowerment for them, as they are able to gain skills and knowledge that they feel is already having a positive impact on their lives. Even the present environment, at least in the urban centers where all the participants I have interviewed live, the participants are feeling optimism and a sense of hope for their future. Yet despite their optimism, many of the women experienced new worries alongside the opportunities that they were enjoying or looking forward to. In addition, many women are struggling to carry forward with their goals in a context that is becoming increasingly more hostile and uncertain. I examine some of their worries below.
Navigating Through Old and New Dilemmas While Living Under Occupation

I interviewed women from 6 different universities which were located in two separate provinces. Both provinces are markedly different from one another in terms of the quality of education, resources available (both private and public) and the ethnic and linguistic backgrounds of the students. Kabul was very diverse in terms of language and ethnicity, whereas in Nangarhar the students were mainly Pashtuns or Pashais, and spoke mainly Pashto. A striking difference lay in the socio-economic background among the participants from the two provinces. There were greater elements of ‘traditional’ rules and practices in Nangarhar than there were in Kabul. For example, every girl interviewed in Nangarhar adhered to a stricter practice of gender segregation and covering their bodies (including faces) in public, at all times. At Kabul, the participants did not cover their bodies in the same way that the locals did and instead wore Western style clothing.

Yet despite these differences, it was compelling to hear the participants describe similar concerns and fears as a growing dilemma. They described their frequent experiences of violence and attacks that were directly affecting themselves and their communities. They faced an obstacle that could not be ignored since they were witnessing these issues on a daily basis while attending university or work. Sarah for example, had lived in places that were more accommodating for women’s physical and mental well-being. However, after her family moved to Afghanistan, she gave up her freedom to return to her homeland. The simple act of walking outside was a difficult undertaking. These fears had immense effect on her mental health. Although her family does not prevent her from going outside, she does not want to take the risk for fear of what might happen to her:

Here girls have no freedom. Even though my dad is open-minded, he encourages me for example to get a car and drive. But I tell him that, “no girls cannot drive here. Girls cannot go out easily”. If they go, lots of boys walk
behind her and say bad words. You have to be very brave to go out. But still it’s very difficult in Afghanistan, the security is very bad. You can’t go shopping, or you have to go at least with your mother or father. You can’t take the taxi, it’s you know, nothing, nothing at all.

Sarah considers herself fortunate that she has family outside of Afghanistan whom she can visit regularly. Because she is employed and has a salary well above the average amount in the country, she does not face any financial burdens. She is able to make regular trips to visit her family outside of Afghanistan. Sarah looks forward to these trips as they help her temporarily overcome the limitations she fears she cannot in Afghanistan:

I try at least once a year to leave the country for a month. I try to go out, you know, swimming, biking, just walk walk walk. I miss walking in Afghanistan. When I think about this, it makes me very depressed. But there is no choice. Now I am just working, and studying, and then go home, just slave and come back. It’s the same routine every day.

Tabasum, who studies at the same university as Sarah, expresses anger over the negative impact that insecurity has on her learning. She is especially concerned because violent attacks often mean that her University is shut down for days. She realizes that the situation is at its worst outside of the capital. Regardless, she still expresses frustration: “during the year, at least ten days, we have to delay our classes because of the insecurity issues [a]nd I have to listen to the news like what’s going to happen tomorrow, will I go to school?”

Zarlakhta, who also lives in Kabul, shared an incident that left her scared for her life:

One evening, we were invited to talk about issues. When we went there [British embassy], and the event was about to start, there was an explosion. We ran to the basement, and we were there for a long time. That day, at the British council, we were talking about education and that is what happened! And my friend’s family lived close by but she couldn’t go to her house. My friend’s house was close also, but we couldn’t leave. We were there for a very long time. I told my mom, how did the condition of Kabul become so bad that these attacks were happening? After the attack, there was shooting too […] it was very scary.
This experience left Zarlakhta feeling resentful towards the presence of foreign security forces in Afghanistan. In addition, the experience also raised suspicions in her mind as she now questions why they are in the country:

Their goal is not to develop our country […] this is not their purpose. If it was, they would have already brought security here. If they wanted to bring security to Afghanistan they would be able to do it. Two weeks, maybe one. You see, we have over half of our soldiers from more than 26 countries. How is it possible that they cannot bring security, not even in Kabul city! This is just one province!

Ariana, another student living in Kabul, expressed similar concerns over issues of security and safety in Kabul. When I asked her about the security situation in Kabul and whether it was improving, she responded:

No it’s not safe. Because I have seen suicide attacks with my own eyes. One day, I was on my way home. For two days, I was stuck in my aunt’s home because of suicide attacks. There was fighting that lasted two days and nights, so I couldn’t go home. But if I didn’t have relatives in that area, then where would I have gone?

The situation worsened for Ariana as her classes were also cancelled during these attacks:

[My university lessons were off. The teachers said ‘oh we can’t tell you if you can come or not because the situation is bad’. But luckily my aunt’s house was near the university. But what should others do? They were at school until 9 p.m., in the car. They couldn’t go anywhere. The situation is still not good.

Although it appears that her professors have become familiar with the interruptions, Ariana remains reluctant to accept these interruptions and worries angrily over their impact on her daily routines. Ariana spent most of her life in Afghanistan, where she was present during the Taliban regime. She is frustrated that she has not been able to experience peace in
her life, and refuses to accept these experiences of violence as normal. She explains that she has gained her family’s trust to come to school by herself, and enjoys coming to university. Unfortunately, the violence threatens not only her learning, but her sense of independence is compromised as well. She has fear of travelling to and from school by herself.

During the Taliban regime, women were not allowed to leave their homes unless they were accompanied by a *mahram* (husband or blood male relative); and those who did not comply with this rule, were often beaten in public (Rostami-Povey, 2007). Ariana remembers that time vividly when her family had lived in Afghanistan during that period. Thus, for her to leave her home on her own is a rare and welcome privilege that she does not want to lose. She is worried that if the violence continues, her family might decide to pull her from university.

However, the feelings of blame toward the foreign presence for the violence were not shared among all students Marium for example, saw it as an internal concern stemming from high illiteracy rates in the country: “that’s why education should be a priority, and they [Afghan government] should take care of that first.” She feels that through foreign governments, investments are being made to address security concerns: “I think it’s improving now. There are a lot of buildings being built, and they are doing a lot of investments. I mean a good amount, in education […] it’s getting better”. Marium had recently graduated and had received grant money from a foreign organization to provide computer training classes for women in Kabul. She was more optimistic than many of the other participants regarding the future of the country.

Also, Marium’s views about the source of insecurity are ironic given that her University is under daily threats of possible insurgency attacks (because it is owned and run
by the United States). There are security guards inside the campus that search every individual who enters the campus. Security clearances are required in order to enter campus. Yet despite these measures, the threats continue to arrive. Even the week that I was there, I was denied entry after a few visits due to ‘security concerns’. None of the other Universities provide the same kind of security checks or face the same kind of direct and regular threats.

Ariana blames the causes of insecurity directly on the presence of foreign troops especially since civilians are the ones who pay the price. Ariana explains:

One day I thought, so many Afghans are dying, so I asked my father why are the suicide attackers doing all these attacks? He said they are doing it because of the foreigners. I said, ‘but foreigners are safe, so why don’t they want us to be safe also’? Like for example, I have been to the American embassy, and they have so much security there, and I thought, ‘why aren’t they doing this for all of the people of Afghanistan? They can do it. So that is something you know, that not a single American was dying, it was all Afghans. Whenever someone is killed, I say they are to blame. I blame them.

Some participants were also beginning to wonder if there might have been less violence under the Taliban. Basgula, for example, expressed anger at the increases in violence and insecurity she witnesses in her city. She has come to wonder if life under the Taliban might have actually been better:

At that time security was better than it is now. Like there were no bomb blasts like there are now. People were scared but it wasn’t hectic like now. The people that are dying now. I mean look at the number of people dying in [her province] or the insecurity in Kunar [Eastern province]. These problems didn’t exist then. I mean people were afraid because the Taliban had just left but there were no attacks like there are now. Like right now people are killed for no reason in the middle of the night.

In an attempt to elaborate on her despair toward the constant presence of violence, Basgula compares it to the Taliban era, a group that she acknowledges was violent and unfair towards Afghans.
Many of the participants were disappointed with the international community for not being able to provide security, while a small number blamed it mainly on the Taliban. Others, like Tabasum for example, had a much more complex perspective. Specifically, she fears that increasing unemployment is another major threat to the security, and one that is not being addressed. Tabasum states:

By threats I mean threats to infrastructure, threats to jobs. Because for example, as you know, we need 10,000 troops in Afghanistan and out of that we have 6000 who are foreign. Only 4000 are Afghans. We also have a high unemployment rate in Afghanistan, not sure if you know […] We have too many ex-combatants who can join the military, they have good skills but they are unemployed, or doing shop-keeping, looting, thieves groups, what they call, mafia groups, because they have skills so who is going to attract them? If the government is not going to attract them, then the mafia will. So by threat, I meant this thing, the unemployment threat.

Tabasum recognizes the very real threat of unemployment to security. She also realizes that unemployment is something that is not seem to be receiving attention. With over 45% of the population under the age of 15, Afghanistan has the highest population of youth in the region. Also, since the Taliban regime, the standard of living has deteriorated in Kabul and other cities due to soaring costs of housing, fuel, lack of development of urban services and constant transport interruptions primarily due to the US presence (Emadi, 2010; Riphenburg, 2006). There are clear distinctions between the quality of life among the expat community, the Afghans who work for them, and the rest of the country. Feelings of resentment and desperation are high since most Afghans are not able to look after their basic needs.

Tabasum’s worries that unemployment will lead to greater insecurity is a valid one due to the fact that the educational system is also not able to absorb this population. Riphenburg (2006) explains that “a youth bulge is statistically associated with the outbreak
of violent conflict, as uneducated, unemployed and frustrated young men can be recruited to armed groups or organized crime” (p. 517). Tabasum is also concerned with what she describes as insincerity amongst foreign development workers.

NGOs also do the same thing. For example, they are mostly headed by international staff, and the reason is that they say that Afghans don’t have the qualifications to operate in a way that those donors want them. Ok but we have a process of 10 years and the percentage of foreign staff in the NGOs has not decreased in those 10 years […] if they are really suffering here for Afghans, then they could have had them trained in 4 years developing programs, and then replaced all those foreign staff who are more needed in their own country.

The complex role of NGOs and aid workers in general is one that has received some recent attention. As I explored in Chapter 2, development aid to post-conflict contexts has become increasingly intertwined with a war-driven capitalist restructuring, enforced mainly through neoliberal polices. Fluri (2009) notes that international aid and development workers play an important role throughout this process by managing, assisting and financially profiting from this paradigm. As a result, “[r]ather than “developing Afghanistan” this situation results in an extension and reproduction of hierarchal wealth and uneven development” (Fluri, 2009, p. 987). Tabasum’s concerns therefore, point to a problem that poses a real threat to the security and development of the country.

Finally, some participants raised concerns over the negative impact insecurity had on girls’ access to education. Basgula, who works for a foreign NGO, illustrated some of these concerns:

It’s getting worse day by day. Like attacks on plazas and markets. Like the other day in Kabul. Under these conditions, nobody wants to let their women leave homes, because they are scared, and not necessarily because they are bad and don’t want their daughters or women to leave homes. They are just afraid that she will be killed in some random place.
The controversy that often surrounds girls’ education has existed in Afghanistan since formal education was first introduced over 100 years ago. However, since the Soviet occupation, it became much more politicized as rural populations were specifically targeted by educational programs heavily infused with Soviet propaganda. These experiences, as well as the centralized and elitist nature of the Afghan state have kept the two sides unaware of each other’s needs. As a consequence, the uprisings against the Soviet occupation were as much about the foreign occupiers as they were against the state (Roy, 1986).

In justifying the occupation, however, the Taliban’s violation of women’s rights played a large role in justifying the present war and in turn ignoring other forms of prejudices and neglect that have contributed towards women’s oppressions. As Daulatzai (2008) maintains, the imperious emphasis on what the Taliban did to women have made it difficult to talk about other forms of suffering that women continue to encounter. Similarly, the occupation’s militarization of women and girls’ access to education is also contributing towards women’s suffering. Specifically, Novelli (2010) explains that the use of educational progress as a sign of success of the occupation is precisely why the Taliban also target girls’ education to oppose the state and its ‘modern’ educational institutions.

Basgula links Afghan men’s resentment towards girls’ education to the oppressive rules and practices of the foreign personnel in Afghanistan. She finds these rules unacceptable even for herself. In addition she feels that she is losing her rights as a citizen:

I see that the NGOs are helping, but these tanks, I see that whenever they are passing by, our cars have to pull over. This really bothers our men. I have seen this with my own eyes. Like sometimes when we are with a driver, and we see these foreign vehicles, our drivers have to keep a distance because if they get close or if they don’t stop, they will be shot at. So this really has negative impact on Afghans who are thinking why? This is my country! Why are we standing for them?
Basgula feels anger towards the West and sympathy towards Afghan men, even though she felt she had successfully stood up to, and challenged, patriarchal orders from her male relatives. She is beginning to wonder if there might be financial gains being made by foreigners through the insecurity, as those are the kinds of rumours she hears around her:

Three years ago things were not as bad as they are now. And everyone says, the people in the villages, they say that this security is this way exclusively because of the foreigners, who use money negatively to further deteriorate our society. This is what they think. They say that it’s these foreigners who train Afghans and bribe them with money, to come and continue destroying Afghanistan. This is what they say in the villages.

Ariana is equally as concerned over the impact of violence on the lives of women. However, she blames both foreigners and the Taliban for further deteriorating these conditions. She sees both sides contributing to the problem and increasing parents’ fears in letting their daughters go to school.

I told you before, in terms of security they [foreigners] are making it worse and worse, because women are not safe to go to University. The Taliban will threaten the families and say if you let your daughters go to school, they will be killed.

Ariana had first-hand experience when a friend of hers was no longer allowed to attend university because she was forced by her family to get married. She says: “My friend was in third year when she got married. Now she’s home. We were worried about her and said “why?” She said ‘my brother-in-law told me not to go to University’. She is in Kabul and he’s in [the countryside] but still he stopped her from going.” According to her friend, the risk was not worth it, even if it meant she would have to resort to more traditional roles. Ariana’s worry over her friend’s marriage demonstrates the fragility of the environment in which she lives.
In sum, insecurity was a major problem in the lives of every participant interviewed. Their responses did not vary too much in terms of where they lived (both Kabul and Nangarhar were experiencing escalating violence), or other social differences (for example ethnic or socio-economic backgrounds). Every one of the participants felt that insecurity was still an escalating concern. All of them shared personal accounts of first-hand experience. There was variation with respect to the level of understanding the causes or culprits. However, a consistent factor was the fact that violence was not going away, and that women in particular faced the risk of losing opportunities to work or go to school, and being restricted instead to more traditional roles. In the next section, I explore the participants’ accounts of their educational pursuits and the purpose that they feel it serves in their lives.

The Pursuit of Higher Education: A Means of Disrupting Constraints

Through the interviews, it became evident that while the participants expressed many concerns related to their personal lives, as well as challenges that they experienced as students, they saw their pursuit of HE as an important coping mechanism. Considering that less than 1% of Afghan women accessed HE, the participants considered themselves fortunate, and also felt a sense of power to do something that would bring about change. Since 2001, the Afghan state has demonstrated its commitment towards addressing the historical disproportionality in women and girls’ access to formal learning institutions. In Chapter 3, I explored some of these commitments through MoHE’s strategic plans, which explicitly recognize women’s inclusion as an important progressive step towards the development of the country. Many of the participants were aware of this recognition, and also saw their education just as important to the national progress of the country. Sonia for example, explains the importance of HE and the development of the country:
Right now in our country we need a lot to have HE, to develop something good and develop our country. It was my idea to continue on with HE and go to university [after graduating high school] but during this time, my family helped me a lot. They gave me a lot of support. My dad said that in Afghanistan there is a rule that when you pass high school, you write the concor exam, and when you pass that, you go to University. In Afghanistan we have many students, but very few seats in Universities, so not everyone can continue on. So when I passed the concor exam, my father said that it’s your life and you can do whatever you want, something for your country.

As Karlsson and Mansory (2007) note, the goal of education within the Afghan context is not necessarily to gain a degree, but rather to use it to help the individual, their family, their community and also their country. Moreover, it is the family, and not the individual which “constitutes the universal block of the family” (Moghadam, 2004, p. 25). Therefore, it is not surprising to hear participants talk about using their education to help their country or their communities.

On the other hand, it was surprising to hear that some of the participants not only demonstrate an awareness of the politicized nature of women and girls position in Afghanistan, but they also use their education to address these concerns. Tamana for example, recognizes the importance of using her education to improve the lives of other women in Afghanistan:

I live in a society whose women are most vulnerable and who need help. I am getting enough education to be a role model for other girls in my country, in the future. I can feel and better understand their problems because this is an Islamic country, so I can work better for the way they want to live.

For Tamana, her education will help contribute to the vulnerabilities and problems that Afghan women face. Also, a university degree qualifies her to not only understand women’s concerns but also to do something about it. By indicating that this country is Islamic, Tamana, a Muslim, feels she is in a better position than non-Muslims, to help the women in a
way that she feels they would want to be helped. Other identity differences are not important factors in Tamana’s understanding of women’s needs.

Unlike Tamana, Marzia is less optimistic about women’s future. She explains:

I think this [freedom] is impossible. Maybe never. But we have to have hope. I mean in foreign countries, which have advanced so much, women continue to face many challenges still. So how can Afghanistan not face these challenges? I guess only if all women go to school, and are able to work side by side their brothers, then maybe freedom is possible. That women are not widows, who have to beg to feed their children, then this will be a sign of freedom.

Although Marzia demonstrates greater awareness of the differences between Afghan women, she still feels education can play a role in improving their situation. Similar to Tamana, Marzia also does not provide any clear ideas on how she hopes to address this problem. However, she is confident that her education serves as a prerequisite for addressing them.

Another participant, Sadaf, is also less optimistic about improvements in the future of women and girls. She includes herself in this group because she too worries that her family will not give her permission to work after graduation. She lives in Nangarhar, where it is a lot less common to see women working outside of the home. In spite of this factor, she has hope in her University education. She is especially bothered by the ways in which religion is used to exploit women, and hopes that she can address this problem:

In my heart I have many dreams, and inshallah [God willing] if I get a job, I will address many problems facing our society, especially our women. You know there was a religious leader who came here and gave a seminar I was at. He said ‘go you are a woman all you do is use men’. You know this is haram. They try to use Islam to punish women. I think after I finish university, I hope that I will be able to address this problem. If God wills, I mean Islamic law alone, provides the rights that women deserve.
In sum, HE provided the participants with a sense of hope and potential that they can contribute towards the subjugation of women in Afghanistan. They expressed an awareness of the politicization of women’s lives in Afghanistan, as many were quick to link their educational aims to objectives that are also linked to the overall development agenda in Afghanistan, both of the State and its foreign backers. Although their articulation of women’s unequal position indicate essentialism, they are nonetheless keen to use their education for a good cause.

**Conclusion**

The major theme examined in this chapter the militarized nature of learning in Afghanistan, particularly since 2001. The fact that women can go to university is an outcome of the occupation. For this reason, the participants express appreciation for development process. Yet increasingly, their daily routines, as well as their future hopes and dreams, are constantly threatened by insecurity and violence that does not seem to be limited to a particular region or group. Some of the participants are beginning to question the purpose of the occupation, particularly their own assumptions about the West in developing Afghanistan. As uncertainty and violence continue to escalate, and become a part of their daily routines, the participants appreciate their access to the university even more and consider it an important means of survival and hope. The next theme explores in detail the significance of HE in disrupting gendered constraints in their lives.
Chapter 6  
Higher Education as a Mode of Resistance

Introduction

In the war on terror, the oppression of Afghan women under the Taliban served as an intrinsic element toward justifying the occupation. The occupation had not only hijacked Afghan women’s accounts of suffering, but also furthered the agendas of (Western) feminists, many of whom did provide support to the occupation. Hunt (2006) asserts that the war on terror appropriated feminist agendas by “embedding feminism in the war in Afghanistan in order to favourably shape public perception that this was a war of liberation and to gain support for the project of ‘civilizing’ Afghanistan” (p. 52). These ‘civilizing’ goals of the war on terror continue to define the imperialist and colonialist dimension of the war, as Orientalist constructions of Afghan women (as passive victims lacking agency) and men (as backward, misogynist, violent), continue to influence mainstream scholarship on Afghan women. As Daulatzai (2008) reminds us however, while these “feminist (-inspired) writings have served an important role in keeping discussions of Afghanistan [and Afghan women] alive, they have largely obfuscated the history of war, violence, and subjectivity” (p. 420), especially as they relate to women.

Moreover, it was the work of transnational anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist feminists that drew attention to this misappropriation, and challenged it by providing a context that was shaped by local practices as well as global economic and political structures. For example, Afghan feminist Maliha Zulfa (2006) draws attention to Afghanistan’s own history of using women “as pawns for political legitimization” (p. 28). Zulfa maintains that gender policies have been manipulated, by both progressive and reactionary politics “as
a symbolic instrument serving to foster larger political ideals” (p. 28), than the actual needs of the women, a vast majority of whom live outside of the cities where these polices are focused.

These policies, Zulfacar explains further, have historically been initiated by urban male elites through a top-down approach “without any consideration for the broad range of ethnic, tribal, regional, geophysical and rural contexts of women’s lives in Afghan society” (p.28). The development of a ‘modern’ (secular) education further marginalized rural women. Specifically, the Soviet’s attempts to make education mandatory in rural areas resulted in the “rejection of all teaching imposed by the government” (p. 38). As explored in Chapter 2, the Soviet era educational reforms were mainly designed to fuel Soviet propaganda, and these efforts are one of the key reasons for the subsequent mistrust of girls’ education (p.38). In my interviews with Afghan mothers, conducted in 2007, (Akseer, 2007), it became apparent that negative misconceptions from the Soviet experience still influence the mothers’ attitudes towards their daughters’ education as they worried about them straying away from Islam or their Afghan culture.

This history is important for understanding and situating the present state-led educational reforms, informed and developed within the larger neoliberal structuring arrangement that has come to dominate post-2001 developments in the country. Specifically as Novelli (2010) notes, women and girls’ education has served a special purpose in the war on terror, by both justifying the occupation and, through increasing enrollments, characterizing its success. Thus, the war on terror as an instrument of monopoly finance capitalism, appropriates its own version of the ‘gender agenda’, on a site that has its own deeply rooted processes of dispossessing women.
However, women have not been silent. As transnational feminists remind us, women in the Global South have always found ways to navigate through the various intersections of power that operate in their lives. Specifically, by understanding individual experiences through a dialectical historical materialist lens, it is possible to document how their experiences are “simultaneously constructed by trans-local forces and relations of power” (Mojab & Dobson, 2008). Women’s agency unfolds within this complex web of socio-historical relations as well as the global and local connections (Mojab, 1998). Within these intersections, lie contradictions of experiences and ideologies, and as Brincat (2014) maintains, possibilities for change or transformation.

The second theme in this study, examines in detail the ways in which ‘local’ and ‘global’, ‘new’ and ‘old’- gendered discourses and practices surrounding girls’ education, operate in the lives of these participants, and more importantly, how they navigate through them. I explore their agency through the following three sub-themes: Contesting the Gendered Nature of Social and Material Constraints on Campus, The Home as a Site of Wavering Expectations, and finally, HE as an Instrument of Power and Negotiation.

Contesting the Gendered Nature of Social and Material Constraints on Campus

In Afghanistan, HE continues have many limitations, including a lack of essential resources. Therefore, it was not surprising to hear the participants thoroughly discuss the limitations that material and structural constraints placed on their learning experiences. Regardless of where the participants studied, or their socio-economic background, they realized the university was a space where their needs were not addressed in the same way male students’ needs were. For example, with the exception of participants’ attending AUAF, every other student felt constricted by a lack of essential facilities and other resources for
learning. These included washrooms, well-resourced libraries, access to technology and socially acceptable spaces for the girls to study or rest between classes.

Zarlakhta, for example, was giving me a tour of her campus and explained to me that the washroom at her university was located very far from the rest of the university. This factor posed as a difficulty due to the lengthy distance and time it took to get there. Many of the girls, according to her, do not use the facility also because they are in very poor condition and not maintained. She was also dissatisfied with her department’s inability to provide students with important resources that were necessary for her field of study Information Technology program. She says:

Like here we are facing lack of new technologies, we don't have access to internet. Our teachers newly got access to the net. Before teachers give us homework, the girls, the economic situation is not good; or they are not allowed to go to internet clubs. So how can they do their homework? Or they can't go to public rooms; also we don't have a rich library either. So they are begging the boys, please let us copy your homework. Or they are telling their brothers who have internet in their offices, to bring their homework from there for them to do. So this is a real challenge. If they can't even do their own homework on their own, how will they be able to fight for their own rights? This I think is the biggest challenge that girls face here.

Internet clubs are common sites in Kabul where many families still do not have a computer or Internet access at home. However, these clubs are often occupied by men or foreigners and are not considered ‘good’ places for girls. Perhaps realizing this, Zarlakhta felt a sense of entitlement to ask her family for a computer and internet at home. This sense of entitlement stemmed from the fact that she needed both to continue her studies. Her family eventually provided her with a computer and access to the Internet. However, Zarlakhta worries about other girls in her class, whose families do not have the monetary resources for
a computer: “Yea I was facing before but now fortunately I got net in my own home. But all people they don't have this ability to have net connection in their home”.

It was interesting to observe the extent of material constraints at Kabul University, since, historically this was the most prestigious University in the country. Since the opening of AUAF especially, the University has lost this prestige, and more importantly, a visible decay of materials needed to teach or to learn. Those who can afford to, now study at AUAF.

Similar concerns were present at Nangarhar University, which historically was the second developed and most well-known university in the country. Here, the participants explained that there were no washrooms or other spaces on campus where they felt safe being present. Unlike Kabul University, which had a poorly maintained washroom that was unused, at Nangarhar University, there were no washrooms for girls.

This lack of resources put severe limitations on them as many explained that they often had to rush home after classes were over, just so they could use the washroom. One participant explained that she usually tried not to drink liquids before coming to class in order to avoid having to use the washroom. Another participant indicated that by not being able to relieve herself, she felt physical pain and discomfort, which made it difficult for her to concentrate. As Zarmeena explains: “Like when I come here in the morning, I have to be in class by 8:30am; and I can't get up from my seat until 12:30. And this really really takes a toll on my body, to the point that I feel physical pain.” According to Zarmeena, the situation is further compounded by the unspoken campus culture where female students are not only expected to sit in the back of the classroom, but must also be not heard. For girls, this meant remaining still in their seats until their classes were over. Zarmeena recounts:

I mean we don't even give ourselves the right to turn our heads to our back. Again because of culture, I mean we look at our context, and we judge for
ourselves; this context is just not good for us to be doing things like that. And it will stay this way because we don't change, I mean even the educated people are contributing to this!

Zarmeena describes the psychological pressure she experiences daily for ensuring she does not move in her seat while in class merely out of fear of drawing attention to herself. She worries constantly about how she must be perceived by male classmates and professors. Although Zarmeena has an overall positive attitude towards her university, these practices continue to affect her physical and mental health. She maintains that these practices are unethical and are also outside the realm of Islamic teachings. However, the practice, she believes, has become a part of campus culture and difficult to challenge:

If I tell you the truth, in Afghanistan, cultural problems do exist for girls. For example, if I go to University, first I must make sure my clothes are covered and follow Islamic code. This is in Islam too but I also have to make sure I wear a burqa too. But the real problem is that once we are in class, we have no right to ask a question; we have the right, but that courage, we don’t have it. Why don’t we have the courage? Because of our culture. Like first of all our normal interaction is segregated, even at home. Also we don’t really go out. This is Islamic sure, but then they should have separate resources for us so that we can study to our full potential and learn.

Zarmeena tries to separate her religion from her culture and blames cultural practices for putting women in a situation where they cannot exercise their rights. According to her, these cultural practices circumvent the rights provided by the religion while claiming the opposite. She clearly articulates the contradictions that she witnesses between her culture and her religion, through the judgements she receives on how she dresses. She recognizes that this inconsistency impacts her courage, and ultimately her decisions on what she can and cannot do on campus. Although she is able to articulate her dislike for these practices, she ultimately chooses to accept them reluctantly. By accepting the claim that they are ‘Islamic’ practices,
she in turn rejects the possibility that they might be social manifestations of religion. It appears that she might be avoiding a deeper analysis of her situation due to the potential threat of losing her access to the university. This fear is illustrated in the following quotation:

> Here when we come to University, I mean at least we are very thankful that we are able to go to University, that our families even let us go, and that we are able to pursue our education.

Yet the gravity of this daily experience is too great for her to dismiss, especially since she has realized that she is not the only girl affected by it:

> But still, many of us girls, we don’t have the courage to speak in class, or let’s say we don’t understand something, we don’t have the courage to ask the professor for clarifications. So we just stay muted [...]. I mean there are no restrictions or rules against speaking, but it’s just this cultural thing. We think oh there are boys, we should not say something in front of them[...]. Many do try, but then slowly, slowly this affects her character negatively [...] like let’s say today you build the courage to speak in class, or you correct a professor or ask him for clarification; or you tell the professor that I have this problem or that you made a mistake yesterday in attendance. People will think ‘look at this girl, if she has the guts to stand up and talk back to her professor, then she is not really a girl of good character.

Although Zarmeena sees herself as ‘powerless’ or not doing anything about the problem, her rejection and awareness of the injustice that happens to her and other girls indicate a contradiction between what is happening to her and why, with how it makes her feel. As Mahmood (2001) reminds us, women enact agency differently in different contexts and always in relation to the larger socio-historical relations and structures of power. Zarmeena may not view her observations of the injustices as initiatives to take action or challenge them. However, they are already changing her perception of the university, her colleagues, and professors, including the knowledge that other girls sitting quietly next to her are not
necessarily lacking knowledge, but that the power structures operating in the classroom
deliberately silence them.

Some participants attempted to challenge these practices. Shaista, for example,
considers herself a bright, independent and academically successful student overall. She
explained that she often had the motivation to speak up in attempts to break this practice,
something even she acknowledged was not easy to do:

Well you know the environment here is different. We had more male students
than female students [in her class]. So the boys tried very hard to devalue us
and discourage us. Like when the girls would get up to the blackboard, they
would try to disturb us. Like I loved getting up to the board to write the
answer or say something but every time I did that, I would get harassed a lot
by the male students.

Shaista realizes the attempts to silence or dismiss her are motivated by existing
misogynist beliefs existing on campus. Specifically these beliefs are actively enforced by the
male students. Although the university does not prevent girls from attending university, and
in some instances, seek their inclusion, male colleagues are not as encouraging. It is a social
problem that is strong enough to prevent Shaista from doing what she is capable of doing or
what she wants to do.

These heightened practices of gendered discrimination have made some of the
participants also more vulnerable to sexual harassment from professors and male colleagues.
The participants shared stories that they had heard or knew of personally, where female
students were forced by faculty to have sexual relations with their professor in exchange for
good grades. Sadaf’s professor for example, had asked her for her telephone number. When
she refused, he threatened to lower her marks, which he did in the end. This had upset Sadaf
immensely as she maintained that she had worked very hard and had well prepared herself
for the final exam. Even though she confirmed that she had evidence against the professor, she was too afraid to make a complaint:

Sadaf: Now I still have very low grades, like from second place I am at 21st, but even if I complain, people will blame me. People will automatically assume the female student is at fault, not the teacher. So I am scared I don’t want this kind of reputation here. You can get a really bad reputation. So because of this, we [another female student who was also harassed by the same teacher], just don’t bother with him

Spogmai: Why does this happen here?

Sadaf: Well first year most students don’t even know their rights. May God help him with his manners, but he just likes to manipulate students in to talking to him. He is a married older man! And you know we have evidence against him, but it’s not the place to complain, even though we really want to complain. There is no process for doing it. I told one female professor about it but she said that we have a shortage of teachers here, and it’s not possible for us to kick him out. But she said that if we find at least two or three more teachers, then we will take him out. But that wasn’t really a good answer as well. I mean if he leaves another will come and replace him.

Sadaf is fearful about sharing these experiences with family or friends, unless it is a friend who had experienced the same kind of harassment. Fear of telling family was a common theme among the other respondents as well. Sheenkai for example, who also attends the same university as Sadaf, asserted that she had witnessed repeatedly female students getting harassed by male professors:

Every professor here already has formed a very particular opinion about girls here. They think the girls that come here are from bad families and they only come here so that they can engage with boys. Islamically, they think this is against Islam. Even the male students feel this way. When we sit in class with them they don’t treat us well or give us any kind of respect.

Sheenkai does not seem to accept the assumption that going to school is an unIslamic practice, or that it taints her character. While she rejects the assumptions that her male colleagues or professors have about girls attending university, she also demonstrates her own
internalization of such assumptions, by separating herself from girls that she believes are indeed ‘bad’ (the label that she resists being placed on her).

They too think that we are girls of bad character. So this is a challenge here. And the other thing is that, if a girl is bad here, then she can survive. But if she’s from a good family it’s very difficult for her, and she will feel violated. Like she will be used, and if she can’t be used, then they don’t like her.

Like Sadaf, Sheenkai also is concerned about speaking out because the consequences would make the situation worse for her. Mainly, it would mean that her family would no longer allow her to continue her studies. In order to avoid this possibility, she separates herself from other girls, particularly those who are much poorer than her:

Only a few girls have this particular kind of problem, like if their families are poor. Or they are really trying very hard to graduate from here. They just want to finish fast, so that is often a reason that they will do anything to make sure their grades don’t suffer. They worry that what if their family finds out that they might fail a year, or that the professor is giving them a hard time, so they will just do what they have to do with the boys or whatever, to make sure their grades don’t suffer.

By suggesting that it is mainly poorer girls who face this problem, Sheenkai is indicating that she might not have to worry about the impact it has on her due to her higher socio-economic background. Alongside this idea, Sheenkai is also hinting at a moral hierarchy in the sense that girls of lower socio-economic background are not only at greater risk, but that they might not actually consider it a serious problem, as she does.

In sum, analysis of this theme revealed that the participants are well aware of the biases that exist on campus, and the active ways in which they are enforced both ideologically for example through cultural or religious assumptions, and physically (through the administration’s lack of attention to the needs of females, harassment by students and
professors). The participants have become more conscious of the unfairness of the situation, and also the contradictory ways in which other processes (for example, culture or class) are used to justify these actions. They are beginning to see that gendered discriminations are possibly deliberate and ultimately unacceptable. The next sub-theme explores how similar contradictions unfold in the home, a site where the participants can express themselves more than on campus.

The Home as a Site for Wavering Expectations

All 19 of the participants talk at length about the influences that their families (which included in many instances the extended family), have had on their academic pursuits. Mainly, they describe their fathers as playing a crucial role in providing them with the support and motivation that they needed to continue on. With the exception of one participant whose father had passed away years ago, 18 of the participants express an admiration and gratitude for the encouragement that their fathers provided them with. They describe many instances in which their fathers had stood up for them, even when it was not socially acceptable to do so.

Shaista for example, who had earlier asserted that she was different from other female students because unlike them, credits her father for instilling these abilities in her said:

When you are in University, usually they [other female students] are like sleeping and not active at all. Neither do they take their studies serious or participate in practicums […] but I was not like this, I always asked questions if I didn’t understand something, or I went up to the board to solve a problem […] Family has a big role. They have been very encouraging, especially my father. He has been very supportive and has always told me that I should be very brave and that I should study as much as I can. He says that there are some people who know a lot but they cannot talk about it or share their knowledge with others because they don’t have that kind of courage. So he tells me that you should learn and try to teach others so they know that I possess knowledge and that I can share it too.
When I asked Shaista why her father is so supportive of her education, she attributed it to the fact that he too was educated and received a graduate degree from outside the country:

Shaista: Like I told you before, my father is an educated person. Spogmai. But there are many educated men like him. Why is he different?
Shaista: Yes but he studied outside of the country, and he is open-minded. It’s not that he doesn’t know his limitations or something; he does everything within Islam, and even my family thinks positively about my father. So one of the reasons is that my father left his village at a very young age, and moved to Peshawar [Pakistan]. So our life has been very urban, we grew up in and lived in cities. Away from villages, that’s why we have been able to pursue so much education.

Shaista sees her father’s educational achievements as positively influencing her freedoms. Particularly his education outside of Afghanistan, and the fact that he had moved away from his village at a young age, are reasons for why Shaista believes he is supportive of her rights.

Another participant, Sonia, who lives in Kabul and describes her home environment generally as ‘conservative’, also sees positive correlations between her father’s support and her own achievements:

I really love my dad because he is a good friend to me and also he never said that I can’t do this or that there is a difference between me and my brothers. He never thinks like this. And every time, he says that you can do whatever you want, but do everything within rule.

Although her father appears to be supportive of what Shaista does, she also explains the boundaries she has in her life. These boundaries are very important for the participants because they allow them to claim their place, or their new freedoms, as happening within their culture (through the father’s support). Shaista also hints at this idea earlier when she explains that even though her father did not stop her from doing what she wanted, his rules were always within religious boundaries. In other words, even though both girls realize that
they are accessing rights that are commonly not given to women in their communities, they are still members of the community because they are still abiding by the existing social rules. 

Abiding by the rules is especially important as Afghans often live in communities where they are somehow connected to one another through the tribal system of the country (Misdaq, 2006). Regardless of the family’s own socio-politics, they have to conform to some degree to the rules of the community, or qawm. The extended family in particular plays a very active role in influencing what individual families might do. For example, Seema explains that many of the restrictions she encounters in her home come from her extended family. Her immediate family on the other hand, is much more supportive of Seema’s aspirations. Even though her extended family lives in a village far from her city, the pressures still influence her daily decisions. She explains:

From my home there was no pressure [to go to university], but I wanted, I mean when I was younger I didn’t really know but my father was really encouraging us to pursue further studies; then later we started to value education too. When I finished high school, I really wanted to work for the government, like be a police officer or a lawyer, and for that, my immediate family didn’t have a problem, but the rest of the family, you know people from [where her village is located], they talk a lot. So when I passed my concor exams [entrance examinations], I decided to study at the faculty of education, even though I received very high grades. I could have done Law or something else. But I didn’t change it because my extended family talked too much; so for that reason I decided not to pursue law. My own family didn’t have a problem with Law.

For Seema, this permission itself was a major feat because she is presently the first woman in her family to have this much education. Many of her female cousins are still denied access. Similarly, she attributes these attitudes as limited mainly to those men who have lived in the village all their lives. Although being a police officer is generally a difficult pursuit for her because she lives in Nangarhar province, where there are greater restrictions
on women’s ability to work and even to pursue HE, many of them struggle with gender-based discriminations that girls in Kabul are not affected by to the same degree.

While she is able to defy them in many ways (through the help of her father), there are still some ‘rules’ that Seema cannot challenge because it would have worsened the situation for her: “I didn’t even want to be a teacher, but you know it’s really not a matter of choice because people here say that there are only two kinds of jobs for women; doctor and teacher. So that’s why I decided to become a teacher.”

Another participant, Zarmeena, also received warnings from her extended family to stop attending university. She perceives her father’s education as a contributing factor in the support she continues to receive from her family:

There are distant relatives that do have issues with me being a university student, but that has a reason too. For example, I was engaged when I was a child and until very recently I didn’t even know about this. When I found out, it really upset me and I went through a tough time. In fact there are times when I ask myself what is the point of life? Why study so much since I can’t even defend my own rights, how can I defend others’ rights? So that's why those times were very difficult, very difficult. But I am lucky that my family is educated; they stood by me and the fact that they stood by me, the main reason is because they are educated.

Perhaps realizing that her situation improved since the end of her engagement, Zarmeena fails to see how her father might have actually played a part in her engagement. Also, it appears that the situation continues to bother her to the point that she has considered ending her life. Her father’s support is unique and also against the wishes of the rest of the family. It is possible that she sees the delicate nature of her father’s role in annulling the engagement. For this reason, she does not question the possibility that he might have also played a role in this act. Her own positive assumptions of education also mystify the possibility that her father might have actually played an active role in putting her in this situation in the first
place. What is clear, however, is that she sees the positive influence that education can have on defending her rights.

A number of the participants noted the positive impact that their education was already having on their daily life experiences. For example, Sadaf explained that she was able to negotiate her area of study with her father, even though the rest of her family wanted her to major in something different. She explains:

See my family is educated, so they encouraged us from the beginning to go on to university; they even encouraged us to take courses to prepare. They just say that go to university, and you know they really want me to be a doctor because the society here says that women should either be teachers or doctors. I really liked Law; so after the concor exam, I chose law and medicine, but I only got accepted into law. So after that everyone at home told me that...actually 4 years ago there was no law here [at the university where she studies], especially not for girls. Like even right now people say that law is just for men. Only education and medicine are considered ideal for women.

Finally, it is worth noting that whereas the participants talk positively about the role of their fathers on their academic pursuits and on their lives overall, many describe their mothers as less supportive. Sonia’s mother for example, did not want her to go to university:

She [mother] was very different [from her father]. She said it’s not good for you, you can study something other than sports. And she said that when she’s with her friends or family they tell her that it’s not good that her daughter is into sports, and that she should keep me home instead, and keep my attention on housework. And that if I do sports in my country or society, it’s not good.

It is uncommon for Afghan women to pursue sports. The fact that her mother is hearing this from her friends, suggests that girls are still not encouraged engage in such activities. In a society where gender segregation was violently enforced, and where social practices still value traditional gendered roles for men and women, it is possible that her mother was reflecting these concerns. Even though Sonia is happy that she now has her mother’s support,
she is concerned for other girls, especially those living in her village. These concerns stem from their assumptions that their mothers still project negative attitudes towards their daughters’ learning.

There are many poor people there [her village], who don’t have money and their family economics [are] not good. They tell their kids not to go to school and say we don’t have money. This is a big problem, but the bigger problem is that mothers tell their daughters ‘look at me, I never went to school, is there something wrong with me? I am just like the other women, why do you want to go to school?’ If your own mother says this to you, then this becomes a big reason for one to change their mind about going to school. And I faced with many girls like this, who said I don’t go to school because my mom says don’t and that they should just do housework, and if they get married it’s good for them to know house chores; like cooking, cleaning, looking after the family than studying.

As this quote indicates, Sonia does not make connections between those women and their socio-economic situation. She does not seem to accept the idea that perhaps they cannot afford to send their daughters to school. These practices seem to challenge Sonia’s female identity, which clearly mandates education as a prerequisite to enacting any type of agency. She also wants to distance herself from traditional roles which she seems to be attributing to illiteracy (for example doing housework or getting married), and not what an educated woman should be doing.

Similar to Sonia, Razia’s mother was also not supportive of her decision to pursue HE due to her fears about insecurity in the country:

[M]y mother was saying it’s not safe because it [university] was very far from where I lived and I would be going home late at night and I am a girl. So my mother was really concerned. At that time with security, nobody could predict what was going to happen. And she said that, if you spend that kind of money, and after a year you can’t complete it because of security changes, then it’s just a waste of 2 years. But I was convincing my mom that knowledge and skills will remain with me, even if I don’t have the paper work.
Razia’s mother seems to be objecting due to material constraints (cost, insecurity), and not necessarily because she does not believe women should be educated. However, Razia was able to convince her mother to change her mind, especially as she found work and was able to absorb the costs of the tuition as well.

Other participants also hint that their mothers were often the ones who wanted them to stay within accepted social boundaries. For example, Ariana’s mother, who is a doctor, wanted her daughter to pursue a field that was more ‘woman friendly’ than what Ariana wanted for herself:

She said “oh I work at home and I go to university and go to hospital and it was too difficult and I don’t want my daughter to face too many problems; it’s better to be a teacher”. So in Afghanistan I think the duty that if you want your daughters to be safe, you should encourage them to be teachers.

Her mother, it appears, wanted to spare her from the difficulties that she felt her daughter will endure doing both traditional duties, such as working at home and working outside. Even though her mother has a high status and educational degree, it appears that she still is confined to the same roles that less educated women are expected to perform. However, Ariana does not seem to agree with her mother. Instead, she opted out for what she wanted to study, through the support of her father. She exclaims: “He said that ‘I really trust you, but people will say bad things [for majoring in Islamic studies]. Like people will say that it is not good for women to work in a place where there are lots of men”. Although her father too reminds her of the limitations that exist in society, he supports her decision nonetheless. It is interesting to note, that her mother too does not physically prevent her from pursuing her academic interests, but Ariana is more accepting of her father’s support, as this helps her
secure more rights in terms of negotiating her freedoms in spaces that are traditionally male dominated.

In sum, the fathers’ support of their daughters’ education often did not see material or social constraints in the same way as the mothers did. In fact, their fathers also see their daughter’s education as something that sets them aside from other women. The mothers on the other hand, appear to be the ones who remind the participants of the social constraints that their individual decisions will have on their daughters and possibly for the whole family. Mothers often base their fears on their personal experiences and what they are hearing or witnessing in the country or in their communities. Many of the girls however, see their mothers as not supportive even if they were able to provide financially for the family. Even this idea could not convince their mothers to put aside their fears. Despite the contradictions, the home still serves as a site where the participants are able to ‘test out’ many of the fears and limitations that exist in society, and find ways (particularly through the help of their fathers) to navigate through them. The next theme examines this navigation in more detail as it highlights how HE has served as an instrument to negotiate power.

**HE as an Instrument of Power and Negotiation**

Every participant interviewed shares stories of hostility and resistance from their families, extended families or communities towards their schooling or employment. Some of them faced a constant battle to have to defend their rights to attend university or to work. Regardless, this was a battle they felt they were beginning to challenge to some degree. Since this feat was not a common one to achieve, they were able to gain new rights through a feeling of self-entitlement. Moreover, as Warikoo and Fuhr (2014) explain, the education system is a key site through which meritocracy (a system in which rewards are distributed
based on individual merits), reproduces and legitimizes one’s status. For the participants, specifically their status as university students, became an important instrument in giving them a sense of accomplishment and confidence, as well as the power to address certain gendered concerns in their lives. The fact that they were able to achieve academic success supports their beliefs that through their education, they could address some aspects of gender inequality in their lives.

Zarlakhta for example, was reminded by her brother-in-law of the fact that she would not be allowed to work, and therefore was wasting her time going to university. Rather than accepting this possible reality, Zarlakhta challenged him back and defended her right to education by explaining to him that for her, the purpose of her education was not to gain employment:

My brother in law, he was joking with me and saying “what will you do with your University degree? Look at my wife, she's educated, but I don't let her go and get some job. And also when you get married your husband will not let you get a job.” I said that's your opinion, I want to be independent in my life. Education is not just about getting a job you know; my father always believed that when you are educated, even if you just sit in a corner, you will still benefit from the knowledge.

Although Zarlakhta had earlier expressed a desire to work, she has come to accept the possibility that she may not be allowed to achieve this goal. However, she reclaims her status as still unique, different, and better than those without a university degree due to the fact that she will still be a different person consciously. Even as Zarlakhta realizes the complexity of her situation, she still sees a transformation in herself through her education.

This sense of awareness of the unequal gendered dynamics, and the simultaneous assumption of the self as transforming through their university education, schooling, meant for some participants, that they had to accept certain expectations in order to maintain, and in
some instances, gain access to even greater, opportunities. Marzia for example, was given certain conditions to follow if she wanted to continue on to HE:

This encouragement [to attend university] came from my eldest brother. On the one hand he stops me from working, but at the same time he encourages me to go to University. He wanted me to study Medical and I had no interest in Medical. I really liked Technology. He always encourages me. I gave good exams, with good results 2 years in a row. Even for the national standardized exams, my brother really encouraged me to apply and do well. He says you will have to bring a name to the family.

Even though Marzia felt confident she could easily find employment in her field, she respected her brother’s wishes not to work, especially as she was able to pursue the field of her choice. Also, by bring ‘a name to the family’ Marzia realizes that she is already bringing a status to the family that might have just as much cultural worth as money. For Marzia, her educational attainment is a form of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986) that has the same kind of value as economic capital. In addition, education brings herself and her family an elite status, and thus becomes another means of social reproduction and hierarchy. Marzia realizes the social value of her education to her family and vigorously ensures that she succeeds in achieving it, even if it means accepting more gendered boundaries than others around her.

For example, unlike many of the other students on campus, Marzia explains that she wears her head scarf tightly around her neck so that not a single hair shows. She asserts that she did this out of her own free will. Also her decisions are mainly to make a statement that she is at university to focus on her studies. She does not want to have inappropriate relationships with boys or draw negative attention to herself:

Marzia: Well you know my sister makes fun of me, she compares me to this character on a drama series, and says that I am very cruel because you put yourself through hardships on your own. But I follow what is in our religion Islam, and in our culture. I want to do that. You know the way I wear my hijab
even, a lot of girls come up to me and say you have to get rid of this don't wear it like this.

Spogmai: Yes you wear it very tightly and differently from the others.

Marzia: Yes and I want to do this on my own. Nobody tells me to do it this way. If I do something where others think negatively about me, then I become very upset and I can't sleep all night. That’s why I try to do those things that people think positively about.

Marzia describes her hijab and dress style in general as more conservative than her friends, and sees this as the reason why male colleagues respect her and do not harass her like they do other female students:

When I come to class, I look away and don't bother to see who is there and who is not. Maybe they [male classmates] think I am very strict and very rude. Even the other girls tell me, after I have answered a question on the board, that if that was them, the boys would harass them for sure. But because the boys are scared of me, they don't harass me at all.

Marzia’s decision to dress more conservative and behave in a ‘strict and rude’ manner with men are also examples of the distorted ways in which local patriarchy continues to define women’s roles in the name of ‘preserving local culture’ or religion, and thus maintain power relations between men and women. As Bannerji (2003) reminds us, the war on terror has also unleashed local patriarchy and “in its most brutal forms is disguised in a rhetoric of anti-colonialism, or an idiom of authentic cultural identities and traditions” (p. 8).

Ariana shares the similar sentiments with Marzia when she explains her acceptance of her father’s control over her decisions, believing that it was a decision made for her own good. Because she worked hard to be accepted in the program, she was thrilled when she was one of the few other women who were selected. Even though it was a rare opportunity, and she was not explicitly prevented from going, Ariana decided in the end that it would be better for her not to go:
I passed it [the exam], but the problem was that my family said ‘oh people will say that she went alone to that foreign country’ and my father said that ‘I trust you, but if you don’t go that will be good’. So then I decided not to go, and [her friend] could go, but I couldn’t.

Unlike Marzia or Ariana, Sadaf tried to challenge certain practices and beliefs on campus that she felt discriminated against her because of her gender. Unlike the other female students, Sadaf refused to conform. However, even as she challenges them she does so by accepting other sets of gendered expectations:

[M]ost girls are afraid to speak up in class; they very rarely put up their hands because either the professor will mistreat them, very few are happy with it, and also the male students really give them a hard time. I mean I love the subjects that we are studying in class, and there are times when I really want to say something in class, but now there is this culture where girls just don't put up their hands. Sometimes the teacher might pick on me and ask for my opinion, then I share it. And also the professors don't even look at us; they just look at male students. When we came to class and expose our faces, some of the professors didn't like that either. So these problems are here, though they are improving a bit, but still they exist. It's very hard to study.

Concern for their family’s wishes and maintaining their reputation was a constant occurrence for the participants. Even for Sahar, who lived in residence and was miles away from home, her daily routines were influenced by her family’s warnings issued to her before she moved on campus:

Spogmai. So when you started coming here [to university], your immediate family or your extended family, did they have a problem with it?

Zarmeena. No not really because as I mentioned my family is educated; and even extended family doesn't really have a say because my father says that he's in charge of his family and he doesn't really let others interfere in his family's business. The only challenge was that when we came here to university, my father said that when you leave home, take care of yourself, and your reputation, and don't do anything that would bring shame to the family. So that was the only kind of condition, but other than that no not really.
Though there is no one around to keep an eye on her, Sahar is very conscious of making sure that she does not jeopardize her family’s trust. The participants’ caution and conformity is an indication that although some things may have “improved” from the Taliban era, structural violence and the fear of social repercussions from potentially risking the family’s reputation (status) continues to shape and limit Afghan women’s lives (Ayotte & Husain, 2005).

Finally, it is interesting to note that over half of the participants worked while also pursuing HE (11 out of the 19 participants interviewed were employed). They found the experience of going to university and also working as complimentary and a great factor in improving their personal lives. In other words, employment provides the participants with the independence and power to negotiate and also to contribute financially, as well as in the decision making process. Many of the participants maintain that their opinions are respected, and that their families include their input in any decision making, especially related to the participant’s personal lives. Seema for example, is able to negotiate leaving her home, alone, because of her education and also because she is currently employed. She recognizes the risks of doing such as it is not what girls in her family are allowed to do:

I can leave my home alone and come back, there is no problem for me. Like I leave in the mornings to go to work but there is no problem for me, even to go to the bazaar. But I don’t think that even if they [her cousins who are not working or going to school] leave their house, they will be able to find their way home.

Seema can act this way because she is employed, and unlike her cousins, she also contributes financially to her family. As I explain further below, Seema also takes care of her family’s needs by fulfilling the role of a ‘son’ or ‘brother’ for the rest of the family. As a result, she is in charge of all the shopping for the family. She enjoys a great deal of freedom leaving her home, unlike many other women around her. Also, her father works and has a job
where he makes more than many of the men in her family. In differentiating herself from her cousins however, Seema believes it is her education that gives her a higher status than other women in her family.

They [female cousins] are like blind people you know. They have never been allowed to go outside you know, and neither do they know about the benefits of education. You know education itself is a form of enlightenment, once you have it, it’s like a light. People without education are like blind; they have no light in their hand and in every direction that they go they will counter challenges, anywhere they go, and they won’t know how to solve their problems. Even at home they will face many problems you know because they have nothing else in their lives. Their brothers work, so these girls have all the responsibilities of the house.

The idea of equating illiteracy or rural lifestyle with ‘blindness’, or ‘backwardness’ gained prominence in Afghanistan during the Soviet occupation. During this period, the government, backed heavily by Soviet aid and political ideologies, addressed illiteracy outside of urban centers. More specifically, they interpreted traditional and existing Afghan gender roles, and Islamic values in general as ‘backward’ and ignorant (Zulfacar, 2006). A massive compulsory literacy campaign, specifically targeting rural women, was enforced through violence, in order to ‘enlighten’ rural Afghan men and women. It was an attempt that was deeply contested and continues to influence negative perceptions of girls’ education (Akseer, 2007). Seema’s perception of herself as an educated urban girl, in contrast with those perceptions of her cousins who live in the countryside and are illiterate, reflect the continued negative repercussions of these previous efforts.

Seema is not only attending university but, unlike her cousins, she is also employed and working for a foreign NGO. This job allows her to contribute financially toward her family and also pay her tuition and her sibling’s tuition. This independence gives her confidence and the freedom to leave her home by herself any time she needs to, and come as
she pleases, including late in the evenings. While her father is supportive, her extended
family is not, particularly her uncles. Seema believes this might be because she has a really
good income and can help her father financially, and her uncles cannot:

My relatives, uncles, everyone, is against it [her working]. They tell me ‘how
can you work?!’ But I think the real problem for them is that I make money.
They don’t like that I can help my family out financially. I have always
argued with my uncles and other relatives and said that, ‘no, like boys, girls
too can and should be allowed to work.

Like Seema, other participants who worked also expressed the important positive role
that their employment played in their personal and family life. Seema was the only one
however, who expressed tensions towards her employment from the extended family, as she
was also the only employed participant who was in close contact with her extended family in
the countryside. Sarah for example, did not face any restrictions or hostility from her family
towards her employment, and they in fact were happy that she had an income:

They are happy, especially my father he says that ‘you are the first child of
mine, who is independent’, because my brothers all of them are educated but
my father paid their tuition. All of them are in the United Kingdom now, and
they went easily, everything was so easy for them. But for me, I faced lots of
problems.

The challenges Sarah describes involved her attempts to balance her full time studies with
her job as it took a lot of time away from her studies. Sarah also feels that her employment as
well as her education put her in a ‘higher’ position than those without it. I had asked her what
the similarities and differences were between her and other women, and Seema highlighted
both her education and employment as important elements in the distinction:

Those people [whom she considers herself above of] are mostly graduates of
high school, and after that they just marry, and most of them are illiterate you
know, jobless, they are at home. [Even if] they have a bachelor’s degree, but
they are at home and they say 'oh good for you, you are working and studying at the American university' and most of them get jealous.

Both Seema and Sarah articulated the opposition towards their employment as individual acts of ‘jealousy’, rather than a structural problem of inequality or exclusion. They fail to see for example, how their employment might also be serving Western agendas, and therefore a concern for those who are already feeling further disenfranchised by the present occupation. As Fluri (2012) explains, Afghan women’s employment, much like their education, plays a central role within the capital driven development of Afghanistan: Fluri (2012) states:

Afghan women also supply a unit of capital accumulation because their presence and employment provide these organizations with the opportunity to broaden their funding opportunities, and subsequently increase the demand for women with these skills. Afghan women have therefore become a site of capital accumulation and exchange. (p. 44)

Moreover, as I have highlighted throughout this thesis, both education and employment have historically been accessible to urban, and most often, elite segments of the population. Since 2001 however, Afghanistan (and Kabul specifically) has become a key site for neoliberal free-market economic development which have furthered the “reproduction of hierarchal wealth and uneven development” (Fluri, 2012, p. 987). This period has also seen poverty rising both in rural and urban parts of the country (Khan, 2008), along with rampant unemployment (Yacoobi, 2008).

Seema and Sarah’s disconnect from the realities of poverty or social inequality are examples of Mojab and Carpenter’s (2011) idea of ‘learning by dispossession’. Through this process, individuals become disconnected and dislocated from their material realities such as war, militarization, social inequality, poverty. Instead, they learn new knowledge and skills that legitimize capitalist social relations as the legitimate form of social organizing. The
assumption that others were not happy with their employment (or education) because of their (individual feelings of) ‘jealousy’ thus becomes an archetype of a process that not only maintains capitalist order, but also existing inequalities.

In summary, through the attempt to understand how HE influenced the participants’ decisions in their daily lives, it is compelling to see the complex ways in which their university education put them in a position to address gendered constraints in their lives. Some of the participants for example, conformed to more traditional practices and beliefs about their identities as women. Even as they secured new opportunities and gains, they simultaneously accommodated to some patriarchal relations of power. Negotiating with gendered power hierarchies also enabled the participants to reinforce a class based social hierarchy, where their status as university students secured them a level of prestige within their families and also in how they understood themselves. This sense of security became particularly apparent through the narratives of those participants who also worked. As a result of their work, they were able to secure a level of power with which to challenge and negotiate gendered boundaries. Similar to their education, their sense of security affirmed their belief that they belonged to a different social class than those who were not in university or working.

**Conclusion**

This chapter examines the ways in which HE serves as an instrument of resistance in the participants lives. The education of women has a history of contested politicization, with some of these contestations (mainly the Taliban’s ban on women’s work and education), are appropriated by the war on terror in order to further its agenda of occupation and continued militarization. I examine the influences of HE on
the participants’” by situating their accounts within a context that has always been politicized, and militarization and occupation again since 2001. The three sub-themes reveal the pervasive presence of both material and ideological constraints to girls’ education, the conflicting ways in which the participants ‘test out’ their new knowledge and skills within their ‘traditional’ contexts (homes), and finally, the ways in which the participants use their education, and for some their employment, to challenge and reinforce existing gendered hierarchies.
Chapter 7
The University as a Site for Redefining Self and Others

Introduction

Previously, I discussed the importance of education in conflict zones as playing a positive and negative role in restoring peace, justice and equality (Bush & Saltarelli, 2000). Some scholars have noted the potential of education as a site for empowerment and/or repression (see for example; Alzaroo & Hunt, 2003; Bush & Saltarelli, 2000; Freire, 2000; Graham-Brown, 1991). Particularly during conflict, “education can be an important medium of social and political mobilization for girls and women” (Kevorkian, 2008, p. 181). On the other hand, as Bush and Saltarelli (2000) point out, education can also promote intolerance and preserve privilege. This is particularly the case when development aid is intertwined with foreign political agendas.

Capitalist restructuring, through neoliberal reforms of HE in Afghanistan are an example of this intertwining of development aid and foreign policies. Moreover, as Stromquist (1998) and others (Kilby & Olivieri, 2008; Morley & Lussier, 2009) remind us, these reforms often do not address gender inequality as a structural or institutional problem, and thus risk the possibility of further deteriorating existing inequalities, specifically for women. Morley and Lugg (2009) in particular, are critical of the assumption among international donors that increased enrollment of women is a sign of achieving equality, because even as they secure access, the university still remains a gendered site where women face greater discriminations than men.

Despite these challenges, the University in Afghanistan has historically been a site where students have demonstrated political and class consciousness, and also initiated
important revolutions against the ruling elites (Ekanayake, 2004). It was a site where elite status was not only attained (Ekanayake, 2004), but also, where youth (mainly those of rural backgrounds), challenged and revolted against the political elites’ western-inspired developments for ignoring “Afghanistan’s diverse traditions, faiths, needs and aspirations” (Matsumoti, 2008, p. 71).

In Chapter 6, I explore the ways in which the participants faced greater material and ideological constraints on campus than their male colleagues. Even the impact of the occupation, as explored in Chapter 5, posed greater threats to women’s learning, by revealing the continued presence and possibility for erosion of existing (gendered) inequalities. Therefore, the participants were cognizant of the politicized nature of their learning and the incessant presence of material and ideological constraints towards it. Politicization of their learning was categorically evident through their awareness of university as a ‘battleground’ for foreign assumptions, misconceptions and local expectations.

In this chapter, I explore the ways that participants navigate through this ‘battleground’ by exploring the ways in which these assumptions and expectations are confronted by the participants. I examine their responses through the following three sub-themes: Confronting Foreign Misconceptions, (Re)Defining Educated Self as ‘Different’, and finally, Transforming Gendered Boundaries: A Complex Undertaking.

**Confronting Foreign Misconceptions**

As I explored in Chapter 6, for many of the participants, HE provided the participants with a sense of confidence to address certain constraints in their lives. They felt that through their university education, which served as an instrument for achieving higher social status, they could negotiate new choices and opportunities, and also certain gendered practices.
Through the acquisition of new knowledge and skills, many of the participants felt some level of confidence and power, which they used to address some concerns. For some of the participants, the university was also a site where they became conscious of Western misconceptions of Afghan women. They were particularly bothered by essentialist notions of Afghan women that presented them as illiterate, victimized, or victims of their religion and culture.

Nadia for example, described her experiences from a trip to the United States earlier in the year. She was shocked at the reactions that some of the Americans she met there gave her, when she told them she was from Afghanistan:

Well there is this funny story; when I went there to the Apple store, everywhere, but especially in the Apple store, I was like “I am going to buy this thing”, and people asked me where are you from, I said Afghanistan; they were like “oh Afghanistan! Like all that fighting is going on there!” and I would tell them that come on it's not that bad, we live there and study there. The image that they have is that Afghanistan is full of war, and nobody can walk around on the streets, and plus for females, they get so surprised when they see us, especially like those Muslims from other countries, they would ask us “do you wear those burqas?”, or “you can't do this or that” and walk around. I said “no I am fine with it. People don't shoot me when I go out wearing what I am wearing right now.” The thing is that Afghans here are not literate, they are not given a chance to study, and they wear big dresses if they go outside.

The assumptions did not reflect Nadia’s own life as a middle-class educated girl living in Kabul, despite the fact that they speak to the experiences of many women living in Afghanistan. Instead of drawing this differentiation, Nadia attempts to clear the misconceptions through her own individual experiences.

Zarlakhta, who was on the same trip, felt offended by the surprise she received when strangers expressed shock when she told them she was from Afghanistan. She was especially bothered by their lack of awareness of Islam which she explained already secured rights for
women. Unlike the women she encountered, Zarlakhta saw Islam as a source of empowerment for women:

> They [Western] women she met in the United States] think that Islam doesn’t give us any rights. But that is not true. They think that we don’t know, we don’t have any information but that’s not true. Even the rights that Islam does give us, they don’t have! They just try to compare themselves to men, but they forgot about their own rights.

Also, in clarifying misconceptions about Afghan women and Islam, Zarlakhta reveals her own bias about women in the West, whom she believes equate women’s rights with being more like men. The trip not only allowed Zarlaktha to confront stereotypes of Afghan women, it also encouraged her to respond to them. Her response, however, also reveals militarized notions of gender equality.

Bannerji and Mojab (2003) explain that with the dominance of Western (neoliberal) feminist agendas guiding the ‘gender equality’ efforts in Afghanistan, there has been an equal erosion of local patriarchal ‘solutions’ to addressing these concerns. Imperialist expansions specifically, have not only “driven masses of people into the direst forms of economic and social desperation” (p. 9), but they have also given rise to ethnic nationalism with specific focus on, the “political mobilization of religion as a false unifier of fundamental social differences” (Bannerji & Mojab, 2003, p. 9). Zarlakhta displayed influences of the politicized and militarized understanding of Islam on her thinking, as she uses religion to defend her own stereotypes women and men in the West and also in Afghanistan:

> Like my friend said, women in Afghanistan are like machines. But even if they are working a lot and yes there are lots of problems, at least they are mentally comfortable. They don’t have this worry that their husband will go and have relations with someone else and leave them.
Sarah described similar experiences from her trip to India. She saw the media in particular playing an important, albeit very negative role, spreading these negative images of Afghan women:

They [foreigners] say that, they think about [an Afghan woman as] a lady with a burka. I don't know why. Because of the medias of other countries are trying to show Afghan women like that. They think that almost everyone in Afghanistan is illiterate, that they don't have any rights, they are hated by their families that they have nothing. They think like this. But they don't think for example that in Afghanistan I am going to University, that I am Afghan. You know when I went to India, especially from North to South I used to go with friends all the time. Everyone would say “are you Kashmiri?” and I would say “no I am Afghan”, and they were shocked they were like “are you kidding with me” I said “no why?” They said “how can you talk in English?” I said “come on are you kidding me, we have American university there”, they say that “no in media it just shows war, explosions, Taliban killing people”, and I said “no it's not like that. It's all about the media. They try to mislead people.”

Sarah was critical of the negative assumptions the people she met in India had about Afghan women. But unlike Zarlakht, Sarah used her own life experiences as ‘evidence’ that Afghan women are not how they are perceived.

While both Sarah and Nadia have travelled overseas and encountered negative stereotypes about Afghan women there, other participants learned about them in Afghanistan, either in their place of work or school. Marzia for example, who used the Internet often for school, explained her shock at some of the stories and images she comes across:

Sometimes when I search on the internet, their [foreign] portrayal is accurate to some extent, but also inaccurate. For example, in many provinces [countryside], women are suffering. They say that “look it's all about the burka and that's it.” And their portrayal is negative because they focus on the burka too much. There are so many girls here who study, do sports, they have advanced in many different areas. For example, they work with foreign organizations, travel overseas on bursaries for studies and so on. So some of their portrayal is not true.
Marzia also used her own life experiences in order to contradict Western misconceptions. For example, even though sports are generally not an ‘accepted’ field for women to pursue, including for Marzia (who had earlier explained the struggles she experienced in gaining her mother’s support), she presented it as something that girls can achieve. She also does not dismiss the fact that Afghan women do indeed suffer. However, she presents it as a rural problem, perhaps to assert her own position as someone who is not oppressed or suffering and instead actively engaged in advancing her life.

In sum, the participants were generally critical of the misconceptions that they felt dominated Western (mis)understanding of Afghan women. They often use their own lives as examples or ‘evidence’ to challenge these assumptions. They are bothered by these misconceptions mainly because they do not reflect the participants experiences, but possibly, also the gains that they have been able to make. Their lack of acknowledgement of the diverse disparities that exist amongst women, specifically through insistence on using their own privileged positions to challenge stereotypes, suggests that more than being concerned for presenting an accurate portrayal of Afghan women, it is possible that they wanted validation of their unique classed experiences. In the next sub-theme, I look at the relation between the participants and other Afghan women. Specifically, I explore how they consider themselves as university students, different, from other Afghan women.

(Re)Defining Educated Self as Different

As I have repeatedly emphasized, during conflict, “education can be an important medium of social and political mobilization for girls and women” (Kevorkian, 2008, p. 181). Kevorkian explains that within militarized contexts especially “education can be an important medium of social and political mobilization for girls and women” (Kevorkian,
2008, p. 181). However, as I discussed earlier in the chapter, it is also a site where historically, conflicting political agendas have collided (local/global, modern/traditional), often resulting in further subjugation for women.

The participants’ navigated through these historical contestations and present uncertainties by redefining their identities as ‘educated women’. Every participant interviewed recognized their university education as transformative toward their self-perception. However, even as they recognize a change in themselves, they continue to display a sense of difference that actually emphasized conformity. This was particularly the case when they compared themselves with other female university students. Marzia for example, explains why she believes her male classmates do not harass her, like they do other female students:

 Marzia: Many of the girls don’t go up to the board to answer a question, because they are afraid that the boys will make fun of them. But when I get up to write something on the board, there is a particular kind of respect for me. When I am in class, they [male classmates] don’t play music

 Spogmai: Why do you think the boys have so much respect for you in class?

 Marzia: I think because I don’t engage with them. When I come to class, I look away and don’t bother to see who is there and who is not. Maybe they think I am very strict and very rude. Even the other girls tell me, after I have answered a question on the board, that if that was them, the boys would harass them for sure. But because the boys are scared of me, they don’t harass me at all.

 Although Marzia attended a public university, she took extra fee-based courses that assisted her learning in subjects to which the other students do not have access. Marzia also comes from a stable middle-class background, with a father whom she described earlier as very ‘Western-thinking’ due to his pursuit of graduate studies outside of Afghanistan. Though Marzia’s university is also located in Nangarhar, which as I described previously, is
a much more conservative environment than Kabul. For Marzia, her ability to take extra courses, along with her father’s ‘open-mindedness’ and support towards her education, provides her with a level of confidence and knowledge that she can share with her students. She does not make connections between her social background as a possible factor in why she goes up to the board, and others do not. Even when trying to explain why she thinks boys do not harass her, Marzia saw it as an individual problem in which the female students themselves, according to her, cause the harassment:

Spogmai: What do these girls do, that the boys feel they can harass them?

Marzia: I think if people want to stay within the boundaries of the dress code of their society, it is in their control to do so. If these girls don’t do so much fashion and wear very tight clothing, basically do something that is not common in our culture, not the style and people are not used to it. This is one of the reasons I think; they don’t dress proper, or they laugh in public too much, or they walk around too much. I think these are some of the reasons the boys become familiar with them, and tease them.

In order to differentiate herself from these girls, Marzia conformed to culture and behaviour that she felt does not contradict local values. In doing so, she is the only one who is able to achieve something rare as academic success. She is also able to do it within acceptable social norms. This is the reason why she considers herself an ‘ideal’ Afghan woman.

Sofia also worries about the ‘unacceptable’ ways in which some Afghan girls behave, and believes it is behaviour like that, that contributes to negative perceptions of women. She explained, that unlike other (women) around her, she is open-minded and does not think negatively about others:

When I think about myself and how I am different [from other girls] , I think one reason is that I am more like boys, I have more in common with them in terms of my attitude. I think high. Everyone tells me that you live in Afghanistan, but you think like [Westerners]. I think very freely about others, like broadly, I don't think negatively about anyone. Everyone looks like a
good person to me, and I think they are great; I don't think negatively about anyone.

By ‘high’ Sofia suggests that she thinks superior to other women, because unlike them, she thinks like a boy or Westerners. She also attributed open-mindedness to men and foreigners. She explained that she does not judge others, or follows restrictions the way other girls do. However, when she visits Kabul occasionally for work, she ensures that she dresses in a way that is acceptable for an Afghan woman. Through these trips, she has become increasingly concerned with the way that girls dress and behave in Kabul:

I feel that even if Afghans are given freedom, they should stay within Islamic boundaries. Hijab for example is an Islamic obligation and they [other girls in Kabul] should follow it. In Kabul they have kind of given this up a bit, but not here [in Nangarhar]. But you know if your heart is clean, it’s not important how you dress. You know that saying ‘clothes don’t make you a man’, it’s your attitude. But I feel people should stay within Islamic boundaries. Another change is this Indian influence especially in our weddings. Like what foreigners do at their weddings and what Indians do, this has really influenced our culture, however not in Nangarhar yet.

Sofia’s insistence on the differences between girls in Kabul (as outside of Islamic boundaries), and her insistence that Nangarhar has not been corrupted by foreign customs evoke differences that are indeed materially based, but also ideological. Kabul has long been recognized as the centre of any development that has occurred in the country, and as well, criticized for forwarding a centralized political structure that has always alienated the rural masses (Zulfacar, 2006). Specifically, the idea that women in Kabul are culturally corrupt is also a result of previous centralized development initiatives, and became more profound after the Soviet reforms of the 1980s. During that period, urban women enjoyed much greater freedoms and opportunities that women like Sofia would not have accessed to as her family
lived in the countryside. Even though the participants wore the hijab in public, this practice did not fit in with Sofia’s understanding of Islamic covering.

Shaista, who lived in the same city as Sofia, also talked about the importance of dressing in ‘acceptable’ terms, even as she explained that she and her family are ‘progressive’ in terms of education and the rights of women:

Like for me, I never paid attention to what people said about me. I always dress Islamically and no one has ever questioned this about my dress code. They’ve generally been very supportive and encouraging; in fact, I have been used as an example to others. Parents say ‘you should study like Shaista does, or behave like her’. So my dress code has been used as a positive example. So I never tried to let negative talks influence my learning, or discourage myself from being active. I don’t care about these things.

Shaista stated that she does not care about how others view her, and instead chooses to dress and behave in a way that she knows will not offend her family or community. Thus, in defining themselves as different from other female students, many of the participants evoked cultural and religious assumptions about how women should dress and behave. These assumptions often varied and for some of the participants were offered as suggestions.

On the other hand, when they compared themselves to women who were not in university, their responses were clear and affirming. Marzia, for example, explained in details how she felt she is different from a girl who has never been to school:

There are so many differences. For example, when I go in the bus, and an uneducated and educated woman get on the bus, the uneducated woman doesn’t know how to talk to the driver, where to sit, how to say where she needs to get off. And when an educated woman gets on the bus, she behaves very well with the driver and everyone else. Sometimes this creates a lot of confusion and noise. But the educated woman, she uses proper manners with the driver and everyone else when she gets on the bus.
For Marzia, education is not only a status marker, but also a class marker. People who are educated, according to her, also gain and (must) display social skills that are connected to a higher social class. The historical development of formal education not only catered to the needs of the elites, but as Ekanayake (2004), maintains, it was also a way to recruit and reproduce a new elite class, one that would be in the service of the ruling state. Moreover, the importance of Western lifestyle have historically been promoted by the ruling elites amongst city dwellers as an instrument of modernization (Misdaq, 2006; Emadi, 2002; Ekanayake, 2004). Beginning with King Amanullah in 1919 for example, elite and urban Afghans were encouraged to dress in Western style clothing, and women were encouraged also to remove their veils in public. Emadi (2002) writes: “Women of ruling class and upper-middle-class families usually identified themselves with Occidental culture and were eager to emulate elements of Western lifestyle” (p. 23). Some of the ways in which Westernized culture, as a symbol of status, “manifested itself [included] dress, eating habits, lifestyle” (Emadi, 2002, p. 23). These changes were limited to cities (mainly Kabul), and continued to be challenged by mostly rural and poor, as well as some conservative elites, throughout the years.

Marzia lives in an area that is generally more conservative than Kabul. However, because she is not a ‘typical’ woman (because she works and goes to school), she emulates that difference by evoking class differences through assumptions about the purpose of education that are historical, but also suggests that even in the present, education continues to be a form of capital that can be used to accumulate (social) value (Bourdieu, 1997).

Other participants expressed similar beliefs about the role and purpose of education in their lives. Sofia, for example, also felt that she behaved and thought differently than women who were not formally educated:
I should say the truth, which is that since I am educated, when I sit somewhere in a social context with my parents, how I talk and how they talk, there is difference of earth and sky; I know what to say and when. They don't know this. They just say whatever comes to their mind, they don't think what if I offend someone or upset someone. They don't assess whether that place is the right place for that topic. Maybe some place is celebrating something, and you say something that just makes everyone sad. Or the opposite. These differences exist. The way they talk to elders or youngsters, it's not with the same kind of respect that someone educated would. But someone who is educated, they would think twice before doing something like this.

Unlike other women, Sofia felt that she was more conscious of what she should say or do because she has achieved a status that requires her to behave in a particular way. By conforming to that status, Sofia maintained her privilege and also emphasizes that there are differences between her (an educated woman) and others (who are not educated). She was especially critical of rural girls and believed that even their day-to-day actions or behaviours were unacceptable:

I think rural girls think that people like me are not of good character or have too much freedom. Also like they don't even know how to eat. Like if you go to a hotel for a wedding, they don't know how to eat with a fork, sit in a chair, you know differences like that. But other than that, I mean they are humans, I am human.

For Sofia, it was also important to sit with people that she has more in common with. These people include individuals who she believed had even greater power or status than her. She feels that this decision will enable her to move up socially:

Another thing is, the more high-level people you sit with, the more you learn. They can't do that, they just know house chores, that's all they have seen. But if they sit with someone, they'll learn. For example, my cousins, they dress just like me, and say that 'I am not different from you', even though they are not educated. I am educated and I know who I should compete with and who I shouldn't, but they don't know this. They say that 'there is no difference between us, it's just education'; but I say that I don't say things like "I am not any less than anyone else'. I don't do this because I am educated and I respect everyone.
When her cousins challenge her beliefs about physical differences between them, Sofia maintains that these differences are also subconscious, and therefore cannot be ‘copied’ as her cousins seemed to be doing. This idea of one’s subconscious or way of thinking being completely altered for the better, through education is an idea expressed by other participants as well. Tamana for example, explained that even her thought process is above of those who are not educated:

Like those women who are not educated, we have different ways of thinking. They are thinking as an Afghan girl, like “one day a man will come, and marry me, and I will make a life with him.” But when real life comes, they face so many problems, because they are not educated, they don't know their own rights, they receive so much violence from their husband and their in-laws’ family. But I feel different because I want to get enough education, make my career, and one day I will be able to work for this government, for women, to bring changes for women's rights, and bring policies. This is my dream.

Like Tamana, many other participants also essentialized (and homogenized) the voices and identities of rural women, similar to the way that they had felt the West does about Afghan women:

Marium. They don't have their voice, they can't decide for themselves, and I don't like that. And they don't have the freedom to talk, even in their family decisions. They don't have… no one gives them chance to talk or when they can make decisions. They are just doing house work. So it's tolerance, and hopeless because it has been like this for years and years and years. Also, brave because they have tolerated a lot and it requires a lot of...for me it requires a lot of courage, not to speak. It requires a lot of effort not to speak and to just sit there, and there are others making decisions for me.

Spogmai. And are they different from how you live? Like is their lifestyle different from yours?

Marium. Yes. I make decisions for myself, they don’t have the right to decide, at what time of the day they can go outside and buy something for themselves. They have to have permission from parents or brother. If they go without
permission they will hit them, or get angry with them. So they are scared, they are scared. And I don't care.

Marium saw uneducated or rural Afghan women or victims of their environment and their men. While she admires their courage to tolerate the violence, she also did not see them as active agents of change in their lives. Marium sympathized with them but she found it difficult to relate to them or to see any commonalities between her life and theirs because her status as an educated woman dominates any possibilities of seeing similarities.

Moreover, the knowledge that Marium had about rural women’s lives, was not based on first hand experiences. Instead, she and other participants based their assumptions on what they had heard or read in the news. Zarlakhta for example, learned about rural women’s lives through her mother:

Well obviously girls here go to school. People who are educated and those who aren't, there is a big difference between them. They are different in their behaviour, their manner, how they speak, how they behave with others. And I see lots of problems where their behaviour, like with their families they cannot solve their problems. They just do some repetitive jobs. My mom told me that they just go shopping and buying clothes, because they have nothing else to do. She says they are jobless so they don't have any other job to do. If they were educated, they would think about their own country, and how to bring changes in their own behaviour; how to raise their children. But they are just busy in celebrations, parties, and they've forgotten about education. Like my aunt, she's living in Kabul city, but you see quite a difference. Like some of her kids they are failing school, because education is not a priority for them. And we see lots of problems like this.

The connection between women and girls’ education to national development is one that was introduced by the WB as part of its neoliberal restructuring of HE in the country, to prioritize girls’ education so that they can participate in the labour market and thus be considered as participating in the development process (WB, 2002). Moreover, Zarlakhta believes that her aunts’ illiteracy also negatively impacts her children due to the fact that they
are failing in their studies because the mother does not understand the importance of
education. Marzia has never been to the countryside, but she has heard through the media
about the difficult conditions in which rural women live:

I don't know much about them personally. But now there is this organization
about women's rights, especially in the villages. We saw a photo on TV,
where a girl's nose had been cut. And this news had even made its way to the
West. Through the internet. I think this is good because if this organization
was not here, how would we have known about this poor woman's life? So
that's why I think it's good that this organization is here.

In this quote Marzia referred to a story that gained international attention in 2010,
about a young woman whose nose had been cut by her family. Gopal (2010) explains that the
story, which appeared on a Time magazine cover along with the heading ‘What happens
when we leave Afghanistan’, not only reduces Afghans to objects of Western chastisement,
but also a ‘cynical ploy’ to invoke the condition of women in order to justify the occupation.
It is worth noting that the story leads to similar outcomes even within Afghanistan, as Marzia
also uses it, in an essentialist way, to develop generalized assumptions about women in rural
Afghanistan and evoking differences that hierarchal.

In sum, this sub-theme is interesting because unlike the first one, where participants
challenge Western misconceptions about Afghan women, this theme reveals that they also
emphasize differences in a way that is similar to the ways that the West generalizes about
Afghan women. When they compare themselves to other educated girls, they accentuated
their own uniqueness by claiming an identity that they feel is more in line with cultural and
religious gendered expectations. Those that do not follow these (and also were educated), are
viewed by the participants as still in a position lower than theirs. Unlike them, they adopt
new knowledge and skills within expected gendered boundaries. As a result, there appears to
be some tension in terms of claiming a privileged position for themselves amongst those who are similar in terms of education. They claimed a new identity where they not only embrace traditional benefits of educational attainment (social mobility or capital), but also do it in a way that reflects their current realities (cultural or religious preservation).

On the other hand, the participants were more explicit and clear on the boundaries that they feel existed between them and uneducated women. These articulations are similar to ones that they accuse the West of using against Afghan women. By emphasizing their differences, including ones that are much harder to ‘copy’ (their thinking), they are ensuring that their new higher social status is not something easily achievable (or replicated through dress). By not accentuating social differences between themselves and others, they risk being also considered ‘illiterate’ or ‘backward’ and thus of a lower social status. Polarizing differences was ultimately a way for the participants to escape to a higher social class and to (re)emphasize the boundaries that mark those differences. Their education, serves as an instrument of reproducing and actively maintaining historical social differences (inequality) in the country. Yet this is not how the participants necessarily view their educational attainment. For many, transforming gendered constraints in their communities and their country is a central component of why they are pursuing education in the first place. These ideas on how they articulate differences between themselves and others, influence in complex ways their aspirations to address inequality in their country. I examine this complexity in the next sub-theme.

**Transforming Gendered Boundaries: A Complex Undertaking**

An anti-colonialist and anti-imperialist (transnational) feminist framework is important to this study because this approach recognizes the complex ways in which women
are affected by various intersections of power. In addition, this framework simultaneously recognizes women as agents who can navigate through these terrains in transformative ways. As Rostami-Povey (2004) notes in her study of Afghan women, even when living under very dire conditions, women find ways to resist and transform oppressive structures, despite having very little access to support or resources. Similarly, enacting agency through a historical materialist lens is always in relation to the structures within which it unfolds. Specifically, it is with moments of tensions or contradictions, that opportunities to challenge (or maintain) the status quo arises (Ollman, 2003).

As university students, participants feel that university is a site of social privilege which has provided them with the means and confidence to challenge some aspects of their subordinated positions. They realized the importance of the university as a politicized space as they become more conscious of the tension between various forms of ideological forces claiming ownership of women’s purpose and role in society (for example foreign agendas for women’s emancipation, and also traditional or ‘Islamic’ agendas for women). Some of the participants saw this site as an opportunity for them to also address concerns that they felt are damaging to women.

Sonia, for example, felt that misconceptions about women and their rights in Islam have contributed towards a denial of their rights and freedom. In order to bring attention to this problem Sonia took courses to increase her knowledge of Islam, especially as a way to secure her pursuit of studying. She believed that proper knowledge of Islam will convince those who wrongfully assume that Islam prevents women from playing sports:

In this society people think that sports is very different from our people; they say that it is not in Islam, but this is not true. Whenever we study sports in our country, we talk about the fact that it is in Islam. But we do it with our hijab, not without it. It's allowed in Islam, both for men and women. But our people
don't know these things, and they say that 'you are Muslim and this is not good'.

Islamic knowledge helped Sonia gain confidence and credibility in her struggles to convince her family and friends that her pursuit of sports is within religious boundaries. Other participants explained that the very act of going to university while facing many physical and psychological constraints, is indicative of their defiance and ability to transform existing boundaries. Sahar for example, was concerned about the presence of foreigners in Afghanistan, which she felt not only cause insecurity, but also corrupt local culture and values. Some people think that their [foreigners’] purpose is to help our country; they do help us with money, but the damage that they do, is worse than the monetary help they give us. They damage us a lot; they will create opportunities for us to do something; but what they take from us, they corrupt our culture. See since they have been here, all we hear about here is terrorist attacks; if you ask our child what is war, what is terrorism, they will all tell you what it is. Everyone has been occupied with thinking about this; their heads have been filled with these talks. Even a child will know what guns are, everyone in Afghanistan is familiar with weapons.

Yet, she refuses to live in fear. She showed defiance by going to university every day, despite the dangers:

All of their thinking is about war, they think oh if I go to class today, maybe there will be a terrorist attack, what if someone kidnaps me? These are the fears that they have. Even I leave very early in the morning for my courses, and I go alone, and the place is far. And I too worry in the morning, but you know you can't live by this fear; I mean it's in God's hands if something will happen on my way to the course. But I can't sit home just being scared; if everyone decides to just stay home, then who will help the country? I leave early and I come back alone.
Others used their education to protest against local patriarchal practices. Sofia for example, (with the support of her father), explained that she no longer sits in silence while her uncles ridicule her or her sisters for going to school, or for working with a foreign organization:

> When my uncles come from [her village], they live mostly there, anyway first they are bothered by the fact that we live in the city. And why are the girls being sent to school to study? To university? They really don’t like this. Even my younger sisters are doing well academically, especially in English. All my sisters have really learned a lot of English. So it’s kind of strange for them, because we are girls and we are so successful. So if I am sitting and my uncles bring this up like if they say “oh our daughters are home, they don’t have these many rights, how can you work with foreigners?” Then my father says “my child, you need to speak up for yourself, so answer them yourself.” And then I do.

Sofia continued to work and attend university despite protests from her extended family. She sees her continued employment as an indication that she has transformed some of the gendered expectations placed on women in her community. As she opposes traditional gender roles, she also adopts new ones that reflect her present realities, in which learning English has come to gain prominence, and a marker of progress.

Finally, Sonia believed that her status as a university student can encourage her to bring changes to her villages now. She wanted to share knowledge that she feels will be important for bringing changes to the village life. She explained:

> I have decided that I should travel to some province outside of Kabul so that I can tell people about the value of sports. I am not going to tell them to do sports for money or position. I am going to tell them to do it for their health. When you see a man in Afghanistan, you think his age is 35, but you feel he looks like he's 55, why? Because they don't take care of their health and appearance. So I want to tell them about these things.

The transformation she wanted to bring about is based solely on her own experiences and her perception of what she believes people in the countryside need and how they are:
They [rural men] just want their women to work like machines in this country. And the parents say, “you are like a machine, you should make breakfast, looking after children, and after that you are nothing.” So I think women here are just like machines, their family life. There is no difference between a washing machine and a woman in my country.

Sonia’s understanding of the needs and actions of rural residents, is compelling because, despite living in Afghanistan, and having close ties to her extended family in the countryside, she prioritizes their lives and imposes her own beliefs of what she thinks they need to know. As Ansari (2008) explains, in imperialist interventions of the present, “the centrality of insider consent has become much more pronounced as they help provide testimony that an intervention is needed in their communities. Ansari (2008) writes: “These figures whisper things that confirm what dominant interventionist discourses wish to hear without offending a sense of political correctness” (p. 63).

Although I consider myself an ‘insider’ in many ways to Afghanistan, for Sonia I represent an outsider (from the West). According to her, she did not understand life in the countryside, and therefore she did not feel the need to provide me with a more contextualized account. The kind of transformation that Sonia envisions changes her own position as a privileged woman whose everyday life is very different because of her class, and instead forwards an essentialist notion that is not very different from the way that the West continues to understand Afghan women. Thus, differences, as Sonia understands them, are because of lack of education or cultural practices rather than material constraints.

In sum, this sub-theme reveals the important role that education plays in helping the participants redefine themselves as they feel they are not the same person anymore now that they are in university. Their identity as university students is also a key factor for them in refuting Western misconceptions about Afghan women, as well as marking differences
between themselves and other (uneducated) Afghan women. While they develop a sense of confidence through their education to challenge certain gendered constraints, they also feel the need to enforce some gendered boundaries, in order to maintain their status as unique and privileged and therefore better than the majority of (uneducated) Afghan women.
Chapter 8
Final Thoughts and Discussion

Introduction

In this study, I wanted to understand how Afghan women made sense of their HE experiences at a time when the adverse effects of the war on terror in Afghanistan is gaining momentum. I also wanted to examine them in a context that had its own disputed history of providing (or denying) women and girls access to formal learning. In effect, I wanted to examine how they navigated experiences of foreign occupation, militarization and local contentions in a socio-historically politicized context like the university. The university has historically played a significant role in Afghanistan, as a site for political organizing, protest and transformation (Emadi, 2010; Ekanayake, 2004). The issue of women’s access however, has not only generated controversy, but also divided the population, often between those who wanted Western-style modernization, and those who wanted to preserve existing practices and beliefs. It was a division that also reflected class differences. Those who supported women and girls’ formal education were often modernizing elites, and those who did not, were the poor mass, mostly living in the countryside, disconnected from the Western-style development of education in the cities.

Since the war on terror, it appears that the university continued to be a politicized site for competing ideologies and uncertainty, despite women’s ability to secure access. There was recognition from the state, as well the international community, to address their uneven and contested access. Specifically, many of the reforms that addressed the importance of women’s inclusion have been introduced since the American-led occupation. As I explored in Chapter 2, this occupation is the outcome of capitalism’s latest ‘trend’ (financialization) in
which conflicts and instability in the Global South became important sites for capital accumulation, (re)investing surplus, and imperialist expansion (Magnusson 2013; Bichler & Nitzen, 2012, Amin, 2001). Specifically through military spending, and subsequent militarism of states and citizens, capitalist superpowers like the United States, are able to exercise dominance over financially weaker states (Amin, 2001).

The education of women and girls in Afghanistan exemplifies another important shift within financialized capitalist expansion, and that is the infusing of war and militarism with democratic values like democracy, humanitarianism and equality. This fusing, as Wood (2006) reminds us, enables occupations like the war on terror to commit their own violations of human rights and freedoms. Specifically through neoliberal policies, financialized capitalism is able to integrate democratic values with capitalist ideologies, and enable a permanent state of war (Wood, 2006).

Transnational feminists in particular have drawn attention to the problematic ways in which the war on terror capitalized on the adverse living conditions of Afghan women (caused by poverty, conflict and social prejudices), in order to justify the occupation (see for example, Bannerji & Mojab, 2003; Daulatzai, 2008; Deo, 2014; Kandiyoti, 2007; Russo, 2006; Thobani, 2007). Specifically, the education of women and girls (and always in reference to the Taliban’s banning of women and girls’ education and work), served as a key site for justifying the occupation as a campaign to restore women’s rights (Kevorkian, 2008; Novelli, 2010). It is within these processes that I wanted to understand how Afghan women made sense of their experiences of HE, and specifically how they used this space to address gendered inequalities in their lives.
I examined their narratives using an anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist feminist approach that was guided by a dialectical historical materialist lens in order to interrogate the war on terror’s conviction that it is a ‘just war’ being waged to transform existing inequalities. Specifically, I wanted to understand the ways in which these processes materialized in their lives. More importantly, I also wanted to gain an understanding of how the participants made sense of them both as its ‘objects’ and ‘subjects’. The analysis of their narratives not only revealed the prevalence and pervasiveness of these relations of power in their daily lives but also the contradictory ways that the participants navigated through them.

Below I summarize three themes that I believe are important for understanding the ramifications of financialized capitalism and local practices of gendered subordination on the daily lives of women. These themes include: Militarized Development: A Paradoxical Condition for Peace, Financialization of Learning, and finally, University as a (Re)Productive Site.

**Militarized Development as a (Paradoxical) Condition for Peace**

The presence of escalating violence throughout the country was concerning to all the participants. The participants saw this violence as having direct physical and psychological impact on their daily routines. For example, in Kabul, their learning was constantly interrupted by violent threats from local insurgent groups, as well as foreign military personnel. One student was traumatized from witnessing the death of four civilians in front of her university building which happened when a group of foreign military personnel were passing through and the civilians apparently had come too close to their convoy. On the other hand, there were also threats from ‘local’ insurgents threatening to burn schools or hurt students for attending.
The participants offered diverse opinions on who they felt was causing the violence. While some blamed foreign troops directly, others blamed neighbouring countries, and local (rural) populations. What was apparently in all their accounts was the proliferation of violence throughout the country and greater uncertainty about their own futures. Many noted that their opinions about the occupation were now drastically changing. Mainly, in the beginning, almost all the participants saw the American-led occupation as an opportunity for peace and development. However, many were beginning to question their purpose in Afghanistan as the situation had not improved.

Many participants expressed concerns about the international community in failing to meet local needs. Poverty, unemployment, and lack of education were considered as key reasons for the violence. Some participants also expressed concerns over growing resentment towards their education from extended family members and community. One woman felt that the harassment she received from men on her way to school was an example of the resentment that she felt was growing among Afghan men who felt ‘left out’ of educational initiatives in Afghanistan. This ‘mismatch’ between local needs and international efforts concerned many of the participants when they thought about their communities and their country as a whole.

This disconnect between local needs and international efforts uphold concerns from researchers who have criticized the war on terror for fusing its imperialist agenda with important democratic values. Harvey (2003) explains that this fusing has enabled justifications of civilian casualty, violence, and destruction, replacing the language of repression, resentment, and poverty with hope of democracy, development, and free market ideologies. It was not easy for many of the participants to draw these distinctions because
they understood that having access to school was a specific outcome of the occupation, and also a right that they did not have under the Taliban.

The use of education as justification for the occupation that Novelli (2010) discusses, also influenced the participants’ understanding of the purpose of the occupation. Many felt that if it had not been for the West’s occupation they would have still been living under the Taliban with no access to education or employment. Moreover, any achievements that they had (whether academic or work-based), they felt were positive outcomes of the occupation. For example, every participant that worked did so for an organization that was affiliated with the West (or the nations that were part of the occupation). Their work provided them with important resources to support their families, their education, and also negotiate new opportunities at home and elsewhere. Some were able to travel overseas through scholarship programs offered mainly by countries like the United States. There was also a sense among some of the participants that they now had the means, through their education, to address structural constraints in their lives. A number of participants felt that the pursuit of religious studies in particular helped them to achieve this aim.

These seemingly positive outcomes of the occupation in the participants’ lives can be understood through Patnaik’s (2010) notion of ‘inverted logic’, explaining that, in the present era of globalization, “interests of finance are increasingly passed off as being synonymous with the interests of society” (para. 13), creating an ‘inverted logic’. This logic however, “is not just a misconception or false propaganda; it has an element of truth and is rooted in the actual universe of globalization” (Patnaik, 2010, para. 13).

As a result, while the participants potentially saw these opportunities as benefiting to them, they can also be accorded as part of the propaganda used to justify the occupation as a
‘humanitarian’ effort, particularly in supporting the occupation’s key rhetoric of rescuing women. As I explored in Chapter 2, schools are sites where imperialist order is often reproduced, but specifically in the post-2001 era, the education of women and girls has been linked specifically to larger capitalist restructuring agendas in Afghanistan (Novelli, 2011). The analysis chapters reveal that the changes the women experience are often limited to their own actions, or their families, and rarely towards external structures of power, including their university. For example, the participants at NU who experienced sexual harassments did not feel they were in a position to bring the problem to the attention of the administration because they feared there was not a mechanism in place for completing such a task. Without the appropriate system, they felt vulnerable and felt complaining would make their situation worse.

Without a system in place that acknowledges or addresses their concerns, many of the participants were forced to put the responsibility or the blame on individual women. For example, they felt it was within the female student’s control if she did not want to be harassed, by behaving or dressing in certain ways. Also, when attempting to understand the suffering of rural women, their lack of education (particularly of the men in those contexts) was understood as a key barrier. Parents’ reluctance to send their daughters to school was understood by many participants as resulting from their misunderstandings about Islam, lack of education or negative social attitudes towards women in general. As I highlighted in Chapter 3, the neoliberal restructuring of HE has been occupied mainly with providing access (and access in return has been equated with ‘success’ of the occupation), at the expense of improving quality, resources, or addressing the escalating violence towards girls’ education.
Mojab and Carpenter (2011) explain that such disconnects from lived realities, which are themselves shaped by increasing militarization, violence, and insecurity is a deliberate strategy of capitalism and imperialism. Specifically through ‘democracy promotion’, individuals understand their success or failure as the result of their individual efforts (or lack of), rather than as structural, historical, or institutional. The outcome of this process is a ‘good citizen’ rather than finding ways to understand and ultimately transform practices of inequality. It is also a process that is indicative of the pervasive influences of financialized capitalism on learning. In the next theme, I examine this relation further.

Financialization of Learning

Throughout this study, I was interested in understanding how financialized capitalism materialized through neoliberal policies and militarization was consolidating with women’s own gendered experiences of everyday life. The university was an important site to explore the consequences of these processes because of its historical and continued political significance as the state’s key apparatus for realizing its national agendas. I interviewed students from 5 different universities, both private and public, and from two separate provinces which are dissimilar in many ways. For example, the capital, Kabul, has always been the centre of any development and reforms, and therefore more accommodating towards women’s mobility (for example work and school). Nangarhar province on the other hand, is not as ethnically diverse and the population, mainly of Pashtun background, is more conservative in terms of women’s visibility and role outside and inside the home. In the analysis chapters, I highlighted how these differences started to play a role in the women’s lives.
Despite these differences, there was a consensual belief among the participants that progress meant acquiring ‘market friendly’ skills, such as learning English or computer literacy. Indeed as Fluri (2012) explains, English as a primary language of communication in Afghanistan, despite diversity amongst the international and existing populations, “is largely attributed to the role of the USA as the leading donor country and largest military presence” (p. 47). The work that is often required by international offices requires knowledge of English or using a computer.

Fluri (2012) further points out that many international organizations “actively seek to have Afghan women on staff either as part of the organization’s goals and initiatives, or (more commonly) to increase fits funding opportunities” (p. 43). For the international community, women’s inclusion serves dual purposes: physical and cheaper labour (since Afghans working for international organizations make significantly less than their international counterparts, including expat Afghans), and more importantly also as symbols of the militarized nature of development in Afghanistan, which similar to the occupation, uses women’s bodies to secure financial and political objectives.

The participants were aware of the politicized nature of their inclusion, whether at school or work and see its material potentiality in their personal lives. Those who were fluent in the English language were already employed with foreign organizations, and made more than the average salary of most men in Afghanistan. Those who did not have English language skills, regardless of their socio-economic class, were unemployed. However, they realized the importance of learning English to secure a job. One participant, who described her background as working class, but who had very good knowledge of English (learned in Pakistan), was able to earn enough to support her entire family and her education at the
prestigious AUAF. For some participants, learning English was becoming more important than completing their university degrees due to the fact that they were able to find employment based mainly on their English language proficiency, and unrelated to their field of study or completion of the degree.

In order to learn English or Computer skills (both important for securing employment especially), the participants had to register for fee-based courses outside of the university. This option was available in Afghanistan, mainly to students of middle (or upper class) social backgrounds, and more specifically participants whose fathers and/or mothers were educated themselves. Class differences, which played a significant role in differentiating women who attended university from those that did not, also played a decisive role in separating those who were more privileged (financially or socially) than others.

The promotion of English language skills and ICT knowledge is vigorously pursued by the WB through reforms and recommendations for HE to recognize these as ‘essential soft skills’ in order for graduates to participate in the market (WB, 2013). As I noted earlier in this study, since WB is also the largest financier of HE, it is not surprising that these recommendations have already influenced HE reforms in the country. Along with Pashto and Dari (Afghanistan’s official languages), English is also to be taught as a third language.

This emphasis on English or ICT knowledge, as well as others, may not seem too concerning as English and computer science are indeed internationally recognized as important skills. As I highlighted in Chapter 4, educational development continues to be very slow in the country, with material and quality constraints continuously on the rise (Miwa, 2005). This factor is very concerning for Afghanistan. Two of the most historically established public universities for example, do not have adequate facilities conducive to
learning, including girl’s washrooms. Moreover, the demand for HE continues to be on the rise with the capacity for universities to secure a place for very few eligible high school students. In 2013 for example, 180,000 students were expected to take the university entrance examinations, and only 27,000 were offered acceptance (Mcnerney, 2009).

Also, the money that is allocated to university development often does not address the immediate needs of the university. For example, as the largest funder of HE, the WB’s SHEP project allocated most of its money and resources to Nangarhar University, to the development of English language, Computer literacy and engineering centres, instead of improving for example the physical conditions of the university, which as the participants explained put severe constraints on their learning.

The MoHE echoes similar sentiments to the WB despite persisting challenges (its increasing inability to absorb high school graduates), and the possibility of contributing to future uncertainties (as youth are not able to work and therefore secure employment, and risk living in poverty). Among these high school graduates, those who are able to afford private tuition fees, pursue one of the many new HE institutes, which often provide technical and vocational skills. It is a financial risk for families as this does not necessarily guarantee employment, especially since the quality of many of these new private HE institutes is considered poor and not monitored to the same degree as public universities (AUAF is an exception because it is owned and operated by the United States). Moreover, the MoHE appears to be not only disconnected from what is happening to these students, but also proposes future assessments of their needs. For example, noting that there are increasing numbers of private computer and English language schools throughout the country, and that parents are willing, financially, to send their children, MoHE sees this as evidence “that there
is willingness and ability to pay for higher education if it is of good quality and relevance” (MoHE, 2004, p. 76).

According to the same report, parents’ willingness to pay for their children’s learning is a sign, “that students will eventually need to help bear the costs of higher education” (p. 76). As the participants narratives revealed however, paying such fees is a choice limited to those with social and economic privileges, a reality that appears will only worsen with MoHE’s efforts to disperse its responsibilities towards individual students, specifically those who can afford to participate. These changes are also an example of neoliberal restructuring as the students are not only treated as ‘individuals’ responsible for their own success (or failure), but it also individualizes inequalities that are structural, institutional, and historical (Kilby & Olivieri, 2008).

These processes were present among some of the participants, specifically those who attended AUAF as they were able to secure employment and access to important resources that provided them with other opportunities for advancement (including for example, conferencing internationally, travelling overseas, and scholarship opportunities for graduate studies in the West). The participants also felt a sense of entitlement to these opportunities as many felt they were ‘qualified’ because of their English language skills (the entrance examinations and the medium of instruction in general is in English at AUAF), that they had worked hard to be where they are (fighting with family and relatives for their right to work or study), and especially because they were employed and could look after themselves and their families.

As I explored in Chapter 7, the participant’s access to HE played a significant role in how they (re)defined themselves in relation to other Afghan women. These differences
suggested a symbolic social hierarchy, where university educated girls in general were seen as ‘empowered’, ‘independent’ and contributing to the development of their communities or country (through their employment, and also through their new knowledge). The university in effect created an ‘upside down’ (Mojab & Carpenter, 2011) experience for the participants as they come to see the reality in which they were living as well as the reality of those around them, in an ‘inverted’ way, meaning that capitalist relations through its many (neoliberal and militarized) manifestations, appeared legitimate or real.

The university, it appears, is the only place that ‘makes sense’ in a context that is increasingly marked by violence, insecurity and (gendered) inequalities. However, it appears to be making more ‘sense’ to those who enjoy greater financial and social stability. In order to achieve success, participants reproduce the ideological and material needs of the occupation through their implicit and explicit participation in its various apparatuses. In the next theme, I explore university itself as a site that reproduces existing social and economic inequalities.

**University as a (Re)Productive Site**

Throughout this study, I examined literature that demonstrated the ways in which imperialist expansion not only benefited from patriarchy, but in fact contributed further towards its maintenance. While women in the Global South already live under the extreme challenges of their own traditional patriarchies, Western versions of it, accompanied by racist and free market ideologies, contribute further towards their oppression (Johnson-Odim, 1991, p. 321). Schools especially are known to not only maintain asymmetrical gender hierarchies, but actively reproduce them (Stromquist, 2012; Apple, 1985). Thus, it was not surprising to
see that every university the participants in this study attended, the educational needs of women were not met to the same degree as male students’.

What was surprising however, was the appearance of new gendered constraints linked largely to the participants’ pursuit of HE. As I explored in Chapters 5, 6 and 7, the very idea of going to university was seen by the participants as something that differentiated them asymmetrically from other women. This level of education, many explained, not only provided them with new skills, opportunities, and advantages, but shaped their identities as women. The way they thought and how they behaved for example, was seen by many as better and exceptional to those who were not in university (especially uneducated women and girls). Attending university provided them with skills to work and the freedom to leave their homes when they needed to (for work or for school). They also had the opportunity to break away from social practices (including being accompanied by a male relative as it was not possible for fathers or brothers to do this because they too often worked). As I explained in Chapter 3, formal education has long been seen as an indicator of elite status and it was an important means through which even working class individuals could gain higher social (and economic) status (Ekanayake, 2004). This appeared to be still the case as even those participants who described their backgrounds as working class, felt a sense of superiority over uneducated (and rural) women.

Those Other women were described with the same colonialisit, essentialist lens that the participants accused the West of doing to them. On the one hand, they were very critical of the West’s constructions of Afghan women as victims of their religion, culture and lacking agency, many used words like ‘backward’ ‘blind’ and ‘ignorant’ ‘lacking agency’, to talk about women of illiterate and rural backgrounds. Moreover, their lack of access was
understood by some of the participants as either a personal problem or due to the decision making power of a male family member, and not in relation to larger structures of power. This individualized notions of social problems, is in line with Mojab’s analysis of how illiteracy is generally viewed in the Middle East, (and as my participants demonstrate, also in Afghanistan). Mojab (2000) writes:

In the educational policies of various governments, illiteracy is viewed as an individual ‘deficiency’ that is rarely related to structural constraints. Illiteracy is denounced as the source of poverty, poor health, backwardness, crime and conflict. Literacy is promoted as the condition of progress, affluence and civilization. (para. 10)

Mojab sees this as a form of symbolic violence that not only shames illiterate individuals, but turns literacy itself into ‘an instrument of oppression’ (Pattanayak, 1991, cited in, Mojab, 2000). This upholds literature I examined in chapter two, that approached the development of formal education in the Global South as a colonial process. In Afghanistan as well, formal education has historically been the domain of those with socio-economic privileges, with heavy influences from advanced capitalist states, and not surprisingly an alienating experience for masses.

Even as participants express increasing awareness of and resistance towards the politicization of their identities in the present occupation, they nonetheless share values and beliefs that actively uphold gendered and classed discriminations. By seeing themselves as ‘better’ ‘empowered’, through such comparisons, the participants risk failing to see how they continued to be implicated in relations of power that work to disempower and dispossess them. For example, many were ‘thankful’ that they could at least go to university, even as insecurity continued to interrupt their learning, and their movements continued to be monitored by family and friends, because for them, *this* was still better than the Taliban era.
Their knowledge of women’s history and struggle of learning, and the causes of their overall subjugation in Afghanistan, is limited to the Taliban era. Daulatzai (2008) asserts that this ‘scapegoating of the Taliban’ for the suffering of women “has eclipsed the larger and perhaps more consequential modalities of suffering experienced by Afghan women as a result of more than two decades of armed conflict, war, and natural disasters” (p. 425). Limiting women’s oppression mainly to the Taliban atrocities also hides the ways in which the war on terror also “exacerbates the misery for most Afghan women with new problems of starvation, homelessness, and their own terror” (p. 421).

The participants also expressed limited understanding of why they felt their mothers objected to their learning, and why their fathers were such strong advocates. The mothers for example were seen as objecting because of ‘cultural’ beliefs or because they did not ‘understand’ or ‘value’ their daughter’s education. Yet as I explained in Chapter 2, women’s access to formal learning was deeply contested and during the Soviet era, militarized process. It is possible that these mothers saw their daughter’s education through their own experiences (including what they might have heard) from the Soviet era.

**Moving Forward: Final Thoughts and Implications**

Finally, although I raised concerns over possible reproduction of gendered inequality through HE, I want to also explore accounts of contestations which I believe are important, especially if we want to envision a future where possibilities for transformation are real and possible. Despite numerous constraints, both material and structural, I believe Afghan women are already working towards transforming conditions which limit and exploit them. One of the reasons I chose a dialectical historical materialist and transnational feminist for this study was because I wanted to fill the gaps in the mainstream depiction of Afghan
women. I wanted to examine the ‘progress’ that had presumably come to Afghanistan as a result of the US-led occupation. Through a dialectical historical materialist lens, I was able to not only account for the imperialist and capitalist driven force behind the occupation, about also account for the local relations of power and practices of gendered subjugation.

It was important to draw from the work of transnational feminists as they centralize women in the Global South as active subjects on their lives enacting agency in historically and materially specific ways. Saba Mahmood’s (2005) notion of agency was especially useful as it allowed for the inclusion of agency that also upheld relations of power. This is in line feminist materialism as well, which locate the ‘choices’ women have, as circumscribed by specific historical, cultural, socio-economic factors (Lacsamana, 2012). Throughout my interviewing, I heard participants express great hope for their future through their educational attainment. They shared many stories of instances where they were able to challenge certain restrictions that were placed on them, including religious and cultural ones. Some were able to stand up to male relatives, and others were able to extend their privileges, including the right to work, to come home late, and to talk to male classmates without fear of hurting their reputation. I explored many of these stories in the second theme, where I focused exclusively on how the participants navigated through gendered terrains.

This is welcoming as universities are also considered, particularly in the Middle East and also in Afghanistan, as sites for revolutionary struggles (Akseer, 2013; Mojab, 2000). However, the difference is that the participants are becoming increasingly aware of the conflicting accounts of their lived realities and their identities as women. They simultaneously challenge Western conceptualizations as well as ones that they have grown up under in their own homes and communities. Many of the girls for example, expressed
concerns from family members who expressed negative stereotypes about girls in universities, especially as learning occurs in a co-educational environment. However, the participants used their own bodies, by covering in more conservative ways than other girls, and their actions (for example, not joking around or laughing loud in class or hallways) and increasing knowledge (especially about Islam) to challenge assumptions about them as ‘bad girls’. They were equally as vigilant in challenging Western misconceptions, and again used their own lives, as women who were ‘allowed’ to attend universities, as a sign of progress in their country. I believe these encounters are small acts the participants consider as revolutionary and a sign of hope for the future—that can bring about real changes through their education.

Finally, this study explored how HE influenced Afghan women’s navigation through gendered constraints in their lives. By examining the interlocking of various relations of power, both local and global, it became apparent that the ‘development’ process since the launching of war on terror has complicated further the challenges experienced by the participants. While there are some gains (clearly the attention to women and girls’ gender inequalities from Afghan policy makers and the international community, along with possibilities for negotiating some gendered expectations within the participants’ homes), more examination is needed in terms of how the opportunity to pursue HE influences their lives once they have completed their studies. The participants want to use their education in a collective way so that it benefits not only them, but also their families, communities, as well contribute to the development of the country.

Also, the act of being able to leave their homes to attend university as liberating and empowering for the girls. As a result, it would be important to understand how they are able
to continue or not continue and achieving their personal goals while balancing their new skills with their ‘old’ traditions and beliefs. This examination will also provide a deeper understanding of the curriculum that students are taught and whether or not it influences their individual (gendered) lives in a positive way.

There also appears to be an inconsistency between the participants and their families and communities, which seemed to be heightened through their pursuit of HE. The participants who had experienced sexual harassment on campus for example, were too afraid to tell their families because they felt there were already certain stereotypes that circulated in those spaces that would further jeopardize them, especially their access. It is important to explore possibilities of strengthening this connection, as it has the potential to further strengthen and empower female students.

Summary

This chapter provided a discussion of the overall findings of the study. Three themes were explored further. These included; *Militarized Development as Paradoxical Condition for Peace, Financialization of Learning* and finally *University as a (Re)productive Site*. This chapter also provided implications which included a call for further study of the impact of higher education on women’s lives after university and also the importance of bridging the gap between ‘home’ and ‘university’ life for families of female students.
References


MoHE & UNESCO. (2004). *Strategic action plan for the development of higher education in Afghanistan*.


Appendix A

Advertising Poster

Are you a female student who recently graduated from or are currently enrolled at a university in Afghanistan? If so, I would like to talk to you about your experiences of University and how it impacts your life as a female!

My name is Spogmai Akseer and I am a doctoral candidate from the University of Toronto, in Ontario Canada. My research examines the impact of higher education on Afghan women’s lives, especially their experiences and understanding of themselves as Postsecondary students.

This is based on a volunteer basis, and will be flexible in terms of time and location. The interviews will take between 1-1.5 hours of your time.

For more information, please contact: Spogmai Akseer at (647-704-2988), spogmai.akseer@utoronto.ca, or Dr. Jamie-lynn Magnusson (416) 978-1208
Appendix B

Consent Form

I understand that I will be participating in a research study examining the adjustment experiences of young Afghan women in Afghanistan.

I understand that my participation in this research study involves participating in two 1.5-2 hours interview on separate occasions. In the first interview, I will be asked to describe my experiences of adjustment to the Canadian society and complete a one-page background information questionnaire. In the second interview, I will be asked to comment on the summary descriptions of the previous interview (making and deletions or corrections I think necessary), and discuss any issues that may not have been addressed in the previous interview. All attempts will be made to conduct the interviews at a time and place that is convenient for me. I understand that I will receive no money for this interview.

I understand that all interview sessions will be audiotaped and tapes will be transcribed. After they are transcribed, the tapes will be erased. The interview transcripts and questionnaires will not contain my name or other identifying characteristics. All interview transcripts and questionnaires will be coded by numbers only and will be kept in locked filing cabinets accessible only to the investigator and the research supervisor. The information shared in the interview will be kept confidential and my name will not be used in any written reports or publications.

I understand that I can choose not to discuss any particular topic during the interview. I understand that discussing experiences related to immigration may be upsetting and if I wish to discuss this with a counsellor, the researchers would assist me in finding one. I understand that all attempts will be made to protect my confidentiality. The only times my confidentiality would not be protected are if I reported that I was planning to hurt myself or someone else, if I reported that a child was being hurt or in danger of being hurt by me or another adult, and if reported being sexually abused by a regulated health care professional.

I understand that my participation in this research is completely voluntary. I may withdraw from the study at any time and may withdraw my data from the study up until the time we begin to write a report based on study results, without any negative consequences to me. If I decide to withdraw from the study or withdraw my data, I understand that I may still keep the payment that I have received for each interview. Finally, I understand that I may receive written information about the results of the study if I choose to by completing the attached form.

I have read the above information and agree to participate in the study.

Name: ___________________________________ Signature ________________________________

Date: ________________________________
Appendix C

Interview Guide

Background
1) Tell me about yourself
   - Where were you born?
   - Where did you complete your elementary and secondary education? When?
   - What is your father’s level of education and occupation? Mother’s?

Present postsecondary experiences
2) What are your present schooling experiences like?
   - Describe the process you had to go through to seek admission at your particular university?
   - What influenced your decision to go to university?
   - How does your family respond to your schooling?
   - Are you treated differently because you go to university? If so, by whom? Where?
   - How do you feel as a woman in the university?
   - What distinguishes you from other students?
   - As a postsecondary student, what challenges and opportunities do you encounter at school?
   - At home?
   - Is there anything that you participate in now that you would not have if you were not in university?

Values and Aspirations
3) What are your future goals for yourself?
   - What opportunities do you feel your degree will bring you?
   - Does university change how you see yourself as a woman? How your family sees you?
4) How would you describe your identity as an Afghan woman? What has contributed to this formation?
5) What challenges do you feel women in Afghanistan are facing?
6) What does it mean to you to be a woman? Is it different from being an Afghan woman?
7) Where do you see examples of gendered oppression in your life?
8) Where do you see examples of empowerment?