

Economy, Labor Force, Education and Inequality: Session 703

Education and Labour Market Participation: Who are sent to school in Afghanistan and why and its outcome?

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This Rapid Qualitative Assessment (RQA) explores evidence of shifting gender norms, and how such shifts may be affecting the economic options and decisions of women and men in their different roles as individuals, members of households, workers, and citizens. As the economy changes and as connectivity rises, the gender dimensions that surround economic decision-making processes are looked into. Are they changing and, if so, how may they be changing?

The study employed a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods, with focus group discussions (FGDs) involving male and female adults and young people as the main qualitative tool. For the quantitative method, a community questionnaire was employed, as well as supplementary data gleaned from the FGDs. Debriefing sessions were conducted after the completion of fieldwork in each area, followed by a series of exchanges and meetings with the teams to clarify points reflected in the transcripts as well as the contextual underpinnings of answers given. The focus group questions are designed to deepen our understanding of these trends by exploring the gender dimensions of processes surrounding women's and men's key choices about education, occupations, and accumulation and protection of major productive assets. These choices are examined since they shape one's productivity, earning power, resilience to shocks, and social standing; and these choices bear quite directly on the underpinnings and dynamics of gender inequalities in a society and its potential for inclusive development.

There were four areas examined in this study. Two communities, one rural and one urban, are located in the province of Kabul Province while two other communities, one rural and one urban community are located in Parwan Province. The selection of the four communities follow the following criteria: For one urban community Karte-e-Bakheter, this is where NSP has been implemented for quite some time (since 2006) For the other urban community Shirabad Ulya in Kabul province, NSP has just been completed. For one rural community NSP has been implemented for quite some time (since 2006) in Boyina Bagh in Kabul province. For the other rural community it has just been completed in Naw Da, Parwan province. Furthermore, the two urban communities are near the school with all levels offered a bustling market, and a factory.

Sex selection is very much evident as to who are sent to school or not. Although almost all participants answered that there is no distinction as to who will be sent to school or not, boy or girl when children reach school age, whether boy or girl, the data show that more boys than girls are sent to school. More males than females, whether youth or adult, have attained at least a certain level of education. The case of Boyina Bagh is the best example as none of the female participants, whether youth or adult, had ever gone to school.

In all of the communities, except for Naw Da, where only one male adult participant had ever attended school, it is apparent that more youth than adults had gone to school.

Participants from the rural communities are less educated than their urban counterparts. One of the reasons could be that there are less school facilities in the rural areas than in the urban areas. Furthermore, rural areas are more conservative in their views regarding sending children to school, especially girls and young women. The cases of Naw Da and Boying Bagh attest to this. However, all of the participants from the four places acknowledged that education is a major factor in getting a job. There is a changing view of sending girls and young women to school nowadays, even in the rural areas.

Education has a big role in finding a job... a person who has education can land in a job and do it well (All female youth, BB).

If we attended school and had education, we may have jobs in government or NGOs but now we cannot have any job except for extracting stones and being labourers (All male youth, ND).

All four communities share common reasons why more boys are sent to school than girls: it is a combination of distance of school from the community and security reasons. All the female and male youth mentioned that since most of the schools are outside their respective areas, boys have more opportunity to go to school.

Adhering to tradition as to women's and men's roles was another reason brought about by the participants of the study both in rural (Boyina Bagh) and urban (Shirabad Ulya) areas in Kabul. The divide between women's private and men's public world still operates. In Boyina Bagh, participants noted that as girls grow older, families arrange their engagement to get married rather than send them to school:

If the school is next to our village then the families' decision is that that they send girls to school and when they reach 11-15 years [old], they are made to stay at home. Since they have grown up... it is bad for these girls to go to school... they get engaged, instead. (Deema, 19, FY, BB).

The problem of sending girls to school in Shirabad Ulya was compounded with the incident of a girl who was sent to school and then got married to a boy without the permission of her parents (see Mini-Case 3). As mentioned, this event has affected parent's opinions over sending their children, specifically young women to school. They thought that by doing so, daughters no longer adhere to the custom and tradition observed by the family.

Kidnapping was also raised as an on-going problem in Shirabad Ulya. Thus, more constraints are imposed on sending girls to school than boys.

...there is no difference among them (boys and girls), whenever they reach 5-6 years old, whether boy or girl, he/she must go to school. The only problem for them is that the school is very far from this village and most of the families, due to kidnapping problems, can't send their children to school. That is the big problem here. In this case, there are more constraints on girls to go to school because of the distance and the kidnapping cases. Families are more protective of girls than boys (Fadi, 22, MY & Ehsan, 20, MY, SU).

The school is far from our village, so the family did not send daughters to school due to security issue and distance (All female youth, ND).

In Naw Da, the most impoverished of the communities studied, the participants added poor economic condition as a reason for not sending girls to school other than distance and security issues. Again, since girls will be joining another family when they get married, the idea of investing on their education is not entertained by families. The male youth in Naw Da emphasized the families weak economic situation

...Our economic condition is very weak so instead of going to school we go to work. Children instead of going to school, work to help family members. (All male youth, ND)

None of the participants from Kart-e-Bakheter brought up issues that hamper girls' education, except for the lack of higher educational institutions to accommodate those who want to pursue higher degrees nearby the village. As noted, residents in Kart-e-Bakheter are more open in sending both boys and girls to school.

The participants' value over education resonated in their disagreement regarding the restrictions to girls going to school. Participants, especially adults from Boyina Bagh and Naw Da, said that women and men who have not gone to school because of constraints imposed by culture and tradition. They voiced out that income-generating skills or vocational courses should be taught.

Driving and carpentry skills would be beneficial to the people in the area (All male adults, BB).

Tailoring skill is very important for women and they can do it at home too. So, skills are needed such as embroidery, weaving of carpet, and tailoring, metal works and computer courses for women and men to learn and solve their financial problems. (All female adults, ND)

In all study areas (except Kart-e-Bakheter), women are not engaged to do paid work, now and 10 years ago. Participants narrated that women are confined inside the house performing household chores and the responsibility of taking care of the home and children. Ten years ago, that on-going armed battle and the presence of the Taliban in their community prevented women from going out outside the house and work. The participants from Boyina Bagh also stated women in their place did not qualify for work in the government, because most, if not all of them, are illiterate.

At present, it appears that the view of women and men in the three communities regarding women working outside the home is changing. They are more or less open to the idea of women working outside the home. The factor that is hindering women's participation in the work force are the unavailability of work opportunities and then if there are work opportunities, women do not usually qualify since they do not have the academic qualifications nor the skills needed for the job.

The participants from the two urban communities mentioned that in order for men and women to get into the government or private companies, assistance from employment and professional agencies should be at hand. The participants from Kart-e-Bakheter raised the issue on "backers and bribes." These are essential for anyone to get into both private and public institutions.

The governmental employment is available but those who will take the job must have relatives [in the government] or pay bribes because it is impossible that any one can work with the government. Currently in our village there are more people

who are literate but they are jobless because they don't have any supporter/backer or relatives or unable to pay a bribe. During the Taliban there are more jobs but the people didn't have interest in working and most of the people were out of the village (CQ Informants, KEB).

In Naw Da when participants were asked if women in their area worked 10 years ago, all of the participants said that women did not do so mainly because both women and men adhered to the belief that women stay at home and take care of the house and children. At present, women are still invisible in the workplace, but the participants said that if there are job opportunities for women, the women will surely join as part of the workforce. However, people from their community also noted that they do not know how to scout for job opportunities.

In conclusion, adherence, to traditional gender stereotypes that regard men as income earners and women as dependents still prevails. This affects men's and women's mobility as well as the decision of who joins the work force. This also affects the decision as to who will be sent to school.

Lack of knowledge and having not gone to school contribute to women being powerless or having no voice in the decision-making process within and outside the home. In rural areas, women are not aware of their rights, or even if they are, they cannot exercise such right. Others are deciding for them and for their lives.

A number of factors affect women's entrance to paid work. At first glance, cultural constraints are the ones that hinder women's mobility and close their chance of taking work outside the home and the community. However, with the economic crunch as well as the shifting attitudes towards women working for pay outside the homes, another constraint has come up – it is the unavailability of work opportunities and, if ever there are, the problem of qualification comes in. Most of the women have low level of education or they have not gone to school at all. The fundamental problem that women face to be able to join the workforce (taking out cultural constraints) is their lack of capacity and work experience. Women's lives are filled with household tasks and the responsibility of caretaking.