

The Problematic Socialization of Child Marriage in Afghanistan: Perceptions,
Challenges, and Possibilities for Social Change

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This thesis titled
The Problematic Socialization of Child Marriage in Afghanistan: Perceptions,
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ABSTRACT

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The Problematic Socialization of Child Marriage in Afghanistan: Perceptions, Challenges, and Possibilities for Social Change

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Within the next decade, the number of child marriages is estimated to reach 100 million cases worldwide. Presently, 51 million girls in developing countries have been married before reaching legal adulthood, which is 18 year old for most countries (World Vision, 2008). In Afghanistan 57 percent of all marriages involve teen brides, placing it among the top affected countries for this issue (Akbar, 2012). Although laws prohibiting child marriage in Afghanistan were passed in 1977, the issue remains largely unaddressed at the local level (Bahgam & Mukhatari, 2004).

This study, using a qualitative method and participatory approach, describes and analyzes Afghan people's beliefs and perceptions of child marriage, especially their knowledge of the law; their attitudes toward marriage and gender relations; the reasons they give for marrying off their daughters at a young age, and makes suggestions for eradicating child marriage in Afghanistan. In-depth interviews, a focus group, and observatory methods were utilized to collect data. Research participants expressed their thoughts about child marriage and reflected on influences that led to an increase in child marriage in Afghanistan.

PREFACE: MY JOURNEY BEYOND THE BURQA

I would like to begin by sharing my story. I was born and raised in Mazar-e-Sharif, the Balkh Province of Afghanistan. I am a Sunni Muslim on my father's side and a Shiite Muslim on my mother's side. Although I belong to two different sects, this has never impacted my views about either sect. In fact, my parents' marriage was the greatest lesson of my life in terms of teaching me not to discriminate against other human beings. Before coming to the United States, I lived with my parents and five siblings. The war in Afghanistan, which began before I was born, is one of the most important events that shaped my life. I have survived during two major airstrikes in Mazar-e Sharif and a land mine, which exploded right behind our house. Though I survived, these events traumatized my childhood.

During the Mujahedeen's rise to power, I was barely 10 and my sister was 11. My mother did not let us go anywhere except to school. Although our school was within walking distance ten minutes away, my sister and I used to run home after the last bell rang. If we were two minutes late, we would see our mother on her way to meet us. I never understood why she acted like that until I grew up and I started doing the same thing with my younger sisters.

I attended school until I was about 14 years old, at which time I had to leave school because of the Taliban's rise to power. I spent the next four years of my life at home relegated to prisoner status, as was the rest of my family. I lived a life with no

entertainment, electricity, and not even a single hope. My only friends were my old books. I read them over and over again. My diary was also a source of comfort to me.

Although the restrictions and oppression enacted by the Taliban have been widely publicized by Western media, in my view the impact on women is little known. I can say the trauma and the wounding are irremovable. Although I have moved on, the experience is too painful and severe to forget. Somehow I do not want to forget it. At the age of 14 I was forced to wear the burqa. I could barely breathe. I do not forget how I hated it. I do not forget that I am three years behind the men of my age in terms of education. I do not forget my mother's tears when we lived in poverty and she could not work. I do not forget when we buried our photo albums and tape recordings and hid our television, since according to Taliban it was forbidden to have those things at home. I do not forget that we celebrated our wedding ceremonies without music and video recordings, so these celebrations seemed like funerals to me. I do not forget that my father could not shave his beard and suffered endlessly from irritating rashes due to his sensitive skin. I do not forget that I could not wear nail polish. Let me clarify about nail polish, why it was so important. I give nail polish merely as an example of autonomy. The articles I read about the banning of nail polish during the Taliban focused on the nail polish itself and failed to see the helplessness of Afghan women. Nail polish was never important for me, and it will not matter if I do not wear it for years; the point is that somebody is controlling me. I did not have the option of wearing it if I wanted to. I did not have control even over the parts of my body. All the "do's and don'ts" forced upon us by the Taliban made me feel powerless and helpless. It took me a long time to overcome those feelings. I have not

forgotten what happened. I have been able to move on, but there are many women in Afghanistan that could not overcome these traumatic experiences. Those women totally gave up. One example is my own mother.

Formerly my mother lived a life better than the women of my generation. She studied in the 1970s, when Afghanistan had freedom for women (at least in the cities.) My mother is very well-educated. She earned her BA in math and geometry. She is one of those select few who can solve equations in her mind. She does not even need a pen and paper. She did not wear *hijab* until the war started between the Mujahedeen and the Soviet Union. For me, she is both a source of admiration and a source of disappointment. Although she lived a life that my sisters and I never had the chance to live, she gave up due to political instability and the treatment of women in Afghan society over the last 25 years. My mother used to ride a bike to school, something my generation cannot do in today's Afghanistan, but now she wears a burqa. She has high blood pressure, and the burqa causes health problems for her. Although her doctor has told her to not wear the burqa, she insists on wearing it. The only rationale she provides is that she is tired of the changes (veiling and unveiling) she has been through.

Here, I again speak to the Western and Afghan feminists who say that the burqa itself is not a problem for Afghan woman. Angela E.V. King, special advisor on Gender Issues and Advancement Women in the United States, reported in 1997:

External observers and interlocutors often mistake symptoms and causes: the burqa, for example, is not considered a major problem for most Afghan women with whom the mission spoke, but is treated as such by many assistance workers in the country, agency personnel at headquarters and sometimes, opinion-makers outside the country (quoted in Skaine 2002, p.21).

Although I understand the feminist point of view about the burqa, I believe that burqa is one of those complicated terms that is difficult for outsiders to understand. The burqa has been a controversial issue since the late 19th century. The regressive changes my mother and millions of other women have experienced during the last decades of war have ruined their self-confidence, and I do not see any hope in my mother's eyes. She has given up on herself and the hope of changing things. Her only concern is for the safety of her daughters and their future. Thus, she attempts to protect her daughters by restricting them.

When I see the history of Afghanistan through the eyes of my mother, I see a regressive change in the situation of women. Although child marriage has existed for centuries in Afghanistan, it was not always as common as it is in today's Afghanistan. In 1980, my mother was married at the age of 22, while my elder sister married in 1998, when she was 16. My sister was married during the Taliban regime, when education was not an option for girls. What I want to say is that if child marriage was a part of our culture and religion neither my mother nor I could avoid it. As my mother says, back in the 1960s and 1970s people were not obsessed with marriage and even the poorest families wanted to send their children of both genders to school and were hopeful about future (at least in the cities.) She says her generation had the chance to choose their partners or at least their consent was considered when it came to marriage. A good example is my parents' marriage, where they broke the Sunni and Shiite taboos.

My elder sister's marriage was neither because of poverty nor tradition, but was merely for her protection. She was beautiful according to Afghan standards and her

beauty was a concern for my parents during the Taliban. Although she wore the burqa and did not go anywhere, my parents were concerned for her safety because of the Taliban. During the Taliban period, if a member of Taliban knew that there was a beautiful girl in a family, he would ask for her hand and it was not an option for the family to refuse the proposal. This was a concern for my parents until my sister was married to a close relative. However, they regretted their decision after the fall of Taliban when my other siblings and I started going to school again and my elder sister could not resume her education since she had a baby and the responsibility of caring for her husband's household.

Despite the challenges of war, the Taliban's rule, cultural, financial, and gender barriers, I remain convinced about the power of education to transform even the harshest of realities. This is why I am committed to furthering my own education, despite the multitude of challenges I have encountered along the way. Ultimately, I believe that my empowerment through education will help me contribute to improving the lives of women and children in the country of my birth.

After the Taliban were overthrown in 2001, I was able to resume my studies. In 2003, I graduated from an all-girls high school at the top of my class. I then earned a bachelor's degree in journalism in 2007, ranking first in a class of more than 60 students. I chose journalism because I believed that it would give me a space and a voice to engage the issues that concern me most. I was particularly interested in work that promotes women's wellbeing and improves their standing in the domestic, social, and political arenas. Both during and after my undergraduate career, I worked with various

international organizations aiding their development efforts. I gained valuable knowledge through nearly seven years of work with the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), the Women Rights Union, and local and international media. I have worked as a producer and reporter at Arzoo TV and Radio and as chief editor at Balkh Bi-weekly. I also worked for three years as an analyst for Sada-e-Azadi, a radio station run by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). During the time I was working with the media and other national and international organizations, my focus was always on women, including promoting their education, awareness of their rights, and related issues, such as nutrition, hygiene and voting rights.

My success in media and communications studies as well as my success working with international organizations has had paradoxical effects on my life. On the one hand, it has provided me with the determination to pursue a career that would enable me to change the lives of people. Conversely, my work in the media and with international organizations has put my personal life under constant scrutiny and even at risk. For instance, being the first woman in my community to ride in a UN car, work closely with foreigners, and appear on TV has brought much unneeded attention and hatred from community members. Although I have gained much personal happiness as my job opportunities and salary grew, I faced increasing anger and hatred from neighbors and the community. First, I was isolated from the other women in the community through rumors labeling me a troublemaker and a host of other things. Second, neighbors and community members were increasingly confronting my family for providing me with the freedom to

live a life that was only allowed for men. Although family members were very happy with my work and served as my only support system, they became more concerned about my safety.

I decided to join NATO's media in 2008 as a lead analyst overseeing 10 employees. This too had paradoxical effects on me. On one hand, I was enjoying the new position, which was the highest possible position for a woman in our city, and I was developing my journalistic skills with German professionals. On the other hand, I was distressed because of the community members' actions towards me. Whenever I walked in our neighborhood, people's verbal and nonverbal behavior was extremely violent. For instance, some turned their faces avoiding me, while others screamed curse words at me. They would remind me every day that I was bringing shame and dishonor to my family. They hated that I worked in a military camp, surrounded by men. Many screamed that a "decent Afghan girl" would not work with foreigners, especially in a military camp. In the beginning, I did not pay attention to their actions because I knew that these things often happen to activists and pioneering women who go against the gender norms in society.

I was determined not to allow anyone to scare me into giving up what I have worked hard for my entire life. I knew that the violence I faced within my community was not unique. Women, and particularly working women across Afghanistan, have to deal with anger and hate directed at them from a deeply misogynist society. Having grown up in such a conservative and patriarchal society, early on I developed a deep awareness of how acts of violence, inequality, and injustice impact women's everyday

lives, especially those who defy the so-called gender norms and traditional rules and regulations.

As a workingwoman in Afghanistan, I was always hyper-aware that my life was in danger and in 2010 something happened to prove it. I was working with NATO's media in Mazar-e Sharif when some unknown men attacked me with stones. I escaped since the attack occurred close to our office entrance door. After the traumatic experience of being attacked, I realized that I no longer had the fortitude to continue working in a situation where my safety was at risk. I decided to take a break from working and further my studies. I was thrilled when I received a Fulbright graduate scholarship to study in the United States.

I convinced my mother to support me in furthering my education, even though she was concerned it would pose a greater risk to me when I returned to Afghanistan. My father was extremely supportive from the beginning of the process and agreed that I deserved this opportunity for graduate study as well as the chance to live a life without fear and torment for two years in the United States.

After I left Afghanistan, I became acquainted with a new side of my mother. It was surprising to see how her behavior changed towards me. She treats my siblings and me differently not because of my level of education but because she does not feel the tyranny of the community. It is interesting to see that my mother is not a controller by nature but that she has become controlling towards her daughters because of the pressure she receives from the community and what she sees and hears about sexual harassment.

As a daughter, I never understood my mother's concerns. I used to see her as a restrictive mother who policed her daughters all the time. I used to call her a dictator in my mind. The reason for her restrictions became clear to me when I returned to Afghanistan to conduct research and I found myself acting in the same way with my younger sisters. I realized how concerned I became in regards to my sisters' safety. Without thinking I began to police my sisters, the way they talked and walked, to whom they talked to and where they went, so that I became more restrictive than my mother. She used to advise me if she was worried about me, but I started punishing my younger sisters if they did not cover appropriately, laughed out loud in public, or did something that brought unneeded attention. I found myself becoming increasingly more protective of my sisters than I have ever been of myself.

The most typical concerns among women trying to protect their daughters and sisters are as follows: rape; harassment; falling in love; and eloping. As a typical and traditional sister in Afghanistan, my thoughts were similar to others: I was afraid of my sister falling in love and being hurt or committing suicide since arranged marriages are very common and even if a girl and boy are in love, the family can arrange their marriages to someone else. If a girl and boy disagree with the family's decision and elope, they will be looked down upon and this will bring lasting shame not only to the couple but also to their families.

In order to explain the sensitivity of this issue, I will use Nabila Gul, 17 years old, and Fareba, 25 years old, two sisters, whose suicides took place on November 2012, in Mazar-e Sharif city, my own hometown. These two sisters killed themselves because the

younger sister, Nabila Gul, fell in love with someone and the older sister, Fareba, discovered the secret love affair. Fareba warned Nabila Gul to stop the relationship or else she would confront her in front of the family. The fear of confrontation in front of the family was enough for Nabila Gul to drink rat poison and end her life. The article published in *New York Times* on March, 2013 about these two sisters, states that Fareba, the older sister, drank the same poison soon after she learned of Nabila Gul's death. Fareba killed herself out of guilt and the love she had for her younger sister (NY Times, 2013). The family buried the two dead girls on the same day, without knowing what had happened between two sisters. When I read the news, I became very upset because of the loss of two educated girls in my city and the way the report blamed Afghan culture and religion for this. Here, I want to explicitly clarify that what Fareba was not because of religion or culture as was portrayed in the *New York Times* report. We need to look at the situation of people in Afghanistan to understand why control over women has become so important and how a girl might drive her sister to suicide when she meant to protect her.

I landed in Washington, D.C., on January 2nd, 2011 after a long flight. I started in a pre-academic program and later was admitted to Ohio University's Communication and Development program, where I was able to focus on both media theory and issues of development, particularly pertaining to gender. In this program, I also was granted the opportunity to explore my interest in filmmaking. I shot a documentary about an international student with some of my cohorts. When my work and photos became available online, I received threatening emails from an anonymous address, not because of the content of the film, but merely because the act of an Afghan woman making a film

was controversial. The emails did not deter me. On the contrary, the threats made me more determined to act for positive social change. I am aware that on this path I will face people who will try to prevent me from speaking out, but it is up to me to choose to either abandon the fight or continue.

In spite of the threats I received, I chose to write my MA thesis on child marriage in Afghanistan. Child marriage, which was socially accepted hundreds of years ago, has become even more common today. Child marriage has harsh consequences, such as a high rate of maternal and infant mortality, illiteracy, domestic violence, and the exclusion of women from the political sphere. I believe that in order for women to lead dignified lives in Afghanistan, they must be allowed access to education, which is often taken away from them when they are prematurely given in marriage. Thus, the lack of education for women in Afghanistan due to child marriage prevents women from gaining the skills necessary to lead independent lives.

I have seen many child brides at school with pale faces, crying because of family pressure and pregnancy. They could not pursue their education and were forced to quit school just a few months after entering their marriage. I have firsthand experience because my cousins and relatives have been deeply harmed by being forced to marry at a young age. They had to quit school after their marriages to serve their husbands' family. I saw my cousin forcibly married at the age of fifteen and widowed at the age of nineteen with two children.

When I was working with different organizations, I often interviewed women in rural areas for different purposes. I saw married teenage girls crying and begging for

help. They looked at me as an educated woman who could perform a miracle in their lives and bring about change. At that time, I felt powerless to make any change. Yet, I could not forget the hope in their eyes and the expectations they had of me. I decided to write my thesis on child marriages in Afghanistan because I knew this was a chance for me to help those child brides and they are the inspiration for my Master's thesis.

As an Afghan woman who has lived both inside and outside of Afghanistan, I have always heard that Afghanistan was the worst possible place for women in today's world. As someone who has witnessed violence against women in Afghan society firsthand and has also paid particular attention to media reports of such violence, I cannot help but agree with this generalization. However, I completely oppose the idea that Afghan women are weak and fragile, which is how the Western media often portrays them. They are victims of oppression, but not passive victims. For example, during my research I became acquainted with Gulsoom, a beautiful 18 year-old girl, with large eyes and long curly eyelashes who was very shy. She looked younger than 18 to me. Gulsoom had been married twice, once at the age of 14 and a second time at the age of 15. She was given to an old sick person, who died a year after her marriage. After her husband died, she was raped and she had to marry her rapist, who was also the relative of her first husband. When she shared her story, it was difficult for me, as a researcher, to digest her bitter experiences. She escaped the marriage and is now living under the protection of an NGO in Northern Afghanistan. She told me she does not remember her childhood. Her stepfather, who regularly beat her, sold her into her first marriage. While she was telling me her story, I could see tears on her pink cheeks because she wept calmly throughout

the entire interview. At the end of her story, she wiped her tears and told me she wants to go to school. She wants to study and she wants to make a career for herself. I saw hope in her eyes and since that time I have been thinking, *who says that Afghan women are weak?* They are resilient and have the power to live under the harshest of circumstances. They can be a positive force for change in Afghan society, but only if they see their oppression as a problem and not as the norm for women.

It is also important to understand that not all men in Afghanistan are oppressors, even though the media portrays them in this fashion. Hearing their side of the story during my research, I claim they are also oppressed by culture and religion conservatism, ethnicity, war, and the legacy of colonization. Not all men in Afghanistan are aggressive oppressors. One example of this is my father, who not only respects women, but also does anything he can to support them. In Afghanistan, where people prevent their daughters to go to schools within a mile of their homes, my father has supported me in travelling abroad for a Master's degree, which is not even necessary according to our community. Despite all the conflicts and objection from extended family members, he stood against these people, defended my rights, and allowed me to come to the United States.

I hope that my thesis will be a positive force for social change in Afghan society. Although I know this research is written in English and not many people can read English and have access to internet to read this report in Afghanistan, I strongly believe that this research will help policy makers, governmental institutions, international, national, and

local NGOs, who fight for justice and support women's rights as human rights, to come up with the better and stronger interventions to eliminate child marriage.

DEDICATION

*This thesis is dedicated to
my youngest sister Marjan and millions of other girls her age.
I want her to enjoy her childhood as a child, not to struggle as a bride.*

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I would also like to take this opportunity to thank Dr. Elizabeth Wangui and Dr. Risa Whitson, my committee members, for their constant encouragement. They provided me with the basic knowledge about research. During the entire process, they devoted their time and their unceasing energy to help me anytime I needed. They introduced me to phases of the feminist movement in both Western and Third World contexts. Learning about and developing an understanding of critical gender issues, women's right as human rights, feminist movements in a post-colonial context in different parts of world, and critical culture issues, prepared me for this research.

I also would like to thank all my friends for being my support system both in the United States and in Afghanistan. I heartily appreciate their existence. I am indebted to them for their love, care, and patience.

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Athens, Ohio, July 15th, 2013
Zulfa Zaher

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LIST OF ACRONYMS

| | |
|--------|--|
| ACSFo | The Afghanistan Civil Society Forum-organization |
| AIHRC | The Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission |
| BBC | British Broadcasting Cooperation |
| FAO | Food and Agriculture Organization |
| ICRW | The International Center for Research on Women |
| MICS2 | Afghanistan Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey2 |
| NAPWA | National Action Plan for the Women of Afghanistan |
| NATO | North Atlantic Treaty Organization |
| RAWA | The Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan |
| RRESA | Regional Rural Economic Regeneration Strategies |
| UNAMA | The United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan |
| UNICEF | The United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund |
| USAID | The United States Agency for International Development |

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Child Marriage in Afghanistan



Figure 1: Map of Afghanistan

Afghanistan at a Glance

Afghanistan is located in South-Asia. Its area is slightly smaller than the state of Texas. Its population is estimated at over 30 million, and more than half of the population is made up of women (Potts & Hayden, 2008). Afghanistan has 34 provinces and its economy is mostly dependent on agriculture (Nawa, 2011). There are four main ethnic groups in Afghanistan: the major group is Pashtun, which makes up 38 percent of the population; Tajik accounts for 25 percent; Hazara for 19 percent; and Uzbek for 6 percent (Skaine, 2008). According to the Afghanistan Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2012),

there are also many other minor ethnic groups, such as Aimak, Turkmen, Noristani, and Baloch. Afghanistan has two official languages, Dari and Pashtu, and 30 other minor languages. It is an Islamic country made up of 84 percent Sunni and 15 percent Shiite Muslims. The remaining one percent is comprised of Sikhs, Hindus, and Jews (Skaine, 2008).

Child Marriage

It has been estimated that by 2015, child marriages will reach 100 million cases worldwide, with 25,000 new child brides every day (Bruce & Clark, 2004). Already 51 million girls in developing countries have been married before reaching legal adulthood, which is 18 for most countries but can vary from one country to another (World Vision, 2008; Jain & Kurz, 2007). Some researchers suggest that child marriage is actually more common than indicated in data provided by international, governmental and nongovernmental organizations (Nawa, 2011; Bahgam & Mukhatari, 2004).

The global phenomenon of child marriage and the effort for its eradication have been discussed since the 1920s. In the 1980s, the United Nations started its effort to address the harmful practice of child marriage after countries like India, Bangladesh, and Indonesia declared the legal age of marriage to be 18 (ICRW, 2011). However, systematic interventions to end the practice of child marriage have only been implemented since the 1990s, beginning with the Cairo International Conference on Population and Development in 1994 and the declaration of women's rights as human

rights at the United Nations International Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995 (UNICEF, 2005).

Child Marriage in Afghanistan

In Afghanistan the term “child marriage” refers to a female child married before the age of 16, although in most of the world the legal marriage age is 18 for both girls and boys (Buvinic et al., 2008; Jain & Kurz, 2007; Bahgam & Mukhatari, 2004; Nwankwo, 2001). Fifty-seven percent of all marriages involving teen brides are found in Afghanistan, placing it among the most affected countries in the world (Akbar, 2012).

Attempts have been made in Afghanistan to curb child marriage at the institutional level. For example, according to Afghanistan Civil Law Article 70, “legal capacity for marriage is accepted for boys when they have completed 18 years and for girls when they have completed 16 years” (Bahgam & Mukhatari, 2004, p.13). According to Article 28 of the Afghanistan Penal Law, child marriage is a criminal act and offenders are subjected to two years’ imprisonment (Kamali, 1985). However, Article 71: Subsection 1 states: “When a girl has not reached the age written in article 70 of this law, her marriage rights belong to her father or a competent person.” Subsection 2: “Marriage contracts for minors younger than 15 are not allowed by any means” (Bahgam & Mukhatari, 2004, p.13). According to this law, a father can legally marry off his daughter if she is 15 years old.

One of the significant factors that make it difficult to tackle child marriages is that people accept this practice as a norm and see nothing wrong with it (Nawa, 2011). In

rural areas people believe that the sooner they marry their daughters the better. Therefore, this practice is more widespread in rural areas than in urban settings (Ellis, 2000). It is quite rare in rural areas for a girl to be between 16-18 years old and not have been married yet. In general, marriages are not seen as existing for the purpose of lifelong companionship but are more practical and for economical arrangements (Mccord, 2012). Marriages are still considered a family decision, and despite child marriage being outlawed, nobody denounces the practice, because it is thought to be a private issue (Akbar, 2012; Mccord, 2012; Nawa, 2011; Bahgam & Mukhatari, 2004).

Efforts to Change the Practice of Child Marriage

In spite of the fact that development in the different areas of social, economic, health, and politics have brought many formative changes to the lives of Afghans, including women, these developments are restricted to few major cities (Skaine, 2008; Bahgam & Mukhatari, 2004). There have been many projects initiated by international and national organizations to educate women about their basic rights through women's advocacy and communications channels in Afghanistan. For example, a three-year project by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID, 2002-2006), which included 34 provinces of Afghanistan with funding of 38.9 million USD, targeted women as its primary audience using three different strategies: increasing literacy and educational opportunities; developing economic growth opportunities; and raising awareness of women's rights. The project staff worked to increase women's awareness of their individual rights through a variety of communication channels, including print,

radio, television, billboards, banners, murals, and flyers, which showed girls attending school, participating in elections, and working outside the home. Furthermore, the project provided employment for women. In addition, women's rights were promoted through workshops and round table discussions, which facilitated debates, dialogues, and discourse about gender equality and justice. Women's rights studies show that projects focusing on gender issues in Afghanistan have been very successful in their approach to women's empowerment (Skaine, 2008; Rostami-Povey, 2007). According to a USAID report (2006), the literacy rates of Afghans have increased to 34 percent since 2001.

However the strategy of education in women's rights and providing employment to women has not been sufficient with regards to many social problems, specifically child marriage, because this problem is not solely a women's issue. Men are equally important because they are the decision-makers and they decide when and to whom they will marry their daughters or sisters. Therefore, the issue of child marriage in Afghanistan needs a multi-dimensional focus and a holistic approach that targets both genders. This aspect of the issue of child marriage has not been recognized in the literature.

As this study will show, the literature overemphasizes the importance of culture and tradition as the cause of the high rates of child marriage in Afghanistan today.

Attitudes and laws regarding child marriage have changed radically in the course of the 20th century. The impact of these changes is not considered in the literature.

If we problematize child marriage as simply due to culture and tradition, as Western scholars in the literature and media do, then we need a "civilization mission" rather than strategies to cope with this issue. Uma Naryan (1997) argues that problems

that impact specific groups of women in Third World countries are often assumed to be primarily, if not entirely, rooted in “Traditions/Religions/Cultures,” where all three terms are used as synonyms for each other. She says that by blaming culture and religion for certain practices, Western scholars form stereotypes about Third World women and this creates a barrier to even address women’s problems:

The problems that have very little to do with traditions, religions, or culture are represented as if they are the effects of this imagined complex, reinforcing “ethnic” stereotypes and completely misrepresenting the real nature of these problems (Narayan, 1997, p.50).

Agreeing with Naryan, I cannot help but say that the generalization of problems like child marriage as being part of “Afghan Culture” not only makes it difficult to tackle this issue, but also contributes to the prevalence of this practice since it will further motivate people if they know that it is their “Tradition/Religion/Culture.” The *National Geographic* documentary (June 29th, 2011), “Too Young to Wed: The secret world of child brides” in Afghanistan is an example of this.[@] In the video on Afghanistan there are many photos of old men in their 80s with long beard and dirty cloths sitting next to very young girls, probably 10-12 years-old. Although the photographs portray the situation accurately, the problem is that the implication is that child marriage is a barbaric practice of Afghan tradition.

I believe that identifying critical aspects that have been missing from previous studies of child marriage in Afghanistan would strengthen intervention efforts aimed at the prevention of this harmful practice. Therefore, the purpose of this thesis is to answer the following questions:

[@] See:<http://video.nationalgeographic.com/video/specials/nat-geo-live-specials/sinclairgorney-lecture-nglive/>

- 1) What are the causes for the prevalence of child marriage in Afghanistan at the present time?
- 2) What reasons do people in Afghanistan give for marrying off their daughters as child brides?
- 3) More specifically, how do men perceive this practice? How do their emotions influence their willingness to give their daughters as child brides?
- 4) Are people in Afghanistan aware of the negative societal consequences of child marriage?

CHAPTER TWO: RESEARCH DESIGN

Theoretical Framework

Since many of the structures and practices that perpetuate child marriage are rooted in assumptions and norms related to gender, *Gender and Power Theory* (Connell, 1987) is a suitable framework for addressing this issue. According to *Gender and Power* three structures, labor, power, and cathexis, determine how much authority and status a person has according to their sex and gender. The authority and status individuals hold in society influences their ability to make decisions. This theory helps to explain people's perceptions and beliefs about women, especially their daughters. This theory helps us understand the social-cultural structures that incline people, especially men, to believe that child marriage is a desirable/acceptable circumstance for women.

Labor refers to women's productivity and income generation, access to the resources, and the distribution of work both at the household level and the work place. Lack of income generation and access to resources renders Afghan women dependent first on their immediate families and then on their husbands after marriage. Because they are forbidden from working outside of the home, their agency and decision making is severely limited. In Afghanistan a good woman (according to Afghan men) is a housewife who stays at home and takes care of the children, her husband, and his family (Mccord, 2012). Despite the tremendous work women perform in the home, their work remains unvalued and unrecognized. Work in the home is seen as their natural duty. While women's work in the home is not valued, they are simultaneously discouraged from pursuing work outside (Nawa, 2011). Working women are ostracized and harassed

by strangers as well as family. Those who find ways to work outside despite the discouragement, face repercussion, which are at times violent (Skaine, 2008). Afghan women's inability to engage in work that generates income undermines their role in decision making in the home and in society in general. When it comes to child marriage, girls' ultimate goal in life is seen as marriage (Mccord, 2012). From a practical point of view, families and girls do not have many options and end up seeing child marriage as inevitable and natural. After all, not all child marriages are forced. Accordingly, the labor structure helps us see the way in which child marriage is connected to women's position within Afghan society. The limitation of income generation undermines women's collective and individual power.

The second structure in the Connel's theory has to do with power. Power in this case refers to the ability to make decisions and choices. Women in Afghanistan have a paradoxical relationship with power. On the one hand, they are rendered powerless as they are financially subordinate and dependent. On the other hand, women play important role in the construction, enforcement, and perpetuation of child marriages (Ellis, 2000). This lens positions women as both victims and perpetrators in the child marriage dynamic.

Cathexis, the third structure in the *Power and Gender Theory*, refers to the understandings and manifestations of sexual and emotional aspects of women's lives. Women's sexuality is not only personal; it has ramifications for familial and communal relations. Women's bodies are policed and protected by their families (Sultan, 2006). For instance, protecting the chastity of women until marriage is a major responsibility of

parents. Women without virginity suffer the consequences of community shaming, family dishonor and lack of partner (Akbar, 2012). As an important structure, cathexis influences child marriage in important ways. For instance, families choose to marry off their daughters young to protect their chastity. Secondly, their sexuality is seen as a commodity for men. Thus, a man decides when and to whom he will give his daughter or sister in marriage. Accordingly, cathexis has an important implication in why, how, and when girls are married off.

According to Connell's *Gender and Power Theory* women's labor, lack of power, and the social construction of cathexis help to construct child marriage. These three structures work together to produce, normalize, and sustain the practice of child marriage. While these structures are important to understanding the system that perpetuates child marriage, social cognitive theory helps us explore how individuals negotiate child marriage within the context described above. Together, these theories show us the tension between individual agency and structural constraints.

In order to explain the social factors that represent an individual's core beliefs about child marriage in Afghanistan, this study employs *Social Cognitive Theory* (Bandura 1977). This theory is relevant to my study as it explores the dynamics of human agency. *Social Cognitive Theory* claims that people make decisions considering the interplay of internal and external factors. In cases where collective agency is strong, individuals might not have the power to resist commonly accepted norms, values, and practices. Personal agency is impacted by emotions, perceptions and habits. In Afghanistan, individual women might perceive themselves as weak in regards to

changing the practice of child marriage. For instance, many mothers of child brides were themselves married off as children. Even if they individually believed this practice was wrong, they could not voice their beliefs because collectively child marriage is endorsed as a normal practice.

Collective agency is influenced by social approval, institutional rules, and other types of pressure that strongly influence people's choices. One of the drivers of child marriage is its collective acceptance (Nawa, 2011; Bahgam & Mukhatari, 2004). Collectively, this practice is institutionalized and legitimized through social norms and values, common perception, and positioned as a normal cultural and religious practice. Families and communities are instrumental to upholding collective agency. Collectively, men have more capacity and power to sustain child marriage (Mccord, 2012). The social cognitive theory helps us explore the relationship between internal individual perceptions and external factors such as community and family in determining response to child marriage.

Methodology and Approaches

The participatory approach is the most suitable worldview for this study. According to Creswell (2009), through the advocacy approach, specific issues such as empowerment, inequality, oppression, domination, suppression, and alienation can be explored. For those who seek to eradicate the practice of child marriage, this topic concerns issues of oppression, inequality and empowerment. For instance, those forced into child marriage are powerless in a familial and social system, which is predicated

upon the suppression of their voices. The participatory approach has an aim to bring to the front, these voices, which are silenced.

In addition to the participatory research approach, I relied on network mapping and positive deviance to explore those who have managed not to practice child marriage. Network mapping was used to identify people who are the most influential and respected members in the community and if any of them could be used as positive deviants. The positive deviance approach provides a framework for identifying people who do not practice child marriage and looking at how they can help influence other members of their communities. Exploring the perceptions of those who engage in child marriage is useful for understanding subjective interpretations of people. On the other hand, examining the perceptions of those who do not is just as useful as it can allow us to understand which factors contribute to people's differing perceptions.

I also used the process of peer debriefing. I asked ShahJahan Ahmadi, who is an female Afghan media practitioner at Sada-e Azadi and a teacher at Balkh University, to review some of my analysis, in order to evaluate the quality of the data and the pertinence of the methodology, and to examine whether some attitudes and practices, which can only be fully understood from an Afghan's perspective, are being portrayed fairly and accurately. She reviewed the data and the conclusions and provided feedback on the quality of the data gathering, analysis procedures, and the reliability of the conclusions. She was not involved in the prior process of research and checked the data and research only for its validity.

I engaged in reflexivity and I believe this will open an honest narrative for readers to understand how my interpretation and findings are shaped by my gender, culture, history, socioeconomic origin, understanding of the topic as an insider, and the challenges I faced during the research process. For example, some people were uncomfortable with the topic of child marriage and misunderstood my research motives and when I introduced the topic of my study, child marriage, I faced different reactions. Some participants gave me a sarcastic look and awkward silence, while most encouraged what I was doing. Many participants asked if my rationale for this study was the fact that I was not married yet, since I was over 25 and that is the age where it is considered too late and difficult to find a “good husband.” I used interview, focus group, and observation methods to gather my data that will be described in detail in the next following paragraphs.

During the week I arrived in Mazar-e Sharif to begin my field research the weather was becoming terribly hot, with high temperatures reaching almost 43° C in mid-June 2012. One of the things that I was concerned about with regards to my research process was the month of Ramadan, which was in July 20th 2012 and only a month ahead. During Ramadan people fast during the day and this affects people’s daily schedule since people pray most of the time and recite the *Quran*. The business hours also change during this month from the normal 8-4 p.m. to 8-2 p.m. Women spend most of their afternoon preparing food for dinner. Ramadan also affects people’s mood, especially people who have low tolerance of hunger and thirst or who usually smoke cigarettes (something that is forbidden during Ramadan) can be very moody. People feel tired and sleepy, especially

when Ramadan coincides with summer. I did not want the hunger and hot weather to impact my data and my findings. Therefore, I started the data collection process in mid-June 2012, as soon as I arrived in Afghanistan.

I had already decided to consider gender, age, education, ethnicity, and rural and urban differences in my research because these differences impact people's decision making and the way they perceive child marriage. My aim was to interview 20 people but I ended up interviewing 26 people. I interviewed 14 women and 12 men. I found my interviewees through the snowball sampling or respondent-driven sampling process, which means interviewees, introduced other people to me as potential participants in this study. Among these interviewees, 7 of them were illiterate, 6 had primary education, 4 had secondary education, 5 were high school graduates, 3 had a BA degree and 1 had a MA degree. I wanted to explore how the interviewee's answers varied based on their level of education. I also considered age and ethnic differences because people's lifestyles are different based on their ethnicities, which shapes the way they see certain things. For example, the Pashtun ethnicity is well known for being more conservative than the Tajik and Hazara people. Among 26 interviewees who were aged in between 18 and 65, 10 of them were Tajik, 8 were Pashtuns, 4 were Hazara, 4 were Uzbek, and 2 were Turkmen.

I started by interviewing two people a day; one in the morning and one in the afternoon. As the days passed, I was able to find more interviewees and increased my interviews to 3-4 people a day. The only tools used for gathering and documenting data were an audio recorder, a pen, a notebook, and the consent forms. Knowing Afghan

tradition, it was clear that using an audio recorder could be a sensitive issue for some people. The pre-interview sometimes took more time because many of the interviewees assumed that their voices would be broadcast on the radio. For those interviewees, I took 10 to 15 minutes to explain about my research process and that I needed the audio for my own benefit, since it would take longer for me to write everything verbatim if I did not record. The interviews often took between 30 to 45 minutes, except for specific four interviews that I did not record and the interview process lasted an hour. I did not record these four specific interviews when I saw that the interviewees were not comfortable with the audio recorder. I did not use the audio recorder out of respect. I tried to write down as much as possible. I have to point out that three of these four specific interviewees were women.

These interviews occurred mostly in public and private places in Mazar-e Sharif and its suburb, such as schools, hospitals, and people's houses. All data was collected completely anonymously and the names of participants have been changed for privacy purposes. The interviewees were asked not to reveal any names or places that would identify them. I also avoided taking cameras to the interview site out of respect for the participants. I especially wanted to avoid using cameras with female interviewees because they can be a source of discomfort for women. In general, the interviewees were very helpful. Not only did they contribute by participating in this research but they also helped me to find other participants.

My goal was to finish all the interviews by the first day of Ramadan. Fortunately, I succeeded in finishing the interviews a day before Ramadan. I took a week to review

the interviews. I had already planned for two focus groups; one female focus group and one male focus group. I asked all my male participants if they were willing to participate in a focus group and 6 men out of 12 contributed to the focus group. I wanted to conduct these focus groups because a focus group provides more information, since comparing the participants' responses during in-depth interviews with their reactions and verbal input during the focus group will allow for insight into how their attitudes about the subject change or are maintained in a group environment, especially about a topic like child marriage that men are less likely interested in discussing.

I spent two weeks arranging a suitable place at the center of the city for conducting a focus group. While I finished the interviews before Ramadan, I was not able to begin the focus groups until after Ramadan began, so I conducted the focus group in the morning between 8 and 10 a.m. because the weather was less likely to be hot and my participants would not feel as hungry or thirsty as they would in the afternoon. I conducted the focus group in mid-August and, as I expected, the group dynamics were helpful for me in garnering more insightful information. The focus group contributed to my findings and conclusion, since the participants had contradictory opinions regarding child marriage and even the definition of who is a child. The focus group also provided me with an opportunity to employ observation, another method for my data collection. Observation played a key role, as attitudes are not limited to words, but also include body language, facial expression, and other non-verbal cues such as gestures, smiles, frowns, and so forth, which carry relevant information, and in some circumstance even opposes the verbal responses and thus can be even more explanatory. For example, it was

interesting to see some men's sarcasm when the other participants talked about women's rights and empowerment during focus group.

Unfortunately, I could not conduct the female focus group for three reasons. First, it was time-consuming, and I had to return to the U.S., since my summer break was ending. Second, I found that the focus group was costly. I felt guilty when I could not provide my participants with at least their transportation. It is very common in Afghanistan when you invite people for workshops, training, or discussion groups to pay for their food, transportation, and sometimes offer a per-diem because you take their time. As a student I could not afford to pay this cost. Third, it was not as easy to gather female participants as it was to gather male ones. The female participants did not have any problem for the interview since I interviewed them in their offices, houses, and places they were available, but focus group is different than interview. I had to meet them in one place. They simply refused because they did not know me and their families would not allow them to accept a stranger's invitation even for academic purposes. Understanding their concerns, I did not try to convince them.

I left Afghanistan at the end of August 2012. As soon as I returned to the United States, I began transcribing my data. It took me almost three months to finish it, after which, I started coding the data via a software program called NVivo. I utilized thematic analysis using NVivo to analyze the interviews, focus group, and the observation notes. Thematic analysis is used to analyze data for the meanings created in and by people, situations, and events (Floersch & Longhofer, 2010). According to Boyatzis (1998), thematic analysis functions as: (1) a way of seeing; (2) a way of making sense of

seemingly unrelated material; (3) a way of analyzing qualitative information; and (4) a way of systematically observing a person, an interaction, a group, a situation, an organization, or a culture (pp. 4-5). This method especially helped me to code the discussions of the focus group into themes as well as the observations and interviews. Using thematic analysis through NVivo software also helped me to find the most frequent use of specific words and phrases during the discussions. For example, the frequent words used almost by all interviewees are puberty, education, age, and sexual harassment. These frequent words helped me to more focus and comprehend their close relationship with the concept of child marriage. Furthermore, the focus group allowed me to analyze the observation based on themes and the meanings that those interactions, gestures, and reactions generated.

CHAPTER THREE: THE STRUGGLE FOR WOMEN'S RIGHTS IN AFGHANISTAN AND THE CONSEQUENCES OF CHILD MARRIAGE

If we look back at the history of Afghanistan, it is clear that in some periods in the past Afghan women had greater freedom and more important roles in society than today. Queen Gawhar Shad, the wife of Shah Rukh Khan, ruled an empire (1494-1510) from her throne in Herat, a province in the northeast, to China (Skaine, 2002). She is remembered for her strength because she unofficially led the empire for forty years since her husband Shah Rukh was ineffectual. She supported the arts, musicians, poets, and philosophers at the time and wrote laws (Ellis, 2000).

Rabia Balkhi and Malalai are another source of inspiration for women because of their bravery and wisdom (Ellis, 2000). Rabia Balkhi, who belonged to a royal family in Balkh Province, was the first Afghan poetess. Her poems are taught in schools, and there are schools in Afghanistan that bear her name. She was not only a prominent intellectual, whose poems are considered the source of the modern Persian/Farsi literature, but she also wrote about love. She fell in love with her slave against her family's will. When her brother learned of her secret love affair, he locked her in a steam bath until she died. It is said that she wrote her last poem about love in the steam bath using her blood as ink (Ellis, 2000). She is buried in the same steam bath, an historical place in Balkh province.

Malalai fought the British army in 1880 during the second Anglo-Afghan War. Malalai both surprised and inspired men with her bravery during battle. Her name is written in bold letters in the history of Afghanistan and she is still mentioned in schoolbooks (Ellis, 2002). There are many schools and maternity hospitals named after

her, and people often name their daughters Malalai (Moghadam, 2003). Malalai is a very common name for girls in Afghanistan.

As the story of Rabia Balkhi shows, women in Afghanistan have suffered from the culture of shame and honor that requires men to control who has sexual access to the women in their family. This can be viewed as a form of protection of women, but it can also be seen as using religion and culture to subjugate women. If we look back at the history of the late 19th and 20th century we can see that there have been many debates in Afghanistan about the status and rights of women. Important reformers have argued that the subjugation of women is neither true Afghan culture nor Islamic.

Efforts to emancipate women provoking efforts to defend gender discrimination started when Afghan rulers began to introduce reforms regarding women. In 1880 King Abdul Rahman Khan declared that a woman did not have to remarry her husband's kin should he die; a girl given in marriage before reaching puberty had the right to refuse it; and a woman could sue her husband for alimony or divorce in cases of injustice. He also made marriage registration obligatory (Skaine, 2002). These reforms brought attention to women's issues, and the fundamentalists interpreted the reforms as a challenge to culture and religion. Although most people in the cities enjoyed their lives and freedom in the late 19th century, in rural areas and among the poor in cities invisible anger and hatred simmered, stirred up by clergy who feared the changes and saw in them a challenge to their own power and status.

After Afghanistan received its independence from Britain in 1919, King Amanullah Khan and his wife Queen Soraya Tarzi promoted modernization. In

particular, they set the liberation of women as a top priority (Moghadam, 2005). Queen Soraya was the most active queen in the political sphere and at the forefront of feminism in Afghanistan. She wore Western cloths and had short hair and did not cover her head (Ellis, 2002). She established the first women's magazine, *Irshadi Naswan* (Guide for Women.) She also accompanied King Amanullah Khan at every public gathering and on trips abroad and to provinces of Afghanistan, which was unusual at the time (Skaine, 2002). (Even today in Afghanistan, almost a century later, Dr. Zenat Karzai, the wife of Hamid Karzai, the current president of Afghanistan, does not appear in public or have a public face in Afghanistan.) People still admire Queen Soraya because she encouraged others to ask for their freedom, participated in women's gatherings, talked to women personally and wrote about them in *Irshadi Naswan* (Moghadam, 2003).

During the ten years of his reign (1919-1929), King Amanullah Khan introduced many social reforms regarding women, such as establishing Anjuman-e- Himayat-e Naswan (Women's Protective Association,) led by his sister Kubra, to promote women's empowerment and emancipation. This association was one of the steps against women's seclusion (Ellis, 2000). Legal reforms were introduced to allow girls to choose their life partners. According to Moghadam (2003), in the 1920s "Afghanistan legislation was among the most progressive in the Muslim World" (p. 238). Women's situation in the cities changed rapidly. Women in rural areas also benefitted from education and health care, but not as much as urban women.

Conservative Muslims, tribal leaders, and clergy who opposed the king's policy were alarmed (Moghadam, 2003). They helped to fuel anger at the king. Among the

reforms he introduced were monogamy, compulsory education for both genders; and night schools for those who could not study during the day (Ellis, 2000). These reforms provided the fundamentalists with an opportunity to provoke people against the king since night schools for girls and the right to select their partners posed a challenge to men's authority in the family. Also the reform outlawing monogamy did not serve most men's interests since polygamy was very common at the time. People saw the monogamy reform as an attack on religion since in Islam men are allowed to marry four times under certain circumstances. The King announced the separation of Islam from the state; the unveiling of women; and sent of the first group of female students abroad in 1928 (Skaine, 2002). According to Moghadam (2003), these three audacious acts caused a tribal rebellion led by Habibullah Khan that brought down the king. In 1929, King Amanullah Khan abdicated and fled to India.

Habibullah Khan ruled for only nine months, but during that time he banned schools for girls; female students abroad were forced to return home; and polygamy once again became legal and common. From this time on the issue of women's status and rights became a prime source of political tension within the country, and this has made women more vulnerable. Basically, the clergy, kings, and presidents have used women as puppets serving their political interests and agenda.

Habibullah Khan was overthrown by General Mohammad Nadir Khan, who became the next king of Afghanistan. During Nadir Khan's reign (1930-1934), veils became obligatory for women in both rural and urban areas (Skaine, 2002). This became a challenge for those women, who had to unveil themselves during Amanullah Khan's

reign, and then had to change again to appease the new king. Since he was supported by his conservative tribe, Nadir Khan did not allow girls to go to school until the last two years of his kingship (1932-1934). Girls who had started their education during the reign of King Amanullah Khan were deprived of education for three years.

After Nadir Shah's reign ended, his son, Mohammad Zahir Shah, ruled from 1934 to 1973. Zahir Shah, the last king of Afghanistan, was titled "the Father of Nation" in 2002. Under Zahir Shah, Afghanistan joined the United Nations in 1946 as the 55th country. King Zahir Shah also reinstated some of the social reforms introduced by King Amanullah Khan. For example, he established separate schools for girls in 1934, a system that is still followed in Afghanistan today. He allowed women to work in professions considered appropriate for women, such as teaching and medicine. Later women were allowed to work in any profession and even encouraged to ride bicycles and drive in the cities. Women were first admitted to Kabul University in 1959 (Ellis, 2000). This motivated Prime Minister Mohammad Daud Khan, the first cousin of King Zahir who served from 1953-1963, to lead another movement to unveil women, but this time unveiling was neither mandatory nor forced. He left it to families and individuals to decide (Moghadam, 2003):

In 1959, Prime Minister Mohammad [Daud] Khan decided that, since the veil and the *purdah*, the isolation from all men except near relatives, could not be justified in Islamic law, wives of high officials could appear in reviewing stands during the *Jeshn* [feast] holidays with their faces bared (Skaine, 2002, p.16).

In 1963, a high point in women's rights in Afghanistan, women held high positions in government. For example, Kobra Noraye was selected as the first Minister of

Public Health. Four women, Dr. Anahita Ratebzad, Khadija Ahrari, Roqia Abubakr, and Masuma Esmati Wardak, were appointed deputies in parliament. Two more women, Homaira Saljuqi and Aziza Gardizi, participated in *Mishranu Jirga* (Upper house) (Skaine, 2002). Most of these women were highly educated from urban areas. In 1964, these women asked that the term “Afghan” in the Constitution of Afghanistan be clarified. They argued that the term Afghan applied to both genders and called for the right of women to vote (Ellis, 2000).

The abolition of the veil in 1959 was a social, political, and economic reform. Women started working in factories, hospitals, banks, etc. and in the fields of agriculture and construction. They also appeared as actresses, models, designers, and entrepreneurs (Moghadam, 2005). The Afghan labor force increased by 50 percent (Ellis, 2000). Afghanistan changed rapidly in a positive way for women under Mohammad Zahir Khan, but the changes were uneven. While women in the cities had access to education and employment, in rural areas only boys benefited from education. Women stayed at home unless they worked in the fields. In rural areas arranged marriages were the norm rather than an option, but love marriages were becoming common in the cities (Goodwin, 2002).

In 1964, when conservative members of Parliament opposed girls’ education abroad, hundreds of women demonstrated in support of a law that would secure their rights to equal education. Women who were involved in these demonstrations were the first highly educated and modern generation in Kabul. Skaine’s account of this demonstration shows how inflammatory the issue of women’s rights was.

The organized women's movement in 1964 consisted of two political groups, Feminist and Socialist. The feminists advocated equality of men and women regardless of class or ideology. The Socialists wanted to change the material bases of women's oppression, the semi-feudal and capitalist relations of production. Conservative forces saw the women's movement as anti-Islam. During the demonstration, a religious leader threw acid on several women. He was arrested but he said he would do it again. More than 5,000 women demonstrated saying, "Give him back to us!" (2002, pp. 16-17).

Mohammad Daud Khan overthrew King Zahir in a coup in 1973, and King Zahir was exiled to Italy. Mohammad Daud Khan, who claimed the role of the first president of Afghanistan, was known for his progressive policies, especially in regards to promoting women's rights and freedom. In 1977, he outlawed child marriage and set a legal age of 16 for girls and 18 for boys; declared that the dowry belongs to a woman and no one has the right over it but the woman herself; established a family court and hired a female judge in Kabul, the capital of Afghanistan; and allowed women into the police and military (Moghadam, 2003).

The religious and tribal leaders in Afghanistan once again strongly opposed the reforms introduced by Daud Khan. They saw these changes as a challenge to Afghan religion and culture. President Daud Khan's reforms brought many positive changes in Afghanistan, but opposition to his rule grew because of his nepotism and the steps he took on behalf of women's emancipation. He was assassinated in 1978 (Skaine, 2002).

In 1979 the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan. During the time of Soviet Rule, social changes for women reached rural areas, where education became compulsory for both women and men. According to Skaine:

When villagers missed the compulsory education classes, the communists used physical force and coerced them to be present. Some took the

coercion as a personal offense and as “unbearable interference in their personal life (Skaine, 2002, p.25).

Moghadam (2003) adds that education for women “raised the threat of women refusing to obey and submit to family (male) authority” (p. 249).

Over two million people died during the war with the Soviet Union and millions left the country (Skaine, 2002). While the Soviets promoted women’s emancipation, education, and employment, people were not safe. In rural areas the Soviets bombarded mud-brick houses occupied by women and children. Many people fled to Pakistan, Iran, and other countries. Some conservative rural people fled because they thought that women’s education brought dishonor to the family since girls did not wearing the veil or *hijab* in schools. Others joined the Mujahedeen to fight against the Soviets. According to Skaine (2002), even women who lost their children and loved ones during Soviet War joined the Mujahedeen and fought against the Soviet Forces. The Mujahedeen were formed regardless of ethnicity, tribe, education, urban and rural setting, and this diversity opened a whole new chapter in the history of Afghanistan, since it provided the minorities and individuals in the Mujahedeen with so much power (Popalyar & Bell, 2009). According to Popalyar and Bell (2009), the Mujahedeen did not have an agenda to lead the country. They came together as freedom fighters to free the country from the Soviet Union. When Afghanistan’s status changed to the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, conflict broke out among various ethnicities over power within the Mujahedeen (Popalyar & Bell, 2009).

During the Mujahedeen war in Mazar-e Sharif city I was ten year old. The fighting was between the Jamiyet-E Islami (Tajik ethnicity,) the Wadat Milli (Hazara

ethnicity,) and the Junbish-E- Milli Islami (Uzbek ethnicity.) We survived a major air strike, but we lost everything else in that civil war, which brought disaster to our city. After Junbish-E Islami won, the situation even became even worse. People were unsafe in their own homes. Within the Mujahedeen the different political parties from the different ethnicities provided so much power to individuals that anyone could act with impunity (Popalyar & Bell, 2009). Kidnapping, robbery, rape, and harassment became common (Skaine, 2000). People stopped sending their daughters to school because they feared the warlords. People started giving their daughters away in marriage to save them from marrying with the warlord. Women stopped working since they were unsafe in the work environment.

During the Taliban period, both men and women lost their freedom, losing both their choices and their voices, but the oppression applied more to women since they had to stay at home all the time and their rights to education and health care was taken away (Mehta, 2002). When the Taliban took over from the Mujahedeen, the Afghan people experienced the darkest period in our history. Regarding the Taliban oppression, Leonard Rubenstein, the executive director of Physicians for Human Rights in 1998 said:

We are not aware of any place in the world in recent history where women have so systematically been deprived of every opportunity to survive in the society-from working to getting an education to walking on the street to getting health care (quoted in Skaine, 2002, p. 22-23).

After the fall of the Taliban and the United States invasion of Afghanistan, the new government promised women's liberation and emancipation. Women's education and empowerment has become one of the top priorities of the government; however, women's safety has remained unaddressed. The need for protection, which emerged in

the Mujahedeen period, has become even more serious. Women experience sexual harassment on a daily basis.

I personally experienced street harassment multiple times. I was harassed not only on the streets but also in the classroom and work place. I remember coming home in tears and deciding to quit college, but it was my parents, especially my father, who sent me back to college, saying that education does not come easily in our country and reminding me of the simple saying “no pain no gain.” I wonder: *what happens to those girls who do not have family support?*

In Afghanistan, people today are more protective and cautious about their daughters than ever before. This concern for “safety” undermines the value of women’s education and employment for families. Both the girls and their entire family live in fear that a girl may face sexual assaults and harassment when she steps out of the door. Although the issue of harassment in Afghanistan has been recently addressed nationwide through a guideline strategy, it is worth questioning whether this guideline will help to tackle this issue when law enforcement is still a challenge in Afghanistan.

Consequences of Child Marriage

Child marriage is a serious issue that undermines the welfare of women in Afghanistan. According to Jain & Kurz (2007), “...child marriage not only is recognized as a human rights violation but also as a barrier to development” (p.7). Some of the major consequences stemming from the premature marriage of children include isolation, high maternal and infant mortality, high fertility rate, physical abuse, illiteracy, and the

deprivation of women from active participation in the social and political spheres (AIHRC, 2007; Bahgam & Mukhatari, 2004; Bott & Jejeebhoy, 2003; Mathur et al., 2003).

Child marriage deprives girls of their basic right to education, due to childbearing and household responsibilities, and this deprivation has a negative effect on Afghan society as a whole (Ellis, 2000). Lack of education due to early marriage not only affects girls and women's education in terms of women being trained and equipped to work outside the home, but also causes problems for the children of the child brides, who are then raised by uneducated children, rather than educated women (Mccord, 2012).

Child Marriage: A Barrier to Girls' Education

Afghan women have been deprived of their right to education for decades. Their access to education has been constrained for many different reasons: decades of war, insufficient facilities (schools, classrooms, water, toilet facilities, transportation,) lack of female teachers (only 27% of the total number of teachers are female,) less value is given to women's education, and child marriages (NAPWA, 2007-2017; Tang, 2009; Bahgam & Mukhatari, 2004).

The literacy rate for Afghans between 15 to 24 years old is 34 percent (NAPWA, 2007-2017; Skaine, 2002). According to a report of Millennium Development Goals (2005), in Afghanistan boys are twice as likely as girls to complete their primary schooling and this difference continues not only in secondary and high school but also in higher education.

Child marriages deprive girls of their right to education, since the girls must drop out of school and stay at home to serve their husband and his family (Bahgam & Mukhatari, 2004). Traditionally people say that a woman will do nothing productive with a higher education degree. Therefore, it is better for her to stay at home and learn sewing, cooking, and cleaning so that she will be prepared for marriage as soon as possible (Mccord, 2012; Sultan, 2006; Skaine, 2002).

Child Marriage and Severe Health Problems

Child marriages and frequent births are some of the most important causes for a high rate of maternal and infant mortality (Kaartinen & Diwan, 2002). Girls who marry at an early age are most likely to have long-term fertility. The World Population Prospects (2004) states that the fertility rate in Afghanistan is 6.0 children per woman, while the world's average fertility rate for the least developed countries is 5.02 children per woman. Due to a lack of education, women are not able to decide the frequency and spacing of their pregnancies (Mccord, 2012; World Population Prospects, 2004). According to a survey by the Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys (MICS, 2001), among married women between 15 to 19 years old, only 2.8 percent use any form of contraceptive and family planning. They do not have access to information or the power to decide on the use of contraceptives. Since child marriages are very common in Afghanistan, women produce one million babies annually (NAPWA, 2007-2017).

Child marriages are a cause of low levels of maternal and infant wellbeing. When girls have not reached adulthood, they are neither mentally nor physically prepared for

intercourse and pregnancy, which leads to severe pain during labor, complications during delivery, and low birth weight (Hampton, 2010; Save the Children, 2004; Mathur et al., 2003). Other serious health concerns due to having a baby at an early age are an increased risk of chronic anemia, and vesico vaginal fistula (VVF) (Nwankwo, 2001). The latter is an infection of the uterus that causes a patient to leak urine and feces and is a consequence of early pregnancy (Jain & Kurz; 2007; Nwankwo, 2001; Murray & Lopez, 1998). Patients with VVF require surgery to correct the problem, and the facilities for this kind of surgery are very limited in Afghanistan, especially in rural areas (Kaartinen & Diwan, 2002).

Child marriage is one of the main causes of Afghanistan's high maternal mortality rate, which is estimated to be 1,700 per 100,000 live births, which translates to one maternal death every 30 minutes and high infant mortality, which is estimated to be, 103 per 10,000 live births (NAPWA, 2007-2017; Kaartinen & Diwan, 2002). Studies reaffirm that child marriage (in combination with lack of health facilities, transportation and female doctors) is the most significant factor that contributes to low life expectancy for women in Afghanistan, where the average is 44.5 for women, while it is 51.5 for men (Bahgam & Mukhatari, 2004; Kaartinen & Diwan, 2002). Afghanistan is ranked below Angola and Sierra Leone in issues associated with children at risk, such as security, education, health, mortality rates, and nutrition (Skaine, 2002).

The consequences of child marriage along with illiteracy and lack of education can be deadly. The annual report of the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC) on the status of human rights in Afghanistan stated the following:

Runaways, suicides, self-immolations, murders, sexual perversions, and psychological disorders are among the many negative consequences of child marriage. These problems also include the increase of maternal and child mortality rates, and the low level of education for women that has a long term influence on the role the women play in the country's political, social, and economic life (AIHRC, 2007 p. 7).

These issues are illustrated by a recent case that occurred in Nimroz Province in southwest Afghanistan. Amina, a Pashtun girl, committed suicide by self-immolation because at the age of 15 she was forced to marry a 55-year-old man (RAWA, 2010). According to a BBC report on self-immolation, many people who burn themselves in Afghanistan are women. According to statistics given in this report, confirmed by the Ministry of Public Health in Afghanistan, 22,000 cases of burning were recorded in 2011. Most of these cases were women who committed suicide and were victims of domestic violence and other forms of abuse. In Afghanistan families are often ashamed if a woman in their household tries to commit suicide, especially if it is due to domestic abuse (RAWA, 2010). Since the families cover up the actual cause of death, it is frequently difficult to differentiate between accidental and suicidal cases (BBC, September 6th, 2011). Recently, cases of self-immolation have been increasing, making this a national issue. According to the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA), in the past year there were 51 cases of self-immolation involving teenage brides in Herat Province alone.

Child Marriage: A Restriction to Women's Employment

Child marriages combined with gender norms are a barrier to women's employment outside the home (Nawa, 2011). In Afghan society, when a girl marries, she

takes on the responsibility for her husband's entire family. The family usually includes mother-in-law, father-in-law, brothers-in-law, and sisters-in-law. She is expected to perform all the household tasks, such as cooking, cleaning, and washing clothes on daily basis for a family as large as 7-10 people (Mccord, 2012). Second, a girl is expected to give birth as soon as possible after she marries. These two responsibilities are time consuming and severely curtail any opportunity for employment making women dependent on men and without autonomy (Akbar, 2012; Mccord, 2012; Nawa, 2011).

Domestic Violence

Domestic violence exists at the intersection of religious and cultural conservatism, poverty, and ongoing conflict in Afghan society (Danes, 2010; Rashid, 2001; Potts & Hayden, 2008). These factors worsen and deepen both the prevalence and acceptance of violence against women. Regarding gender norms in patriarchal societies, studies have pointed out that such societies define an honorable woman as someone who is obedient without her own desires. Her choices and decisions are based on the will of her father when she is single and on the will and desires of her husband after she marries (Mccord, 2012; Nawa 2011). Hence, girls in Afghanistan are discouraged from being independent and freely making decisions on their own. For centuries this deprivation has kept women subjugated in domestic roles and dependent on men. Therefore, in Afghanistan according to Afghan men, a good woman is a docile woman who stays at home and takes care of her family and household (Mccord, 2012). Domestic abuse is related to child marriage

because a child bride is less prepared to take up the duties of managing a household and pleasing her husband and in-laws.

Child Marriage and Poverty

Poverty is both a consequence of child marriage and a cause of child marriage. Studies show that the poorest countries have the highest child marriage rates (Jain & Kurz, 2007; ICRW, 2006). According to Jain & Kurz (2007), "...child marriage not only is recognized as a human rights violation but also as a barrier to development" (p.7). Since women form 51 percent of the overall population in Afghanistan, investment in their education is essential for human development (Afghanistan Demographic Profile, 2012; Akbar, 2012).

According to a report by the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA, 2011), girls in Afghanistan are sometimes sold; in some particularly poor areas the value of girls is considered even less than that of livestock. The Taliban period added other factors that further motivating child marriage. Since schools for girls were closed and women were not allowed to work, families sold their daughters to make a living. For instance, in Badghis Province in northwestern Afghanistan, a girl was exchanged for a vehicle (UNAMA, 2011).

Causes of Child Marriage

War and its Influence on the Prevalence of Child Marriage

According to the literature, child marriage is among the numerous negative consequences of war (Nawa, 2011; Bahgam & Mukhatari, 2004). According to Nawa, political insecurity and war give men in a patriarchal society more authority and power to subjugate women. War has given families the opportunity to marry off their daughter at an early age under the guise of protection (Mccord, 2012; Nawa, 2011).

Cultural Factors

Many of the structures and practices that perpetuate child marriage are rooted in cultural norms in Afghanistan. One of the significant factors that make it difficult to tackle child marriages is that people see nothing wrong with it (Nawa, 2011). In rural areas people believe that the sooner they marry their daughters the better. Therefore, this practice is more widespread in rural areas than in urban settings (Ellis, 2000). It is quite rare in rural areas for a girl to be between 16-18 years old and not have been married yet. In general, marriages are not seen as existing for the purpose of lifelong companionship but are more practical and economic arrangements (Mccord, 2012). Marriages are still considered a family decision, and despite child marriage being outlawed, nobody denounces the practice, because it is thought to be a private issue (Akbar, 2012; Mccord, 2012; Nawa, 2011; Bahgam & Mukhatari, 2004).

Most families in rural areas prefer to live in poverty rather than allowing female members of their families to work outside the home (Akbar, 2012; Mccord, 2012; Sultan,

2006). Even if a family would allow a female member to work, job opportunities are very limited and employers discriminate against women (Mccord, 2012; Skaine, 2002; Rostami-Povey, 2004).

Religion Factors

The practice of child marriage is most common in Islamic countries, such as in Yemen, where the tragedy of 12 year-old girls dying in childbirth only hints at the extensive practice of child marriage. In the article “Why Do They Hate Us?” Eltahawy (2012) writes: [in Yemen] “demonstrations in support of child marriage outstrip those against it, fueled by clerical declarations that opponents of state-sanctioned pedophilia are apostates because the Prophet Mohammed, according to them, married his second wife, Aisha, when she was a child” (p.1).

Although the Quran does not discuss child marriage explicitly, *Altalq* (the verse on divorce) references child marriage. It says that a man must wait to make sure that his wife is not pregnant: “...and those who no longer expect menstruation among your women, if you doubt, then their period is three months, and [also for] those who have not menstruated. And for those who are pregnant, their term is until they give birth...” (65:4). The passage refers to girls who have not experienced menstruation and older women who are already done with menstruation.

Regarding child marriage there are two camps among religious scholars, one that supports and one that opposes child marriage (Bahgam & Mukhatari, 2004). According to the religious scholars who oppose child marriages, girls have the right to choose their

partners and they should marry when they reach the legal age of marriage. Scholars who support child marriage claim that when a girl reaches puberty she is eligible for marriage (Akbar, 2012).

In a patriarchal Islamic society religion conservatism strengthens and supports men's control over women. Afghan men have the right to forbid their wives from going outside the home, and if a woman goes against her husband's wishes, according to *Sharia* (Islamic) law, a man can divorce her (Kamali, 1985). In rural areas where child marriage is most common, girls are not asked for their consent to be married because they are expected to automatically agree with the family's decision out of respect or for the sake of family honor (Nawa, 2011). Islamic traditions are intertwined with complex emotions, such as guilt and shame. For example, if a woman disobeys her father or husband, she will not only feel guilty, but she will also feel ashamed of breaking the norms and not being a proper daughter or a wife (Mccord, 2012; Nawa, 2011).

Defining Family Honor in Afghan Society

In Islamic countries people place great value on a woman's virginity at marriage (Eltahawy, 2012; Akbar, 2012). A non-virgin bride will be sent back to her family the day after the wedding and this undermines the family honor and damages the family status in society. Sometimes this leads to the girl becoming the victim of an honor killing (Mccord, 2012). Virginity is intertwined with the family honor and shame in the society and the importance placed upon these values contributes to the problem of child marriage (Akbar, 2012). Some families believe that by marrying their daughters at an early age,

they are protecting their daughter's virginity before marriage (Mccord, 2012, Akbar, 2012).

“Honor killing” exists in societies where women are seen as the producers of shame and men as the defenders and the protectors of family honor. Family members or tribal elders are expected to kill a woman who brings shame on her family (Potts & Hayden, 2008). In Afghanistan, this practice still exists in some rural areas, specifically among the Pashtunwali, a tribe within the Pashtun ethnicity (Nordland, 2010). According to a *New York Times* report (December 1st, 2012), in 2012 there were six cases of honor killing reported in the eastern region of Afghanistan and 61 cases in the country as a whole. Among these cases was Gul Meena, an 18-year-old woman who had been a child bride. She fled her marriage. When found by her family, Gul Meena's brother killed the man she eloped with and struck her fifteen times with an axe. She was admitted to a hospital in Jalalabad city, where the hospital staff collected money to treat her. At the time the article was written Gul Meena had been in the hospital for months, but no one from her family or tribe had visited her (Rubin, 2012).

If a woman violates gender and social norms by falling in love, eloping, losing her virginity, and/or becoming pregnant before marriage, she will bring lasting shame and dishonor to her family (Akbar, 2012). The community expects that for a traditional Afghan woman, family honor should be more important than any of her own desires (Mccord, 2012). For example, when a teenage Afghan girl named Gulsima eloped with a boy of her own age instead of marrying an older man, she was shot in the southwest province of Nimroz.

The family is forced by community and tribal norms to punish a woman who dishonors her family; otherwise the community will look down upon the family for not caring enough about their honor. Therefore, family honor plays a significant role in the acceptance of child marriage (Mccord, 2012; Nawa, 2011).

Baad (Settlement of a Debt or Conflict through Bride Exchange)

Baad involves women being used to resolve a family or tribal dispute, in payment for a crime committed by a male relative, and to deal with “shameful” acts like adultery and elopement (Rubin, 2010). According to Afghan law, the practice of *baad* is banned and those who break the law may be subject to three years imprisonment (ACSFO, 2011). Unfortunately, *baad* is still widely practiced in certain areas where people turn to traditional *jirgas*, assemblies of elders that use tribal law instead of relying on the government judiciary system (Bahgam & Mukhatari, 2004).

Female children are usually the victims of *baad*. Young girls are often given as compensation to reconcile a family or tribal dispute by local *jirgas* (Bahgam & Mukhatari, 2004). A famous example is Bibi Aisha, a victim of *baad* whose face was featured on the cover of the *New York Times* in 2010. Her in-laws and husband had beaten Aisha regularly after she was given away in marriage as *baad* at the age of twelve. Usually families that receive a girl as *baad* keep them as slaves and treat them badly. The new bride is a source of revenge for the family and the girl is not seen as a bride but as a servant over whom the man in the family has sexual rights (Bushell, 2002). Aisha fled the abuse, but her husband found her and took her back to Oruzgan, where they had lived. On

a lonely mountainside, he cut off her nose and a portion of her right ear, and left her bleeding (Abawi, 2010; Nordland, 2010). The practice of *baad* has no legal or religious basis (Rubin, 2012; ACSFo, 2011).

Strengths and Limitations of the Literature

The studies discussed above capture both the prevalence and consequences of child marriage. The literature documents the effects of child marriage for young girls in relation to their health, access to education, ability to take up employment, as well as the impact of child marriage on a woman's children and her society.

Another shortcoming in the available literature is the fact that most of the studies were done after the fall of the Taliban, when the situation of women was extremely critical. The statistics about maternal and infant mortality and girls' education are from 2001-2004. Much has changed in regards to women's empowerment since that time, but there is little study of the changes or data about how extensive they have been. Lack of evaluation hinders the possibility of learning from the interventions that targeted women in Afghanistan and seeing what has worked and what needs to be modified or redirected in these programs.

Another issue is that most of the studies are indirect, focusing on women's empowerment and viewing child marriage merely as a part of that issue.

Finally, the studies do not consider the role of men in the social change process and their capacity to advocate for the elimination of child marriage. Men are equally important because they are the decision-makers. They decide when and to whom they

will marry their daughters or sisters. Therefore the issue of child marriage in Afghanistan needs a multi-dimensional focus and a holistic approach that targets both genders.

Finally, as this study will show, the literature overemphasizes the importance of culture and tradition as the cause of the high rates of child marriage in Afghanistan today. A major weakness of the studies is that they fail to explore fully the relationship between child marriage and the economic and political situation in Afghanistan today. Thus, the issue of child marriage in Afghanistan is not well contextualized within the literature.

The lack of a qualitative in-depth exploration of the subject prevents researchers from attaining a deeper understanding of how young girls given in child marriage perceive and experience their situation; how men perceive this practice; how the girls' mothers perceive their daughters; and how this perception influences their willingness to give their daughters as child brides. This is a significant weakness because people's subjective reasons for giving their daughters in marriage must be adequately understood in order to challenge this practice.

CHAPTER FOUR: RESEARCH FINDINGS



Figure 2: Map of Balkh province, where the research was conducted

This research was conducted in Balkh Province, one of the northern provinces of Afghanistan. It has 14 districts and shares border with Uzbekistan and Tajikistan in the north and northeast. Balkh Province covers an area of 16,840 square-kilometers. Its population numbers over one million (RRESA, 2011). Mazar-e Sharif is the capital city and the fourth largest city in Afghanistan. The findings of my research are arranged by the themes that emerged when I coded my interview data.

Afghan Marriage Traditions: Iejab and Qabol

All participants, both from rural and urban areas, think marriage is necessary and obligatory both for their daughters and sons since it is *Sunna* (Islamic custom according to Prophet Mohammad.) Afghan people practice Islamic and traditional marriage based on the values and concepts of *iejab* and *qabol*. *Iejab* means “to meet all the requirements” and *qabol* means “acceptance or consent.” According to all participants, 98 percent of decisions about marriages are made by parents, especially the father, or if the father is absent, a brother or an uncle who is the main family decision maker. Men have more authority because they are considered as the defenders of family honor. Although men are the decision makers about marriages, women are equally involved in perpetuating child marriage. Child marriage is a mutual process of “request” and “accept” between women and men. Women are the ones who find, select, and request girls for their sons and brothers, and the men finalize the decisions.

Among the participants, there was not a single person who had not encountered child marriage, either personally among family members, in neighbors, or in the community. Marriage for girls at a young age is the norm. The consent of the girls to the marriage is usually not required. Although a girl may not meet the legal requirement of being 16-years-old, this is generally not considered to be a problem. Girls are expected to agree to the marriage out of family obligation. Most do not have another option, such as education or choosing their husband. One interviewee, Shaima, a 24-year-old woman teacher, protested that most marriages in Afghanistan do not truly meet the requirements

of *iejab* and *qabol*: “Most of the marriages in Afghanistan are baseless and a pity.” If a girl is 12 or 14, her consent is not valid because she is too young to make the most important decision of her life.

Interviewees described why girls accept a marriage arranged by their parents. Not only is early marriage the norm, good clothes, jewelry, and ceremonies keep the girls happy temporarily. Furthermore, for most girls marriage is a dream. At the age of 12, or even younger, girls start fantasizing about marriage since their families encourage them by teaching them cooking and other household responsibilities in order to prepare them for marriage. Shazia, one of the interviewees, recalled:

When I was 8-years-old, I used to play with my dolls and my favorite [game] was to marry my female dolls to the other kids’ male dolls. When I became 12 years old, I always dreamed of getting married. I knew nothing about marriage and what it meant to be a bride. I only liked wearing a white dress and cutting the wedding cake. I got married at the age of 14 and I was very happy when I said, “yes” to my marriage. I was totally unaware of what was going to happen to me after marriage until I experienced it.

Shazia was raised in a conservative Pashtun family. Her family did not let her to go to school after primary school. She never heard anything about sexual intercourse from either friends or family members. Thus, her first night of marriage turned out to be the most traumatic experience of her life. She had not met her husband prior to their wedding night, and he forced her to sleep with him without knowing anything about sex or considering her sexual desire. From a very young age girls are taught how to fulfill all household responsibilities because they will marry and go to their husbands’ house where they will be responsible for managing the household. But they are not taught about sexual intercourse or the emotional relationship between a husband and wife.

Another important aspect of Afghan marriage traditions is the bride price or dowry (Farsi/ Dari, *toyana*; Pashto, *walwar*; Uzbaki, *qalen*.) Some participants said that although this is the 21st century, a century of modern technology and development, in Afghanistan people still “sell” their daughters for money. The views of this custom differ between urban and rural people. While in rural settings people set a price for their daughters, the bride price is not perceived as “selling,” but as a customary practice. In urban settings people do not set a price, but they expect some money as *sheerbaha* (literally meaning, a price for the mother’s milk) when the father or a male member of the family announce the engagement. Sometimes, however, people do “sell” their daughters due to extreme poverty. Mohammad Saleh, an Uzbek man in his 40s, told the story of his relatives in Sar-e Pul, a province in northern Afghanistan. There were floods for three years. The floods washed away peoples’ houses and crops. In the third year the flood hit his relative’s house and took everything. His relatives were already poor; now they had to live on the street. Not only did his relatives sell their daughters but so did other people. They sold their daughters for up to 3,000 USD and some of these girls were as young as 11 and 12-years-old. Some gave away their daughters without any bride price in order to provide a safe shelter for them and protect them from rape and other dangers of living on the street.

Another participant, Ahmad Shah, insisted that poverty is not the reason people ask to receive a bride price:

Some people make poverty an excuse to gain more profit. They ask for a larger amount of money as a bride price. In fact, the richer people ask for higher amounts of money for their daughters.

He told the story of one of his neighbors, the richest man in the neighborhood, who asked for 20,000 USD for his daughter. He also said some families make the groom's family pay all the money in advance or before marriage. Then the groom's family may not only pay cash but also livestock and anything precious to complete the amount of money suggested by the bride's family. Interestingly, most of the interviewee said that the custom of dowry is becoming more common rather than decreasing recently.

An employee of the Cooperation Center for Afghanistan (CCA) in Mazar-e Sharif said that one of the reasons that family sell their daughters in northern provinces are drugs. He said in northern provinces such as Badakhshan and Faryab brothers and fathers force their sisters and daughters into addiction in order to give them away in marriage without any trouble. Unemployment also contributes to an increase in bride price. Since the International Security Assistance Forces (ISAF) have set a deadline to withdraw their forces from Afghanistan in 2014, people live in fear of post 2014, unemployment, Taliban, and civil war. Security is another concern; families try to give away their daughter in marriage to make their lives secure.

Women and men who live in the city and received higher education not only saw a problem with child marriage and the dowry, but also with the marriage system in Afghanistan as a whole. Marriage is not a choice for most girls, but rather an obligation. They said that women can be forced into marriage at any age, not only as children. Habibullah, a male university student in Mazar-e Sharif, pointed out that women play a role in perpetuating harmful practices: "We rarely hear that a woman is burned by her father-in-law, while it is very common that a woman is burned by her mother-in-law or

sister-in-law” (July 2012). Other participants agreed that in every case of domestic violence there was a woman involved. The men make rules and the women follow them and force them upon other women. Even women who have suffered do not support other women, but see their problems as their destiny or Allah’s will.

Cultural Support for Child Marriage

Some participants mentioned that the desirability of child brides is reflected in Afghan visual arts, folklore, songs, poetry, and fables. Many famous songs and poems in Afghanistan show an obsession with pre-teen and teenage girls (10-14 years- old) and their beauty. It is common to compare a 14-year-old girl to a full moon because on the 14th day a moon is considered a full moon.¹ Changes in the shape of a developing young woman’s body and her skin are also described as a source of attraction in poems and songs.² The following two Farsi/Dari poems, which also exist as songs, were sung and recited by participants in the focus group. In one poem, the poet expresses his feelings toward his fiancée, a ten-year-old girl:

ای دلبر سرو ناز، کان گهری، چه مدعا داری؟
 در آتش عشق تو بسوخت بال و پر، چه مدعا داری؟
 گرفتی به دستای سفیدت قلمه، زده ای خینه
 و سمره ره نزن سرمه به چشمای سیاه، به دست آینه
 انگشتی دسته نمایان کده ای، جان گل لاله

¹http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wNXAybxGAAY&playnext=1&list=PLDEF02AA9FE20820C&feature=results_main

²<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H0mK5GOTMZ8>

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=58-45HLLjfk>

هرجا میروم دلم تسلائی تو نیس، شوخ قنغاله
 خیر ته ندیدم، به غمایت میسوزم، ماه ده ساله
 ای شو سیاه ره به سرم روز کده ای، چه مدعا داری؟

My sweetheart, you are like a mine of pearls, what is your intention?
 I am on fire because of your love, what is your intention?
 You put henna on your white beautiful hands
 You put eyeliner under your black eyes with mirror in hand
 My tulip, I can see your ring
 Wherever I go, my eyes follow you, my fiancée
 I do not see any good from you but pain, my 10-year-old moon
 I stay all night longing for you, what is your intention?

In the second poem, the poet speaks of his love for a 14-year-old girl:

من چه کردم که مرا از نظر انداخته ای
 لطف خوش را به جای دیگر انداخته ای
 خواب دیدم که مکیدم لب میگون تو را
 در دهانم خم شهد و شکر انداخته ای
 مه چطور در نگیرم از غم 14 ساله
 که شده دشمن من با دیگر غنغاله

What was my fault that you forgot me?
 You left me for someone else
 I dreamed of kissing your lips
 I felt you filled my mouth with honey and sugar
 How could I not feel pain because of the 14-year-old girl?
 How could you [get] engaged to someone else?

These songs and poems show that a young girl's beauty is pure and preferred. According to participants, songs and poems play a significant role in supporting the ideal of a young girl as a bride.

When is a Girl Ready for Marriage?

In order to understand more about child marriage in the context of Afghanistan, it is essential to know who Afghans consider to be a child. When participants were asked about their opinion, their responses varied. One third of the participants said that any

person under the age of 18 is a child. However, in the context of traditional families this is not true. Participants who were interviewed in villages consider a child to be an infant, a breastfed baby, or a child going to primary school, meaning under nine years old. The majority of participants said that most people in Afghanistan believe that once a child reaches puberty they are no longer a child. Characteristics that participants described as signaling a boy or girl's entry into adulthood were: growing height and weight for boys and girls, growing breasts for girls, vocal changes and wet dreams for boys, skin changes such as rashes and pimples for both boys and girls, and growing hair on different parts of their bodies. Girls are no longer considered children once their breasts start appearing; they are called *dukhtar jawan* (young women.) Similarly, boys are no longer considered children when pubic hair starts appearing; they are called *mard jawan* (young men.)

In regards to children's pubescence, there was not much difference between men and women's responses. They said that when children reach puberty tradition requires them to behave properly and maturely, otherwise their actions are considered inappropriate and impolite. The expectation seems to be stronger for girls because they are a potential cause of shame. A young woman's physical maturity is more visible than that of her male counterpart, making her a target for the sexual advances of men. For a girl puberty comes with many restrictions, such as wearing *hijab* and not going outside the house. Because of the physical maturation of girls' bodies and the development of breasts, they have to cover themselves not only outside the home but also among family members.

Most participants said that a girl's menstrual cycle was a sign that she was physically prepared for marriage. It is seen as a sign of sexual desire. The physical maturation of girls during puberty contributes to the assumption that these young women are mentally and emotionally mature. When I asked participants when a girl was ready for marriage, they said, "When you hit a girl with a hat and she doesn't fall, it means she is ready for marriage." Although some participants pointed out that this is a shallow measurement because most people would not fall when they are hit with a hat, they agreed that it is a common saying.

Surprisingly, women often expressed the same opinion as men, especially older women who are housewives with only a primary education. Some of these participants were also the victims of child marriage. They said that they suffered because they were not prepared for marriage. According to them, the solution is better preparing their daughters to deal with household responsibilities. One of the participants said, "Life is not easy, especially for a woman. As mothers our responsibility is to make them ready from an early age, so they will be able to survive." According to many participants, a good age for marriage is 14-15 years old for girls. They said that considering society's behavior toward girls (harassment in the streets, sexual assault, and insecurity) it is better for a girl to get married.

According to the female interviewees, 14 to 15 years old is a good age for girls to at least get engaged for several reasons. First, they believe girls are sexually active at this age. Second, girls will spend the rest of their lives at their in-laws' home, so they have to learn the new family's norms. The younger the girls are, the easier it is for them to adopt

the new family's way of living. Third, young girls have a better chance to find a good husband in a good family. The older a girl gets, the harder it will be to find a good husband. A good husband is defined as educated and handsome, with a good family background and secure financial status.

Participants did not have an accurate age established for when children reach puberty. For instance, based on their own estimation some of the men and women reached puberty as early as age 11 and some as late as age 15. These contradictory statements about when children reach puberty are hard to evaluate since the participants hardly knew their ages (See section below on Age as a Factor in Child Marriage.) According to participants, physical changes were the main factor in deciding when a girl is old enough to marry, not the actual age of a girl. According to most of the participants, girls are like *sabzipalak* (spinach,) which can ripen overnight. Once they are over ten years old, it is expected that they can begin their menstruation at any time.

Although none of the participants were certain about the scientific basis of their understanding, many claimed the marriage age being 16 for girls and 18 for boys was based on the fact that girls reach puberty earlier than boys. They believed that Afghanistan's marriage law also states that girls mature more quickly than boys, both physically and mentally. Even though they emphasized the difference in rates of physical maturation between boys and girls in explaining child marriage, when asked to share their experiences their responses indicated that they recognized that girls were not usually ready for marriage when they reached puberty. One woman said:

Unlike my friends who reached puberty when they were 12, I reached puberty when I was 16 years old. This does not mean that when I got my

first menstruation, all of sudden I became mature. Even today at the age of 23 or 24, I think I am weak and immature.

As an Afghan woman, I think sharing my own experience about puberty is relevant. I was 11 years old when I reached puberty. I got my period before my elder sister who is a year older than me. I was the first one among my peers to reach puberty. I was shocked and traumatized seeing myself bleeding. I did not think it was a normal thing. I was terrified and curious at the same time. I did not know anything about a woman's menstrual cycle before that day. In Afghanistan, sex education is taboo because according to our socially constructed norms sex does not exist for women. Neither my mother nor the school had taught me about menstruation. I was scared of my mother and thought that if I told her she would beat me. After reaching puberty, nothing changed at first except my mother's expectations. She started treating me differently by creating a lot of restrictions, such as requiring me to wear *hijab* (covering my head and body properly.) I was prohibited from playing outside the house with my girlfriends and going outside to buy things from neighborhood stores. In fact, my mother tried to do everything to make me realize that something had changed and I was not the same person anymore. In her eyes I was neither a child nor an adult. When we had female relatives over as guests and they started the so-called "women's talk," my mother made me leave the room with my younger sisters. My curiosity about my biological change was raging, but I did not dare to ask a single question of my mother or anyone else. Like the millions of other mothers in Afghanistan, my mother never talked about sex education with me or my siblings because of the fear that we would become sexually aware and ruined, because it is not good for a "good Afghan teenager" to know about her sexuality.

Sharing my own experience, I would like to make the point that the age of puberty for girls varies among individuals, even between sisters in the same family. With this in mind I wonder, why people and the law generalize girl's maturation as earlier as and faster than that of boys? In addition there is little understanding in Afghanistan of the difference between physical maturity and emotional maturity.

On Birth Certificates

Many parents do not know the age of their children. It is unusual for Afghans to keep track of the exact date of birth for their children. Some families forget their children's date of birth because they sometimes have six or more children. According to participants, sometimes a child's date of birth is associated with a particular event or incident that occurred at the same time. When the participants were asked about their birth date as a test, most of them estimated their age or answered after a long pause and gave me three or four different years in a row. For example, one participant said she was "either 25, 26 or 27, maybe."

Most children do not have a birth certificate. When I interviewed a female gynecologist in Mazar-e Sharif, she said:

Our maternity ward is the biggest in the region. We even receive patients from other provinces. Although it is the biggest, we have small facilities. Sometimes, we receive 30-40 baby delivery cases a night and we have to deal with a lack of equipment, as well as a lack of beds, rooms, and professional doctors and staff. Our hospital does not provide birth certificates because no one asks for them. We can barely keep track of our patients. We do register the patients' names and locations.

Therefore, there is no solid documentation to verify the accurate date of birth for a person.

Not having a birth certificate makes any statement about age unreliable. When people ask for the *tazkira* (Afghan National Identification Card,) lack of a birth certificate can be a problem. When I asked the participants about their national identity card, only 10 out of 26 had one. Even on the national identity card the age is not accurate since a person does not always provide a birth certificate when requesting the card. When people get their national identification card, their real birth date is used if they know it; if not, the age is estimated. It is essential to know a girl's age before she can be recognized as a child bride. Since most families do not know the exact age of their daughters when they marry, if a girl has reached puberty, they do not see it as child marriage. The issue of unreliable information on age is totally neglected in the literature reviewed for this thesis.

The Responsibility of Having a Daughter

Girls in Afghanistan are a big responsibility and for families, sometimes even a burden. As one participant said, "We love our daughters. They are gifts of Allah but from the day they are born we say: "Girls are strangers and belong to someone else [meaning their husbands]" (*Dukhtran mal mardom ast.*) In both urban and rural settings men stated that their daughters were their responsibility, and they would be blamed if anything bad happened to their daughters. The men in rural areas, regardless of their education (middle and high school,) ethnicity and age, said that a father is responsible for marrying his daughter off as soon as she gets her menstrual cycle, otherwise with each monthly cycle

they will have to sacrifice an animal because it is a sin to keep a girl who might be able to produce a baby in the household. Even though people said that with every monthly cycle of their daughter they should sacrifice an animal, no one actually does this. However, as soon as another family asks for their daughter's hand and fits their expectations, most fathers are ready to marry off their daughter.

In contrast sons are seen as supporting the family. Male participants gave many reasons why sons are more important. First, they will carry the family name and perpetuate the family line. Second, boys are less likely to bring shame to the family than girls. Third, they take care of the parents when they are old. Fourth, boys can earn income while girls have restrictions when it comes to going outside the house. Most participants said that sons in the family help fathers as they struggle to make a living. In a society where men are the "breadwinners" and women are "caretakers," men are responsible for working hard and feeding a big family of up to six or seven people. Boys are called *bazoepadar*, which means "arms of their fathers," while girls are called *dastyarmadar*, which means "girls are mothers' assistants for household purposes."

Girls are a big responsibility and keeping them for a long time is risky. If a daughter falls in love with someone or elopes, the parents will be responsible for not raising her properly and this brings lasting shame on the family. According to the interviewees, this shame affects the family severely for years. For example, the girl can be accused of being a whore, even if she has slept with only one person, and it will be difficult for other girls in the family to find a husband. The man, the head of the family,

would not walk with his head held high for years. In fact, he would be discredited for not protecting his family's honor.

There are many metaphors used for girls in Afghan society. For example, one interviewee compared girls to a white piece of fabric. If the fabric gets a stain, it is difficult to remove. Another participant said that when a girl does anything against the traditional norms, the shame lasts until she goes to her grave. According to a more educated interviewee in Mazar-e Sharif:

Afghanistan is a country where women are not remembered when they do something good, but will be punished and nobody will forgive them if they do anything wrong against traditional norms.

But even urban Afghans fear the shame that may come from a daughter or sister.

A woman in Mazar-e Sharif said:

My daughter's virginity is as important as she herself. God forbid, if she does something crazy, I will kill her with a pillow and then I will hang myself or eat rat poison.

This woman has four daughters. She said that she cannot police them all the time. She explained that being a mother is a big responsibility because people judge the entire family based on the daughters' behavior. She said that despite all the restrictions and attention she gives to her daughters, when she hears neighbors or relatives are talking about them, she feels terrible and thinks that her daughters are a burden on her shoulders.

Another interviewee in Mazar-e Sharif, a woman in her 50s, recalled that when she was raised, she did not have any freedom at all. In her entire life she has not done anything to violate her family's honor. She is concerned about the new generation because girls today have access to social media, such as internet and cell-phones. She had

to provide her daughter with a cell phone when she went to school because of the lack of security and harassment in the streets. The cell phone is for protection so the girl can call family members during an emergency, but the mother feels that she has to check the phone all the time. She is worried that her daughter may find a boyfriend through the phone or internet:

Although I know she would not go against my wishes, this fear bothers me all the time. Girls are like cotton and boys are matches. When they get together the result is fire. Therefore, if a good family asks for my daughter in marriage I will not wait for her to finish her higher education. She can continue her education in her husband's house if they let her do so.

She is not the only mother concerned about social media. Many participants see social media, especially cell-phones, as a potential source of trouble for their daughters. Social media is a site of interaction between girls and boys since they cannot meet openly in public places even to talk. Young people must find ways to keep their contact secret, and they use social-media.

The concerns of women in rural areas are completely different from those of women who live in urban areas. In rural areas women want to raise their daughters in a very traditional way, as they were raised. They think it is the preferred way of rearing children because they can manage six or eight children, handle household responsibilities, and take care of livestock, such as cows and sheep. The women that I talked to in rural areas were married between the ages of 12 and 18. When I asked about their marriages and their children's marriages and futures, they talked about destiny. They said that the time of marriage and the partner is already fixed the day a person is born. Although some of these women said they suffered a lot when they married,

especially with pregnancy and child bearing, they said it is a common problem that every woman encounters in her life and patience is the one and only solution.

Attitudes toward Girl's Education

Many families cannot afford to send all of their children to school, so they choose to send their sons. Male interviewees explained that a boy's education is more important than a girl's education because boys stay with their parents and take care of them until they die. Sooner or later girls will marry and leave home. Therefore, families invest more in their son's education than their daughter's education.

During the group conversations, however, participants revealed that denying girls an education was not simply due to the expense. Haji Ahmad, who formerly live in a village in Balkh Province but had recently moved to the city, said that in some rich families, women's brothers do not allow them to have a good education because the women would become aware of property rights and ask for their share. He said that in both rural areas and cities there are landowners and businessmen who do not want their sisters to marry because they do not want their brothers-in-laws to share the property. Another participant, Sharif, confirmed this and said that his relatives had not allowed their sisters, who are now in their 50s and 60s, to get married because of the property issue.

When asked about a girl's education, the women said that they let their daughters go to school until they get married. The rest is up to the new family. If they do not want her to go to school, she should not. If the new family is open-minded and liberal enough

to send their daughter-in-law to high school or to receive higher education, they might also let her work outside the home in future. But people believe that going to school basically does not make any difference if a woman is going to be a housewife.

Men did not all agree on the value of giving girls education. One of the male interviewees in Mazar-e Sharif became visibly upset as he explained why he would not send his daughter for higher education:

I love my daughter; that is why I do not want her to go to get higher education, where boys will run after and bother her. I do not want her to work and deal with a bunch of misogynists and deal with their hatred and abuse. I want her to learn basic reading and writing, so she will not be dependent on others in the future. I want an easy and comfortable life for her. I want to marry her to a man who will take care of her the rest of her life.

Another man, a Pashtun who lives in Mazar-e Sharif, expressed a different view: “My daughter is the only girl in the entire tribe who goes to a university.” He admitted that he never talks about his daughter in front of other men, but he believes that people should break the taboos and see women as human beings, not as a source of shame or a threat to the family’s honor. Although his brothers and other relatives are rich, he said, they are conservative and do not think a girl should study beyond high school.

Several participants expressed their belief that the life of an educated woman working outside the home was more difficult than that of a housewife. Women who work outside the home are vulnerable to sexual harassment. The lack of mechanisms to report complaints and punish offenders makes the problem widespread. As a consequence, most families do not allow women to work outside the home and therefore do not value women’s education.

After fall of the Taliban, the government promised to promote women's liberation and equal rights. But the government adopted a policy of sex-segregated education with girls and boys studying in separate classrooms or separate schools to please conservative members of the society. Some critics believe that this segregation contributes to the sexual harassment that is prevalent in Afghan society. In an article entitled "How Afghanistan Is Beginning to Deal with Workplace Sexual Harassment," Mujib Mashal writes:

For twelve formative years young men and women do not interact in an academic environment as equals. At the university, there is more opportunity for cross-gender interaction, but by then the ideas of the sexes and the traditional power dynamics have become rigid already. Added to this is a flood of TV channels showing popular Western media, romantic soap operas — where women are equally represented as men — as well as a vast availability of cheap pornographic material in the market. The society's conservative values have not changed to accommodate the influx of such media (*World Time*, 2013).

What Do Interviewees Know about the Legal Age for Marriage?

Almost half of the participants were aware that there is a legal age for marriage. Among those participants who know of the law, half support the law, citing girl's faster maturation process. The other participants agreed that girls grew up more quickly than boys, but they were concerned about the education of girls. They pointed out that there is no age difference for primary school admission, which is six-years-old for both boys and girls. When a girl enters school at the age of six, by the time she graduates from high school she will be 18. The law for the age of girls' marriages does not take into consideration girls' education. A girl is only in the tenth grade at the age of 16, the legal age for marriage. Shukria, a teacher in a girls' high schools in Mazar-e Sharif, said, "Our

law is very hypocritical and indeed extremely patriarchal in the case of girls' marriage age and their education." Although many interventions promote girls' education and it is one of the top priorities of the government since the fall of Taliban in 2001, the law regarding the legal age of marriage for girls undermines girls' education.

On Patriarchal Attitudes

A few interviewees blamed child marriage and the situation of women in Afghanistan on patriarchy. A male university student in Mazar-e Sharif, described an event he witnessed at the university:

A few days ago, a girl made a presentation on the feminist movement and she also talked about Islamic feminism. All of a sudden, all boys in the class stood up and wanted to attack her for speaking against Islam. The environment of the classroom changed completely. We faced some conservative and violent boys instead of our classmates. The teacher was scared because those boys could beat that girl. We took the girl outside of the class and the teacher explained that her presentation was based on others' research, not her own words. The teacher said if the students as an open-minded generation cannot differentiate between research and someone's personal opinion then they do not deserve to be in the academic sphere.³

This interviewee said that although he is a man, he knows that patriarchy is practiced in the worst possible ways in Afghanistan. According to him, women are mistreated and they need justice. He said, "Where a girl is not safe in a classroom, how can a family trust that she will be safe if they send her to university?" He continued:

In a society, where women are stoned, beaten up, burned, poisoned, and attacked with acid at the schools, on the streets and in their own houses,

³ When I interviewed men in Afghanistan, I found it difficult to talk to men about women's empowerment and liberation. I was particularly cautious in rural areas, because you never know when the talk about women will turn into a religious discussion.

child marriage is not even a concern. In fact, families who arrange a young girl's marriage see themselves as responsible people who are fulfilling their duties ahead of time.

He explained that in Afghanistan people think that anything that happens to them, good or bad, is Allah's will. He said:

If a woman is beaten up, it is Allah's will. If a family marries a daughter at the age of 12, it is Allah's will because marriages are made in heaven. When a woman is beaten by her husband and she does not complain, but keeps silent, she is praised for her tolerance and patience and strength by other women. She is considered a 'good wife' for living with an extremely aggressive man.

A young woman teacher at a secondary school in Mazar-e Sharif said that it is difficult to live in a society where women receive different treatment than men both in the family and outside the family. She says a woman does not have a voice in the family in a patriarchal society, where the men are extremely sexist. She said that she hates it when she sees 12-16 year old girls engaged or married at such an early age. She thinks that families who marry off their daughters as child brides should be punished. As she spoke, she caressed her eight-year-old daughter:

When I hear through media or other teachers about domestic violence, self-immolation, the subjugation of women, and the treatment of women as less than human, I do not know what to do and how to protect my daughter. I might not give her in marriage until she is over 25.

She believes that being a woman, especially a mother, is the toughest job in Afghanistan.

She concluded:

When their own family treats them as less than human, how can women expect to receive good treatment from the world outside?

As another example of patriarchal attitudes in Afghanistan, I note that in the discussion on when girls mature, some male interviewees said that since women mature

earlier than men, they also grow older more quickly than men. They believed that this meant that a man must be older than his wife. Then as a man approaches old age, his wife should still be younger and healthier, so she can look after him. Another interviewee added:

If my son, who is 30 years old, marries a young girl, by the time he reaches his 40s his wife will be in her 20s, and if his wife is still young my son will not think about getting a second wife.

The Role of Mullahs in Child Marriage

Marriage is an important element of Afghan tradition and religion. A man must marry a woman in the traditional way if the couple wants to live together; otherwise the local community makes the family leave the area, accusing them of adultery. Adultery is forbidden in Islam, and people who are caught are punished, sometimes by stoning. Any sexual relationship outside of marriage is considered *haram* (forbidden) based on religion and tradition.

It is essential that a mullah perform a marriage. Marriages can occur without the presence of a groom or bride or family members if they have a proxy or witness, but it is not possible without a mullah. In a traditional marriage, a mullah reads the contract in front of four witnesses, two from the groom's side and two from the bride's side. This practice is oral rather than written. This is the common practice in both rural areas and cities. People who want to register their marriages in the court must do it after the traditional marriage ceremony. Only people who elope and marry for love marry in the court. Court marriages are not common, and if people hear that someone had a court

marriage, they immediately assume the couple eloped and that it is a marriage against the will of family.

People in cities sometimes register their marriages for legal reasons concerning property, for travel purposes or simply for a record. But most people do not register their marriage. There are multiple reasons. First, it is time consuming and considered unnecessary. Second, people believe in traditional Islamic marriages rather than court marriages. Third, divorce is possible without a court being involved. A traditional divorce (*talaqiorfi*) takes place in the presence of elders, who serve as witnesses to the divorce. Finally, people do not know how to register their marriages. One interviewee said, “When I went to the judge’s office to ask for *nekahnama* (a marriage contract,) the judge said, ‘What is the mullah in your mosque for? They are there to perform the marriages’” (Mazar-e Sharif, July 2012).

Participants said that the acceptance of child marriage by mullahs was a significant factor in the prevalence of child marriages. Without the participation of the mullah, a child cannot be married. Mullahs are respected and regarded as trustworthy, especially in rural areas. The Mullah is regarded as a holy person and the agent of Allah. If the mullah does not object to a marriage, the parents are assured that they are not responsible and guilty before both religion and the law. Critics of child marriage among my interviewees suggested that mullahs who agree with child marriages either do so for the *chapan* "traditional gown" and the money that they receive after reciting the marriage contract or to hide their own child marriage practices by showing religious acceptance of it, making it a common practice.

War and Conflict and Insecurity as Factors in Child Marriage

During the individual interviews and the focus group discussions, participants wanted to talk about different kinds of insecurities that they see as reasons for child marriages. For them insecurity does not only mean war, terrorism and conflict, but also new technology, harassment on the streets, gender discrimination, misogyny and the impunity of warlords. Women and men shared their bitter experiences and concerns about their daughters. A housewife in her mid-50s living in Mazar-e Sharif, said:

Some 40 years back when I was young, I remember men behaved well when they saw a girl on the street. In recent years, men and young boys are becoming uncivilized instead of improving. Although I escort my daughters everywhere, they face harassment even when I am with them. Men stare at, curse, and even touch women on the street.

She explained that all of her daughters go to school, but if they take ten minutes longer than usual to come home, she stands at the door of their home and yells to them. She says that worrying about her daughters on a daily basis, in addition to other problems, is overwhelming. Therefore, she wishes to marry her daughters off to men who will take care of them. Another female participant said, “Regardless of what a woman wears, a burqa or a head scarf, they experience harassment.” According to Doctor Fawzia, every woman in Afghanistan experiences verbal and non-verbal harassment at least a few times in her life.

Listening to participants, I realized that both fathers and mothers see insecurity, rape, and sexual harassment as reasons for marrying their daughter at a young age. They marry their daughters to provide them with a comfortable life. They do not feel guilty or

consider the marriage to be “child marriage” if their daughter has reached puberty. But in the cities, there are those who disagree with Afghan traditions that restrict women.

What Are the Characteristics of People Who Oppose Child Marriage?

In my research I found that those who oppose child marriages are usually young people with higher education, doctors, teachers, and current child brides. University students I talked to told me that most marriages in Afghanistan are forced because individual choice and consent are not considered. Families oppose the idea of women choosing their husbands. If a woman goes against her family’s wishes, the couple cannot be happy because of the community’s taunts. People will look down on the couple and treat them as though they have committed a crime. Although the new generation realizes many problems with the practice of child marriage, they do not know how to challenge this practice. They want to be “good children.”

For example, a 20-year-old university student in Mazar-e Sharif who is not yet married related that she was in high school when relatives started asking for her hand. She has been able to delay her marriage in hopes of finishing her university degree. She said that she is lucky because her parents are both highly educated; thus it was not hard for her to convince them to let her continue her education. She believes that women should be able to choose their husbands. She says that marriage is a life-long commitment, and she seeks companionship in marriage. But marriages without love and consent, based on family arrangements are obligatory. She wants to select her husband, but she will marry only if her family agrees with her choice.

When I talked to child brides, they shared their stories with tears. Here are some of the child brides' stories that I was told:

Laila, a housewife who lives in a remote village in Balkh province, said she got married when she was 14. She became pregnant with her first child when she was 15. She did not know anything about pregnancy. During the entire pregnancy, she did not have any check-ups. She heard from others that the baby would be born in nine months. When it took longer than nine months, the family members started making comments.

I thought I should do something to make the baby come soon, so I went to my room and started lifting heavy suitcases. I was in pain and I thought I was going to have the baby soon. Suddenly something broke and I felt like a river was coming from my lady part. The blood was everywhere. By the time they took me to the old lady [an experienced but uneducated midwife], I had lost a lot of blood and I gave birth to a dead baby.

A housewife in her 30s who lives in Mazar-e Sharif, survived an early pregnancy, but her anger and fear has affected her child. She was 13-years-old when she was married to a 28-year-old man. She was 14 when she got pregnant with her first child. She had to quit school in the eighth grade because she was ashamed of going to school with her big belly. She was the youngest child in the family, so she had no experience with babies:

When I gave birth, I could not hold the baby for weeks. I was scared that I might hurt her. I did not know how to feed her, and everybody in the family expected me to know about this.

Her mother helped her for a month but then left her alone with the baby. Her mother-in-law not only did not help her, but also expected her to do all the chores in addition to caring for the baby. She said she had a hard time looking after the baby. When the baby got sick and cried, she would cry too. She said the traumatic experiences she faced when she was 14—leaving school, being away from family and friends, dealing with unceasing

chores, her in-laws and husband's expectations, and the baby—overwhelmed her. The severe emotional strain led her to beat her two-year-old daughter when she cried. During the interview, she cried and said that her first child is mentally and physically slower than her other children. She is scared, shy, and silent, and she stutters when she talks. The mother believes this is due to the abuse her daughter suffered as a child.

How the Different Types of Family Impact Child Marriage?

People I interviewed, especially officials from the NGOs like Medica Mondiale (Medica Afghanistan) and the Cooperation Center for Afghanistan (CCA) that work on women's rights, said that in order to address child marriage in Afghan society it is necessary to know the types of families that exist in Afghanistan and the way they perceive child marriage. According to them, there are four types of families in Afghanistan; traditional, religious, modern and open-minded.

1. Traditional families are those that no matter whether they live—in castles, tents, cities or villages—their ideologies are traditional. Their thoughts and decisions are based on traditions and customs. They value and prefer traditional norms to an individual's happiness. For the members of a traditional family, what others say and think about their actions is more important than their own wishes. Women in these families are strongly influenced and pressured by tradition. Traditional women are raised in such a way that the family's desires are more important than their own. They accept that they must sacrifice themselves for the honor of the family. Child marriage is widely practiced in traditional families.

2. Religious families are those families that pray five times and recite the Quran daily in order to solve all problems in their lives. They believe that anything that happens is Allah's will. They see this life as a transitional path to heaven or hell. For most of these families religion did not come with education, but rather with heritage. They follow what religious leaders say about what is right and wrong according to their religion. These families see women as producers of sin and shame. Therefore, men see themselves as guardians of women. They domesticate and subjugate women under the guise of protection. They are less likely to support women's education, but instead encourage women to focus on religious activities. Furthermore, religious families often marry their children to close relatives (first cousins.) They do not consider the age of the girls since she will move from her parent's house to her aunt or uncle's house after marriage.

Religious and traditional families together form the majority of families in Afghanistan. They consider child marriage to be the safest and most preferred form of marriage.

3. Modern families prefer to live a different life style than ordinary Afghan people. While ordinary people focus on their basic needs, such as food, rent, and other traditional expenses, modern families think beyond those needs and invest in a long-term future. They support girls' education by sending them to school and language courses, as well as providing social media facilities, such as internet and computers. They want a career for their children regardless of their gender. They even support their wives and daughters working outside the home in professions,

such as a medicine, teaching, or engineering. These families are only found in the cities and the families' financial status is usually better than that of ordinary people. These types of families are the minority in Afghanistan, but their numbers are gradually increasing. According to interviewees, these families are less likely to support child marriages. Even if they marry off their daughters at an early age, they find potential families to support their daughter's education after marriage.

4. Open-minded families are very scarce in Afghanistan. These types of families are different from modern families in various ways. They not only support education for their children, especially girls, but they also seek to involve women in positive changes in society. These changes can be political, economic, and social. They have revolutionary thoughts and support positive movements for change. These families open the door for their daughters to be a source of change in society. These families are not only against child marriage but also denounce any harmful practice that prevents women/human development.

The different types of families in Afghan society make women's situations more complex to understand because with any intervention regarding child marriage we have to consider their family's type and target them using different strategies.

CHAPTER FIVE: HOPE FOR THE FUTURE

Analysis of Research Findings

What makes Afghan women weak and passive victims in the eyes of the Western world is 1) the dark period of Mujahedeen and Taliban rule when women lost their autonomy and agency, and 2) limited knowledge and information about the role of women in the history of Afghanistan. This has led people, especially Westerners, to oversimplify the harsh struggles Afghan women have faced and to fail to recognize their strength to resist continued war and mistreatment in society. They fail to see *the resilient spirit in the heart of Afghan women*.

Neither Afghan culture nor Islam dehumanizes women or invokes their bondage. Islam supports girl's education and access to health care and Afghan culture holds women in high esteem and values them after Allah. Afghans say, "Heaven is under the feet of mothers." But since 1987 Gender Apartheid has been imposed by the Mujahedeen, Taliban and even post-Taliban rulers, and Afghan women have been raped, assaulted, harassed, imprisoned, starved, exiled, given for marriage at early ages, deprived of education and employment, and bombed by in the name of saving them. When we see the contradiction between the values placed on women by culture and religion and the treatment of women we are forced to ask: Why and how has this happened?

There is no doubt that war and the gender segregation of Afghan society are major factors in creating the present situation of women. The increase in child marriage is one of the legacies of war. Although child marriage has been practiced for centuries in Afghanistan, it has become more common since 1980s. The issue of child marriage was

not recognized as a problem until the post-Taliban era. In 2004, the Ministry of Education along with the Ministry of Public Health and Women's Affairs recognized child marriage as one of the main reasons for high maternal and infant mortality rates, increasing numbers of female students dropping out of school, and domestic violence.

Post 2001, the Afghan government and its International partners, especially the United States of America, set forth women's liberation as a significant priority. Although there have been successful interventions promoting women's rights, policy makers have failed to recognize how gender segregation and continued war has affected, although not equally, both genders.

Talking to child brides who were also housewives, I realized how their views have been shaped by tradition and the legacies of war. Their paradoxical views about their husbands are disconcerting. On one hand, they face domestic violence (verbal and physical abuse,) they are not allowed to go anywhere or do anything without their husband's permission, and their husbands force them to have sex. On the other hand, they not only fail to see these things as a problem, but they interpret this mistreatment as being unconditional love. For example, in two interviews women told me their husbands do not want them to work outside the house, do not let them go anywhere, and even control what they wear, because they love their wives and want to protect them from other men. Women in Afghanistan have lived through a terrifying period under the Taliban, patriarchy, war and bombardment, and domestic violence. Therefore, the fear of abandonment is combined with the perception of love. For some Afghan women subjugation and domestication is seen as love. According to them, men care about them

and want to protect them. Their only regret is that they wish their situation were a little different: for example, if their husbands listened to them more than their own mothers, if they had more sons instead of daughters, if they were rich, if they had not married at an early age, if they were educated, then their lives would be better. The biggest dream they have is that their husband will love them more. For example, a child bride in a remote village in Balkh Province said, “My life would be different, if my husband did not beat me; otherwise he is a good person and loves me.”

When I talked to women, I realized they would not support child marriage if they thought that it was not the norm for women. People, both in rural and urban areas, do not consider a girl a child when she reaches puberty. Most women were not aware of the legal age for marriage or accurate age of their children. In rural areas where child marriage is very common, child brides face severe health problems such as high rates of maternal and infant mortality, hemorrhaging, miscarriage, and other complications during pregnancy and after delivery. People view these as common problems among women. They do not relate them to the age of a girl at marriage. It was very disappointing for me to hear the mothers, themselves victims of child marriage who have suffered in many ways, say that they see this as a women’s destiny. Despite recognizing the challenges they face in their everyday lives, they are still willing to marry off their teenage girls. A woman in her 30s whom I asked about her experience as a child bride, told me bitter stories, but when I asked her about her daughters she said: “Life is not easy. Sooner or later, she will face these problems; the earlier the better. When a girl gets married, she should forget the comfort of her parent’s house. Her life is with her husband.”

Talking to women and men in the summer of 2012, I came to the realization that all men in Afghanistan are not aggressive. Any intervention that targets only women while marginalizing men would fail. Men in Afghanistan live in a violent, insecure society where employment is difficult to find. They have good reason to be concerned about protecting their daughters. Talking to parents, I learned that mostly girls are given away in marriage in order to protect them. People in urban areas are concerned about sexual harassment and have fears about social media and love marriages, while people in rural areas do not have any alternative since education and employment are not an option for girls. Therefore, they give their daughters to marriage thinking that they will secure their lives.

I found the research process to be very interesting. I noted an irony when I saw the child brides crying about their bitter experiences. At the end of the interviews they wiped their tears and asked me, “By the way, why aren’t you married yet?” “You should consider getting married”; “Don’t you think it is late.” Some found it difficult to believe that I was not married yet. I could not help but think *Are they not the women who suffer and struggle with the domestic violence on daily basis? Are they not the women who experienced every kind of abuse in their relationships? Are they asking me to do so as well?* I have learned that most people in Afghanistan see marriage as something that everybody must go through no matter what kind of relationship awaits them. It is a duty. Even women, who go through the most painful experiences, encourage others to marry and fulfill this duty.

The effort to end child marriage in Afghanistan should first work to define child marriage as a problem. People can only solve a problem if they see it as a problem. If women know that a major cause of women's health problems is the age of a bride, they would at least see child marriage as a problem. Parents in Afghanistan can be the source of a paradigm shift regarding child marriage, but only if they recognize it as a problem instead of a duty.

A campaign to decrease the incidence of child marriage must begin with compassion and empathy for those who are suffering the effects of child marriage. Sarah Blaffer Hardy (2009) sees compassion as a core component in our evolution as human beings and claims that "to care and to share is to survive" (p.11). Her statement is very relevant to the child marriage issue. Compassion and empathy can be used to bring people together and to mobilize for social change. Instead of arguing that compassion is lacking in patriarchal societies, I claim that compassion exists in Afghanistan but in another form: parents want to marry their daughters to protect them from sexual harassment and want them to have an easier life than that of workingwomen. The ongoing wars in Afghanistan have deepened the gender hierarchy within Afghan society. Women today have little control over basic things in their lives, such as if and when to marry, and when to have children. Efforts to "liberate" Afghan women have a long way to go. As a person who talked to people about this issue individually and in a group for almost two months, I can say that the problem of child marriage is more complex than it appears, because it is intertwined with poverty, war, religion and cultural conservatism, and people's perceptions. Putting a stop to the practice of child marriage is not likely

happen soon. However, it is not impossible, as gender discrimination in Afghanistan is not only the result of culture or tradition. It is also due to ongoing conflict and lack of education.

The United Nations declared October 11, 2012, as the International Day of the Girl Child. The theme for this day was “My life; my right; end child marriages.” This day brought new hope for all young girls around the world, especially Afghan girls. According to a report from the US Embassy in Kabul, most media in Afghanistan supported the marriage age of 18 for girls. The question is will the law change the marriage age from 16 to 18? Even if the marriage age changes to 18, would it make any difference in the practice?

CHAPTER SIX: RECOMMENDATIONS

As both an outsider (by virtue of my education abroad) and an insider who understands the society well, I have developed some recommendations based on what I learned from this research. These recommendations are by no means an overnight solution for all of the challenges that women face daily in Afghanistan, but rather they are steps to solving women's major problems. Although I understand it is difficult when we challenge what people consider the "norms" of a society, I believe these steps will bring positive and formative changes in the long-term to the lives of Afghan women. These recommendations may help stakeholders, including the Afghan government, the judiciary system, as well as national and international organizations develop holistic approaches and interventions to child marriage and other problems of Afghan society.

Law Enforcement

Although the Civil Law forbids harmful traditional practices like child marriage, the lack of law enforcement means that these practices continue. Although the education rights for Afghan women have been secured under Article 44 of Constitution Law, lack of law enforcement prevents girls for continuing their education to age 18 and in remote areas girls cannot attend school due to insecurity and the Taliban even post 2001. A lack of law enforcement contributes to patriarchal practices, gender injustice, and violations of women's basic rights. Women are discouraged from speaking up, threatened for taking part in political and/or social activism, stoned to death when accused of committing adultery, and imprisoned for desperately seeking freedom from an abusive relationship or

fleeing a child or forced marriage or domestic violence. So far the formative and positive changes that have been brought to the lives of Afghan women are limited to the major cities. Women in rural areas still live a life close to slavery. Two important primary steps can be taken to make the law against child marriage more enforceable:

1. Birth certificates should be required for all Afghan citizens. Issuing a birth certificate to every newborn baby in Afghanistan should be mandatory. Although the government needs a long-term strategic plan to implement this project, it will solve many problems. If birth certificates become a necessary element of someone's identity, families will ask for them. This will reduce maternal and infant mortality since families will want women to give birth in hospitals or clinics so they can receive a birth certificate, rather than going to local midwives who would not be able to provide the certificates. It is also important to require that the birth certificates should be issued and signed only by certified gynecologists and obstetricians to be legal. Second, the government can use the birth certificates to create a census database that will allow them to keep track of vital statistics, such as number of births in a particular region and how many boys and girls are in school. Birth certificates will help to reduce child marriages, if the law requires people to show their birth certificate when signing their marriage contracts.
2. All marriages should be registered with the government through the judges' office regardless of whether a traditional and religious ceremony has been performed. The government must announce that any unregistered marriages will be

considered illegal. This law, along with issuance of a birth certificate, will allow the judges to annul marriages that involve child brides.

Education, Co-Education and Sex Education

Considering the high illiteracy rate for women in Afghanistan, education is a crucial factor for any developmental progress. Education provides girls with knowledge about their life in society as human beings. Education also provides girls with self-confidence by liberating them from dependency on men and giving them autonomy to make their own decisions. Considering the problem of sexual harassment due to a lack of interaction between women and men, co-education is essential. To tackle this issue on a long-term basis girls and boys should be brought together at an early age, so that by the time boys reach adulthood they know how to treat their female cohort. In addition to basic education, it is equally important that girls know about their biology, their sexuality, and how to obtain and use contraceptives. Bringing sex education to the schools will break the taboos and restrictions concerning women's sexuality that have been practiced for centuries. It will particularly help teenage girls to be aware of their sexuality since most of them are unaware of what kind of relationship awaits them when they marry. It will also help girls to know more about contraceptives. This can reduce the high fertility rate in Afghanistan, which is increasing poverty, creating health issues for women, and preventing girls from exercising their rights to education and employment.

Community Radio

Considering the high rates of illiteracy in the rural areas of Afghanistan, radio is a medium that serves as a tool of awareness; it is cheap, available, and people's favorite source of entertainment and news. Radio is a useful tool to tackle the issue of child marriage through educational dramas, storytelling, and narration. It would be beneficial to present discussions between positive deviants who oppose child marriage and those who support it. It will be useful to ask victims of child marriage to talk about their experiences and why they think that others should not follow this practice.

The recommendations given above are based upon what I learned from my interviewees. If these recommendations were implemented seriously, the rate of child marriage will decrease in rural areas, an estimate based on the National Action Plan for the Women of Afghanistan (NAPWA), a 10-year plan for women's empowerment in Afghanistan. NAPWA focuses on six important factors that are barriers for women's development and empowerment, including security; legal protection and human rights; leadership and political participation; economy; work and poverty; and health, but the issue of child marriage remains unaddressed. The five recommendations that have come out of this research fit within the NAPWA guidelines and could have a significant impact on child marriage.

I conclude with the message of Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon for the International Girl Child Day, "Education for girls is one of the best strategies for protecting girls against child marriage. When they are able to stay in school and avoid being married early, girls can build a foundation for a better life for themselves and their

families” (UN report, 2012). Empowering women through education and increased employment opportunities will help in reducing the high rates of child marriage.

Mullahs and Religious Leaders

Afghanistan is a collective society where Islamic and traditional values are considered authoritative in peoples’ lives. People usually follow their religious and tribal leaders, especially in remote areas of Afghanistan. These leaders include mullahs and tribal leaders, who are often poorly educated or have only studied in a *madrassa* (religious school.) Some mullahs mislead people by misinterpretations of Islam that are patriarchal. Therefore, it is necessary to educate mullahs about gender equality and women’s rights and empowerment. This process needs a long-term strategic plan. The Afghan Ministry of Religious Affairs, Women’s Affairs, Border and Tribal Affairs, and Rural Rehabilitation and Development, funded by international organizations and partners, such as UNAMA, USAID, and the World Bank, should work cooperatively to develop a joint framework to tackle gender issues, especially harmful practices such as child marriage, *baad*, and honor killings that destroy women’s well-being and threaten lives across the country. The four ministries mentioned above can launch a campaign using tribal and religious leaders who have been trained to address women’s issues. Friday prayers are an excellent opportunity for talking about harmful practices like child marriage. This approach has the advantage of involving religious and tribal leaders. Study participants suggested that such a program would be more effective than any media source.

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