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# Gender Inequality in Developing Countries: A Multifactorial Review

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## Abstract

Historically in some cultures, females are acknowledged differently than males, encouraging girls to follow specific cultural gender-typed behavior and norms. Girls are not perceived similarly to boys, who are considered superior with more intelligence, competence, and academically capabilities. In contrast, girls are deemed to have mediocre potential. All these gender-stereotyped cultural beliefs and practices make a platform for the perception that boys are superior to girls. Such stereotypes about women/girls negatively impact their access to education, work, and healthcare services. The purpose of this qualitative study was to investigate the perception of native Afghans regarding the problems and causes of gender inequality in Afghanistan and participants' opinions of cultural barriers and lack of access to healthcare for women and girls. A qualitative survey using a Likert scale was conducted, and data were collected for questions designed by a Focus Group of Afghan natives. The article ends with a more focused review of the perception of inequality in education for females in Afghanistan.

**Keywords:** Gender, Developing Countries, Education, Health, Equality

## 1. Introduction

In multiple cultures, study results highlight that parental behavior shapes their baby the moment they know their sex (Iwamoto et al., 2018). For example, Palloni (2017) highlights that parents' preferred-gender children get more parental attention, which improves those children's health and nutritional status. Also, Endendijk et al. (2015) suggest that in Middle Eastern and North African societies where the gender inequality gap is prominent, parents tend to differentiate between their sons and daughters in preparing them for adult life; such stereotypical behaviors can limit girls' academic and occupational inspiration (Chaffee & Plante, 2020). According to Linberg et al. (2008), educated mothers with traditional gender beliefs spend less time with their daughter's math assignments than they do with their sons when compared to egalitarian mothers. As children grow, their exposure to messages in the family with consistent reinforcements from teachers, religious leaders, peers, and media, they learn who is more powerful and what is valued in the community (Heise et al., 2019). These cultural norms have led to men's autonomy in the economy, social status, and access to education compared to women in developing countries (Heise et al., 2019).

Kagesten et al. (2016) conducted a mixed-method systemic review that included 82 studies (46 quantitative, 31 qualitative, and five mixed-methods) from 29 countries. Nearly 90 percent of the studies were from North America and Western Europe, and the remaining studies were from Asia, Oceania, the Middle East African Region, sub-Saharan Africa, and multi-country comparison studies. The review findings suggest boys are inspired to be intellectual and superior, and girls are reported to be susceptible and need supervision. Moreover, the review suggests in early adolescence, boys and girls espoused attitudes that endorsed gender inequality acquired from interpersonal influences within the society (Kagesten et al., 2016).

The purpose of this qualitative study was to shed light on the issues of gender inequality issues and their negative impacts on the social life of girls/women in Afghanistan using questions generated by a Focus Group of Afghan natives who had familiarity with gender inequality issues caused by *de facto* government policies and cultural norms. Data was collected from the survey using a Likert scale on the perception of Afghan natives regarding gender inequality issues in Afghan culture and society.

## 2. Gender Inequality and Health Outcomes and Access

Cultural gender norms have shaped the position of women as caregivers and men as providers, impacting their health outcomes (Langer et al., 2015). Healthcare laws and policies are structural determinants that can positively and negatively impact health-related outcomes. One such example is paid parental leave (PPL). The World Health Organization Commission on Social Determinants of Health (2008) states that PPL can enhance women's and children's health outcomes. In the last two decades, a study by Dagher et al. (2011) has suggested numerous benefits of PPL, such as decreasing depressive symptoms among mothers. Ogbuanu et al. (2011) found that PPL can increase breastfeeding duration, impacting infants' overall health and well-being. Despite the well-supported benefits of paid parental leave, some countries do not have policies ensuring paid parental leave (Elser et al., 2022). According to the World Policy Analysis Center Adult Labor Database (2022), PPL is available for both parents of infants in 45% of low-income countries and 50% of middle-income countries worldwide.

In addition, women may face many barriers that can impact their overall health outcomes. For example, women in some cultures encounter complex barriers to early detection of breast cancer that entails social, financial, and other interconnected factors (Ilaboya et al., 2017). In low- and middle-income countries, such as Afghanistan and Pakistan, these barriers lead women to seek care only in the later-stage of the disease (Khan et al., 2022; Qureshi et al., 2018). According to Reid et al. (2019), gender norms also impact women's access to regular general healthcare services. Gender disparities can be found in hospital admission rates in low and middle-income countries, which indicates that men are admitted to hospitals more frequently than women, even when a disease prevalence is the same for males and females, excluding obstetric care (Reid et al., 2019). Study results highlighted gender norms, women's subordinate positions, and decision-making power as potential factors that impact women's access to healthcare services (Forrester et al., 2017).

Furthermore, a study by Nahar et al. (2011) investigated healthcare access to obstetrical care in rural Bangladesh. The results showed that women who had delays in obstetric emergencies were associated with a lack of coverage for financial costs and a lack of income from paid jobs due to barriers regarding gender equality in employment (Nahar et al., 2011). In many countries, access to healthcare services depends on the availability of resources, time, and autonomy to decide (Das et al., 2018; Manandhar et al., 2018). Osamor and Grady (2015) define women's autonomy as the ability to make an independent decision, to seek healthcare services without permission from male family members.

According to the United Nations Women (2018) Demographic Health Survey, a sample from 65 low- and middle-income countries highlighted that women with limited financial power were hindered from seeking healthcare services. Moreover, a health survey by Cost et al. (2017) found in 57 low-and middle-income countries girls had a remarkably lower chance of receiving healthcare services 6 of the surveyed countries (Colombia, Egypt, India, Liberia, Senegal, and Yemen). Cost et al. (2017) also analyzed the relationship between access to healthcare services and economic considerations. They reported that among the higher percentage of Muslim populations (P

= 0.006) and higher income concentration ( $P = 0.039$ ) countries, access to healthcare services is lower for girls (Costa et al., 2017), see figure 1.

In contrast, when women have financial autonomy and the power to make decisions, their access to healthcare services increases (Moyer & Mustafa, 2013). A study conducted in Pakistan indicates that a 1% improvement in women's decision-making autonomy is correlated with an increase of nearly 10% in access to healthcare services (Hou & Ma, 2013).

### Careseeking Sex Ratio

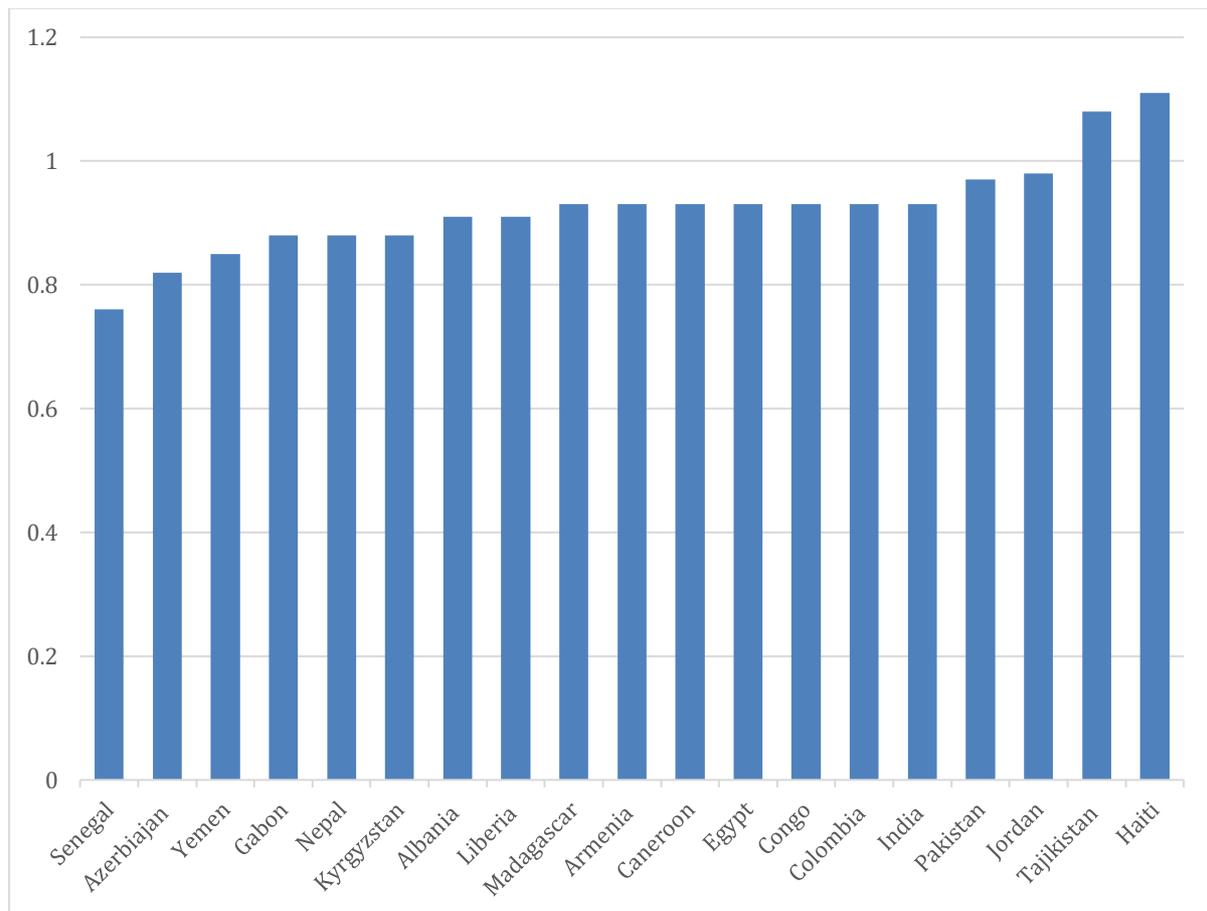


Figure 1: Gender Ratio in Careseeking in Different Countries

Costa, J. C., Wehrmeister, F. C., Barros, A. J., & Victora, C. G. (2017). Gender bias in careseeking practices in 57 low- and middle-income countries. *Journal of global health, 7*(1).

### 3. Education: Issues of Access

Even though girls' access to education has improved worldwide, gender inequality in educational attainment continues in several developing countries like Afghanistan, where girls have disproportionately low access to education for various reasons (Local Burden of Disease Educational Attainment Collaborators, 2019). In rural communities in Pakistan, which has cultural similarity to Afghanistan, one of the significant reasons for the lower educational attainment for girls indicated that traditionally girls have not been considered future breadwinners. In addition, Shah and Shah (2012) found that some people believe that education can have a bad influence on girls' characteristics, such as making them less obedient and less willing to perform their primary tasks, which are household chores.

Another barrier is the potential misinterpretation by religious figures of related doctrine in the community, which influences girls' educational attainment (Shah & Shah, 2012). According to the World Bank (2022), the gender parity index, which assessed literacy levels for youth, was 0.82 in 2019 in Pakistan. Afghanistan is also one of the developing countries where the gender parity index was 0.54 in 2019. An index lower than 1 indicates that girls have lower access to education than boys (World Bank, 2022); see Figure 2 for other developing countries index.

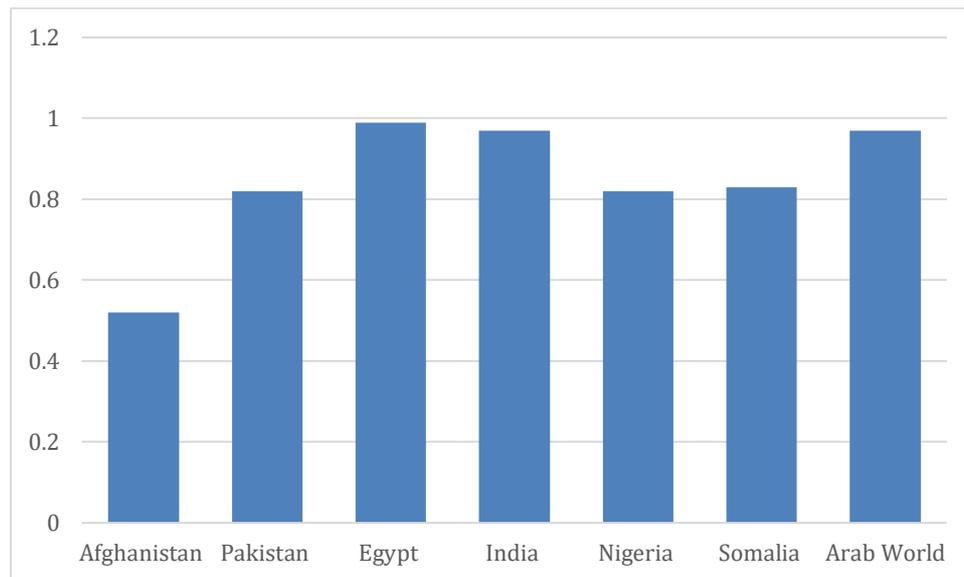


Figure 2: Gender Parity Index in Education in Different Countries

World bank (2022). Literacy rate, youth (ages 15-24), gender parity index. <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SE.ADT.1524.LT.FM.ZS>.

Inadequate access to educational attainment for girls in developing countries like Afghanistan causes poor socioeconomic status, which can negatively strain the population's health parameters (Miller et al., 2017; Pickering et al., 2015). Moreover, limited access to educational attainment is an essential precursor of unemployment and performing unpaid jobs, which leads women to do three-quarters of unpaid jobs. Lack of parity in employment settings with women leads to approximately 11 billion hours per day completing unpaid tasks (Langer et al., 2015).

#### 4. Employment

Theories that shed light on the reasons for existing gender differences in the workplace, such as Human Capital theory (Arnaout et al., 2018), suggest that women allocate more time to childcare and housework than out-of-home employment. In some cultures, such as Afghanistan, a part-time job for a woman is assumed to be an insufficient investment in human capital (Arnaout et al., 2018; Tanner et al., 1999). Human Capital Theory is about education and skills that can enhance efficacy in a business (Becker, 2009). This theory associates inequalities between men and women with differences in work experience and qualification (Tanner et al., 1999).

On the other hand, Gender Stratification theory suggests that gender disparities in the workplace are characterized by doubting women's capabilities and commitment to successful employment outside the home (Tanner et al., 1999). Furthermore, institutional theorists point out that a lack of childcare and flexible working hours can hinder the progression of employers toward a gender-equitable work culture (Weil & Kimball, 1996).

The United Nations (UN) has set specific goals to empower gender equity in the 2030 Global Agenda for Sustainable Development (UN, 2017). Even though progress has been made to achieve the goals and women's participation in the workforce in developing countries like Afghanistan has been increasing, women still need to be recognized in leadership and management positions in many countries (UN Economic & Social Council, 2017). In addition, income disparities between men and women occur worldwide.

Globally, a wide gap exists in job market income. On average, women's earnings are 23% less than men's (UN Economic & Social Council, 2016). This example of income disparities does not consider the fact that women also

perform three times more unpaid tasks than men, such as housework and childcare (UN Economic & Social Council, 2017). Worldwide, multiple factors have led to gender gaps, such as discriminatory institutional policies, gender discrimination, corporate and domestic violence, suboptimal working conditions, and poor mentorship (Kalaitzi et al., 2017).

Cislaghi et al. (2022) conducted a cross-sectional analysis that included data from 97 countries. The analysis included a World Values Survey and European Values Survey. Their analysis indicated that the pro-equality percentages varied from 97.7% of gender-equal employment in Iceland to 7.8% in Egypt (Cislaghi et al., 2022). In five European countries (Iceland, Denmark, Sweden, Norway, and Andorra), pro-equality percentages were demonstrated by more than 90% of the countries surveyed. However, in 14 countries, the pro-equality percentage was held by less than 20% of the individuals surveyed (Cislaghi et al., 2022). See Figure 3

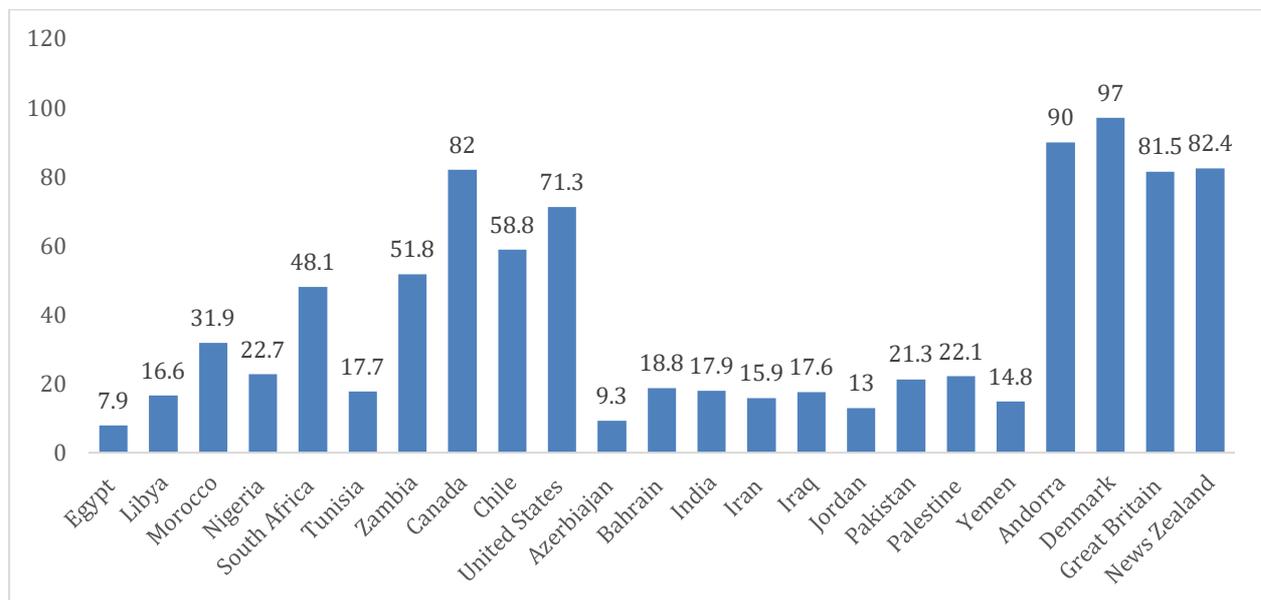


Figure 3: Gender Pro-equality Percentage in Jobs in Different Countries

Cislaghi, B., Bhatia, A., Hallgren, E. S. T., Horanieh, N., Weber, A. M., & Darmstadt, G. L. (2022). *Gender Norms and Gender Equality in Full-Time Employment and Health: A 97-Country Analysis of the World Values Survey*. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 13

In developing countries such as Afghanistan, girls with a lower level of literacy spend more time performing unpaid domestic jobs than boys (Seedat & Rondon, 2021). Household chores and unpaid work are often considered low merit and intangible in cash and revenues for some societies. Also, unpaid work negatively strains the economy, increases the burden of health issues, and decreases the quality of life for girls (Seedat & Rondon, 2021). An example of this is pregnant women in South Africa, where domestic work and field work leave them limited access to seek prenatal care (McCray, 2004; Pereira-Kotze et al., 2021).

## 5. Misconceptions and Causes of Gender Inequality in Access to Education

### 5.1. Perceptions of Gender- Related Brain Size and Intelligence

In cultures, underestimating girls' intelligence contributes to their suboptimal educational attainment (Colom et al., 2022). In some cultures, people have the misconception that intelligence correlates with brain size. On average, men and women do not have the same brains in volume (Nave et al., 2019). However, intelligence depends more on how effectively the brain is used and trained than on its volume (Sternberg, 2012).

In some cultures, a correlation between brain size and intelligence has been assumed since the 19th century (Nave et al., 2019). This belief has contributed to gender inequality regarding readiness for education. Boys are considered intelligent, enhancing their educational opportunities positively (Reilly et al., 2022). Even though direct correlations between brain size and intelligence do not have a scientific base, there are some anatomical differences

between boys' and girls' brain organization. According to Stanford Medicine (2017), girls and boys have brain regions that are different in size, such as the amygdala and hippocampus, which have high concentrations of sex hormone receptors. These regions serve other functions representative of gender differences unrelated to intelligence. Amen (2013) found no difference in the average Intelligence Quotient of men and women after studying more than 45,000 brain scans.

Moreover, in some cultures, in theology, philosophy, literature, and among lay people, girls and women have been perceived as weak, less intelligent, and emotional, whereas men are assumed strong, rational, and competent in the fields of sciences, math, and technology (Keller, 1987). These cultural gender disparities can negatively impact girls' attainment in employment in science, technology, and engineering (Hyde, 2014).

In the last half-century, women's advancement and scientific findings have challenged many of these beliefs and cultural norms (Saad, 2017). According to White (2019), girls in the United States attain 50% of overall university seats in sciences, engineering, technology, and math. Alternatively, girls in low- and middle-income countries like Afghanistan still struggle to attend school, leading to gender disparity in the lower number of female graduates in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math in 107 of 114 economies worldwide (World Bank, 2019).

At the end of the 20th century, Feingold (1988) highlighted that functional gaps between girls and boys were closing, assessing their cognitive and math abilities. Also, study results indicated gender parity between both genders and do not leave room to support gender superiority in intelligence (Zell et al., 2015). A recent meta-analysis indorses that, on average, girls and boys have the same in math performance in math (Hyde et al., 2008). Lindberg et al. (2008), in the meta-analysis of 242 studies results, noticed a difference of  $d=0.05$  in math performance between boys and girls.

### *5.2. Benefits of Education for All*

According to Beneria (2012), facilitating equal gender access to education can improve the productivity in the community. Multiple studies have highlighted that girls' limited educational attainment can increase impoverishment and suboptimal economic growth in the community (Cooray & Potrafke, 2011). Alternatively, educated girls and women can participate in vocational opportunities and improve the well-being and health of their children and the economy (Ostby et al., 2016). Saxena et al. (2013) highlighted that education improves pregnant women's behavior and attitude toward maternal health care services. Several study results suggested that higher educational attainment increases seeking healthcare behavior and attitude among women (Amwonya et al., 2022; Saxena et al., 2013). Moreover, Kaffenberger and Pritchett (2021) used the Demographic Health Survey data from 54 countries, and they found in a cross-tabulation that child mortality gap was 11.5% between educated women (20.9% experience death of a child) and uneducated women (32.4% experience death of a child).

Developing countries are struggling to transform the socioeconomic status of poor people in society. Empowering women in developing countries is essential to fight against poverty (Faborode & Olugbenga, 2016). In the early 1970s in Bangladesh, nearly 80% of the population was living below the poverty line, and in 2016, the percentage of the population living below the poverty line decreased by 24.3% (Wei et al., 2021). In Bangladesh, poverty reduction was correlated with improvement in women's access to education and employment (Chowdhury et al., 2013).

## **6. Study Design**

A qualitative survey of 7 questions was created using a Likert Scale. The questions were generated based on the three-dimensional indicators of Gender Inequality Index (GII) by the United Nations Development Program (2023), which are labor market, empowerment, and reproductive health. The questions were shared with and edited by a focus group of 11 Afghan natives for comments before they were populated into the online survey on Survey Monkey. The focus groups assisted in forwarding the survey link to participants who also were Afghan natives and expressed interest in participating in the survey. The Survey Monkey link was sent to participants' emails,

WhatsApp accounts, and Facebook Messenger accounts. Participants were provided with the details and the purpose of this survey, which is for education and awareness purposes.

### 6.1. Inclusion/Exclusion Criteria

We included Afghan natives aged 18 and older who could read and understand English. We excluded Afghan natives younger than 18 who could not read and understand English, and non-Afghan natives.

### 6.2. Survey Respondents' Demographics

The survey was sent to 300 Native Afghans who were born and raised in Afghanistan and had familiarity with Afghan women and girls' issues at work, the education system, and social life. A total of 213 participants responded to the survey, indicating a return rate of 71%. Approximately 65.3% of the respondents were men, and 34.7% were women. Respondent educational levels included high school (19.7%), bachelor's (52.1%), master's (20.6%), and doctorate (7.04%). All respondents indicated that they could read and understand English. According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (2020), the literacy level in Afghanistan was 43%, and literacy estimates are not specified as English literacy. (See Table 4)

Table 4: Survey Respondents Demographics

Variable	Population (n=213)	Percentage of Respondents
Gender	Male (n= 139)	65.3
	Female (n= 74)	34.7
Education	High School (n= 42)	19.7
	Bachelor (n=111)	52.1
	Master's (n= 44)	20.6
	Doctorate (n= 15)	7.04
Age	>18 years old (n= 213)	100

## 7. Results

We used a Likert scale scoring criteria of Strongly Disagree (1 point), Disagree (2 points), Neutral (3 points), Agree (4 points), and Strongly Agree (5 points) to score the responses to the survey questions. In the sample, 49.7 % of respondents answered strongly disagree, and 22.8% disagree with the statement of girls having the same access to education as boys.

Furthermore, 32.3% of the respondents agree, and 17.3% strongly agree, with the question that boys are considered to be more intelligent than girls in the culture. In addition, 23.9% scored strongly disagree and 34.7% disagree on question 3, which indicated that nearly 50% of respondents do not believe that boys are better in science, technology, engineering, and math than girls. Regarding gender equality in workplace and employment settings in the Afghan culture, nearly 28.8% of the respondent scored disagree, and 32.8% strongly disagree that it exists in Afghanistan. For the scores of all responses, please see Figure 5 and Table 6.

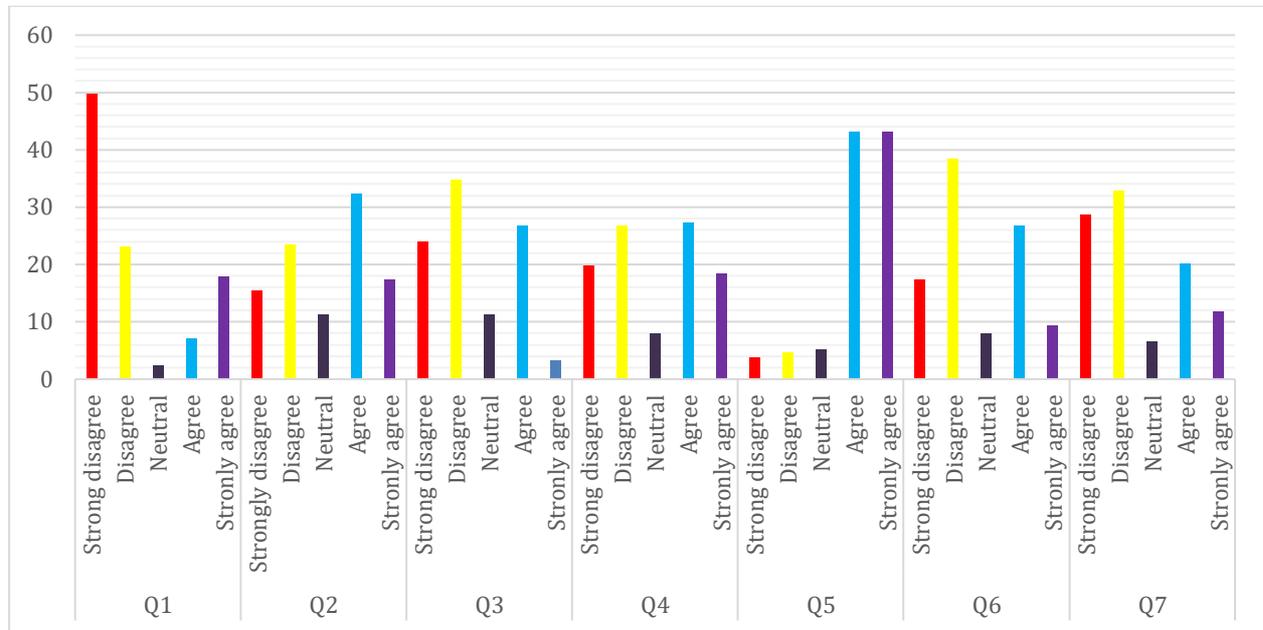


Figure 5: Gender Survey Questionnaire Responses Percentage

Table 6: Gender Survey Questions and Responses Percentage

Question	Responses				
Q1, Do you think girls have the same access to education as boys?	Strongly disagree 49.7%	Disagree 23%	Neutral 2.3%	Agree 7.0%	Strongly agree 17.8%
Q2, Do you think boys are considered more intelligent than girls in your culture?	Strongly disagree 15.4%	Disagree 23.4%	Neutral 11.2%	Agree 32.3%	Strongly agree 17.3%
Q3, Do you think boys are better in science, technology, engineering, and math than girls	Strongly disagree 23.9%	Disagree 34.7%	Neutral 11.2%	Agree 26.7%	Strongly agree 3.2%
Q4, Do you think women have the same power to make decisions as men in a home?	Strongly disagree 19.7%	Disagree 26.7%	Neutral 7.9%	Agree 27.2%	Strongly agree 18.3%
Q5, Do you think men and women should be equal?	Strongly disagree 3.7%	Disagree 4.6%	Neutral 5.1%	Agree 43.1%	Strongly agree 43.1%
Q6, Do you believe there is gender equality in your home, school, workplace, etc?	Strongly disagree 17.3%	Disagree 38.4%	Neutral 7.9%	Agree 26.7%	Strongly agree 9.3%
Q7, Do you think female employees get the same opportunity as male employees?	Strongly disagree 28.6%	Disagree 32.8%	Neutral 6.5%	Agree 20.1%	Strongly agree 11.7%

**8. Discussion**

According to the United Nations (2023a), Afghanistan is the only country where females do not have access to secondary school and university level education, or their access to these educational platforms is postponed. This means they only have access to education when the authorities in the *de facto* government allow them to go to school and university. When Afghan girls are not educated, this results in almost half the country's population being unable to participate in business, industry, or the economy (United Nations, 2023a). These results were consistent with the results of our survey where 49.7% of participants scored strongly disagree, and 23% disagree

with the availability of the same access to education for girls as for boys. These results highlight the importance of providing opportunities for education for girls, as educated girls can participate in vocational employment and bolster the well-being and health of their children (Ostby et al., 2016). Also, Kaffenberger and Pritchett (2021) found that child mortality was lower for educated mothers than in uneducated mothers. Girls' education is also an effective tool for reducing the incidence of poverty (Faborode & Olugbenga, 2016). Through improvements in equality policies for girls, Bangladesh has decreased the percentage of people living below the poverty level (Chowdhury et al., 2013). This decrease is attributed to improved overall access to education for girls (Chowdhury et al., 2013; Wei et al., 2021).

Furthermore, in Afghanistan, women were banned from working for international and national agencies on 24 December 2022 by a letter issued by the *de facto* rulers (United Nations, 2023b). Limiting higher-paying job opportunities leaves women and girls performing unpaid work or household chores. Unpaid work increases the economic burden on families, affects health, and mental health, while also decreasing the quality of life for girls and women (Seedat & Rondon, 2021).

In several other low- and middle-income countries such as Yemen, Iraq, and Bahrain, the percentage of pro-equality cultural norms was less than 20% (Cislaghi et al., 2022). These findings are consistent with our results as we found that 28.6% of respondents from Afghanistan scored strongly disagree and 32.8% scored disagree with the question that female employees get the same opportunities as male employees. Furthermore, other factors such as discriminatory institutional policies, gender discrimination, corporate and domestic violence, suboptimal working conditions, and poor mentorship can increase gender gaps in the workplace (Kalaitzi et al., 2017).

## 9. Limitations of the Study

Even though our survey gathered 213 responses from Afghan Natives, the generalizability of the study is limited due to the nature of the survey, which is online and qualitative in design. We attempted to control the quality of the sample by involving a Focus Group of 11 Afghan natives in creating the survey questions. In addition, our respondents had a higher educational level and English literacy than a significant percentage of the Afghan population where overall literacy is estimated 43% (United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization, 2020). It is difficult to describe or identify possible bias in the sample. It is possible that Afghans who have online accounts are more informed or highly educated, which could have skewed the results of the survey responses. It is essential for future studies with more detailed questions on a larger scale that will include participants with various sociodemographics characteristics to pinpoint challenges of gender equality in the country. Also, a higher ratio of male respondents in this study is likely to skew results due to the fact that they do not have firsthand experience with gender discrimination or lack of opportunities for females in the workplace.

## 10. Conclusion

Improving women's access to education and work is crucial; educated women can actively participate in community rebuilding and decreasing poverty. However, Afghan women have several barriers to education and employment that can negatively impact the economy at the family level and community level and their well-being. These barriers are access to equal opportunity in jobs, leadership and management position, education, and financial stability. It is essential to have structured and organized strategies and the commitment of politicians, religious scholars, and public figures to increase people's awareness of the benefits of equal opportunity for women's education, employment, and healthcare access and work to contribute to the country's economic and social development.

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