



GÖTEBORGS UNIVERSITET

DEPARTMENT OF POLITICAL SCIENCE

Women Representation in Politics:
A Case Study of Afghan Women

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Bachelor thesis: 15 credits

Program and course: Program in Political Science, SK1523

Level: First cycle

Semester and year: Spring 2021

Tutor: Kristin Kao

Word count: 8327

Abstract

It is known that women's participation is less than men in Muslim countries and especially in Afghanistan. In order to know the reasons behind women's less contribution in politics, this thesis focuses on women's perceptions and experiences about their situation, using a qualitative approach. The individual reasons presented in this thesis are categorized from internal to external dimensions, which contribute to capture a picture of Afghan women's situation. This paper not only explores the structural reasons behind women's less participation in politics in Afghanistan but also the history of Afghan women are also presented. Although the literature used in this research offer a basic understanding of how women live in Afghanistan but it is not sufficient without including Afghan women's own perception about their status. The information provided by respondents in this thesis conceptualizes their present status and can be utilized for future researches.

Table of contents

Introduction.....	4
Afghan women status through history.....	6
Afghan women representation in politics	7
The rise of political gender quota in Afghanistan.....	9
Literature review	10
Purpose and research question	10
Methodology.....	11
Interview guide	11
Respondents	13
Method of analysis	15
Results.....	16
Internal reasons	16
Engagement.....	16
Women who adopt patriarchal norms.....	17
External reasons	18
Patriarchal social norms	18
Education	21
Counter examples.....	22
Discussion.....	23
Conclusion	25
Bibliography.....	28
Appendix.....	30

Introduction

Political leadership has remained a male dominant career in society. Women face discrimination and prejudice which obstacle them to achieve higher level political leadership roles. Even in developed counties like United States, the percentage of women representation among leaders is much lower than the percentage of women in the labor force. Women face difficulties to achieve success in high-level positions (Eagly and Steve, 2002) and in political process (Coffé & Bolzendahl, 2010). Political activities such as engagement and political contact, membership in political parties, and collective activism are highly male dominated. The reasons behind women's less representation are described as, their less interest in politics, lower access to socio-economy resources, family responsibilities (Coffé & Bolzendahl, 2010), motivation and prejudice toward them (Eagly and Steve, 2002). This thesis seeks to understand the lack of women's political participation in Afghanistan, through their own eyes.

Fish argues that, in Muslim-majority nations women's status is much worse than Western countries. According to the World Bank, women have less access to socioeconomic and political resources in Muslim countries. Al-Hibri argues that the reason behind women remained subordinated in Muslim countries is not just Islam, it is the "patriarchal culture of Muslim-majority countries" (Coffé & Dilli, 2015). Islam can be used as a tool to neglect women from political institutions (Afkhami & Friedl, 1997). In Muslim societies, social norms dictate that women remain at home and men work outside, which not only lead to decrease women's economy level and interest in active engagement in public affairs but also their less participation in politics. In a similar vein, Coffé and Bolzendahl argue that women's less interest in political affairs also lead to their less contribution in politics (Coffé & Dilli, 2015).

In Afghanistan, the Taliban are not the only responsible actors for deteriorated situation of Afghan women; many years before the Taliban existed, Afghan women lived a subordinated life. In order to understand women's situation in Afghanistan it is necessary to know Afghanistan's history in a larger context. According to Ahmad-Gosh (2003, p.1): "*Afghanistan may be the only country in the world where during the last century kings and politicians have been made and undone by struggles relating to women's status*". Rural Afghanistan has also had an important role in reshaping the nation according to their conservative perception of Afghan culture. Whenever the Afghan government struggled to empower women by giving them equal rights, tribal powers attacked the

centre (Kabul) and neutralized their efforts to modernize the country and resisted to redefine the role of women in society (Ahmad-Gosh, 2003).

Women's role in Afghan society has been redefined by political, social, economic and religious forces through history and even foreign forces like Soviet Union and West (after 9/11). There have been periods when women were elected as ministers by parliament and also when they were not allowed to go out without a mahram (a male relative). Ahmad-Gosh (2003) points out that gender dynamics are formed during two critical epochs which had highest level of impacts on women's situation in Afghanistan. The first era was during Amanullah khan's kingdom in 1923 and the second period was when communist party "Peoples Democratic Party of Afghanistan" (PDPA) was leading the country. Both periods were forcing an agenda to empower women, gender based reformations and including women in decision making political institutes. But unfortunately these reformations during both epochs were followed by widespread protests by tribal leaders which resulted in the exclusion of women from almost every institute. According to Ahmad-Gosh (2003, p. 1), these two eras prove that, "*women in Afghanistan were not always oppressed by fundamentalists as occurred under the Mujahideen and the Taliban regimes*", periodic efforts were made to empower them and bring them near central power.

The major problem with previous researches is that they mostly focus on educated activist women's opinions by interviewing them and analysing Afghan women's situation through their eyes (see e.g., Ahmad-Gosh. 2006) or literatures may lack variety of women respondents in their researches (e.g., Boesen. 2004). Afghan women are restricted from participating in public sphere and political institutes in local levels, which are exclusively male dominated. Thus, it is hard to meet women (housewives or girls) who are prohibited to attend public events or are not available to contact and know their life stories (Bosen, 2004). Which obviously leads to focus mostly on women who are already established because they are available.

I will therefore in this thesis explore, not only the voices of women with academic backgrounds but also uneducated women who are never allowed to visit schools. Because, in order to research a social problem, it is necessary to focus on those who are most effected by an issue (Esaiasson et al. 2017). By engaging in earlier literature the basic information about the Afghan women's status through history is provided. Previous researches and literatures are used as starting points to identify women's situation from different perspectives (see e.g., Ahmad-Gosh. 2004 & 2006., Boesen. 2004., Krooke. 2010). The Afghan women in different age groups are practicing social and

patriarchal norms in society, and women are forced to adopt such norms whether by family members or society. A variation of different age groups with different educational backgrounds will definitely contribute to draw a fair conclusion and wider knowledge of contemporary Afghanistan. Older women may have experienced different regimes and immigration while young girls have modern and courageous perspective of women participation in political systems (Ibrahim, 2015). So, interviewing them and asking them the reasons about why one would abstain from living a fair life could unveil crucial information about equal representation in future. Respondents answers are the honest daily practices based on their upbringing, and their counter examples particularly point at better reformations in Afghan politics while can also be utilized in future researches. Seeking to bring attention to a gender which are neglected by not only men but even women themselves, this thesis focuses on reasons of Afghan women's less participation in politics.

Afghan women status through history

Abdur Rahman Khan who ruled Afghanistan from 1880 to 1901, reformed women's role in society by raising the age of marriage, giving women rights to divorce (according to Islamic laws) and right to inherit from her husband's and father's property. Magnus and Naby, Gregorian and Dupree (cited in Ahmad-Gosh, 2003), mentioned that even after Abdur Rahman's death, his son Amir Habibullah Khan continued impressive agendas of his father for ten years. His wives were not veiled in public and used to wear western clothes. Apparently he was influenced by modern interpretation of Islam and freedom and rights for women. He believed that Islam is not against women education and women should have equal rights to educate as men. Not only he opened an English medium school for girls but also a section was added in his newspaper "Seraj-ul-Akhbar" entitled "Celebrating Women of the World" edited by his wife Asma Tarzi. Struggles of liberalization and modernization of nation led to opposition movements and demonstrations by mullahs and tribal leaders which were believed to be against Afghan traditions and norms. After Habibullah (ruled Afghanistan until 1919), his son Amanullah ruled Afghanistan from 1919 to 1929, he demanded for liberalization of women even in tribal areas. He encouraged women to educate and not wear veil. Women started to participate in government and public affairs and they were encouraged to take part in nation building. The reformations implemented by Amanullah were too western that caused conflicts between monarch and tribal leaders and finally Amanullah left the country. After him in 1931, Nadir shah introduces some reformations but in a way to avoid conflicts (Ahmad-Gosh, 2003).

For the first time in 1964, the third constitution gave women the right to vote and participate in politics. Afghanistan's first women Minister was elected by the parliament in the health department in 1965. Soviet Union's presence from 1979 till 1989 and their assistance helped Afghan women to achieve their rights by creating a political party called People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) and first women's group, the Democratic Organization of Afghan Women (DOAW) with the goal of gender based reforms and modernization (Ahmad-Gosh, 2003).

According to Dupree the second intense/progressive era of change occurred in 1970, when women were not only seen in universities but also as representatives in the parliament. According to Hanne (cited in Ahmad-Gosh, 2003), later in 1978, equal rights for women were declared by government. But all these changes were always followed by protests and murdering women's rights activists. Tribal chiefs believed that equal rights for women and their rights to education is against Afghan cultural norms and religion. As Zoya mentioned, after a few years Soviet Union left and the Mujahideen (a group of anti-Soviet fundamentalists) took the power in 1992, civil war started and women were forcibly covered (Hijab), at times, were raped and killed. In 1996 the Taliban implemented even stricter laws for women and they were not allowed to show their faces (they were forced to wear burqa) and participate in any public affairs. Women were only allowed to go out to buy food or to meet a female doctor and always with mahram (a male relative) (Ahmad-Gosh, 2003). According to Palmerless, before the Taliban's regime almost seventy per cent of teachers in Afghanistan were female and forty per cent of Afghan doctors were female. Women were working in different occupations as engineers, architects, lawyers and judges, but after Taliban ruled the country, women were banned from going outside, working or going to school/university (Ibrahim, 2015).

Afghan women's participation in politics has increased after 9/11 comparing to the Taliban's regime. Women have been more active both politically and socially after American invasion in Afghanistan. Women in the capital, Kabul, take part in different institutions and perform well in field of education and politics. Although in order to secure stability in country, there is still risk in peace making process between Afghan government and Taliban by U.S., where it may effect women's status and representation in political institutes (Ibrahim, 2015).

Afghan women representation in political

Ahmad-Gosh (2006, p. 110) mentions in her research that women in Afghanistan believe *“that democracy can only be ensured through full participation of women in the political process*

especially when women comprise at least 60 percent of the country's population". While according to some local gender norms, women's participation in public is regarded as "shameful". In some Afghan communities it seems to be disturbing to allow women to contribute in politics while in some communities men are tolerant about women's participation in politics and decision-making process. Not only the level of education of community members but also ethnicity and factors like refugee experiences and war contribute in changing perceptions about Afghan women and their participation in public affairs (Boesen. 2004, p. 8-9).

Bari argues that, not only patriarchy remains an effective factor to obstacle Afghan women from political participation but it also gives men the power to control women's engagement in politics. Another challenge facing by Afghan women is that usually they cannot afford the expenses for different purpose in the politics while participation. Not having the source of earning can limit Afghan women's ability to participate in the political process (Ibrahim, 2015).

Boesen (2004) believes that, in some parts of the country women face lack of interest to political affairs, they prefer to remain at home with their children. Women have different attitudes toward political participation and engaging in public affairs. Some women described that they are illiterate and their men know better about decision-making inside and outside the home while others described that they never got the chance to engage in such matters. Men commented that women can participate when they are educated enough, they are usually busy with children and there is no need of them to engage in decision making process. They said this while they had not enough education themselves and women's social problems are always neglected by them (Boesen. 2004, p. 48-50).

Afghan women's voices are important for future development of the country and government is accountable to protect women's rights in Afghanistan. According to Palmerless, the Bonn agreement signed by Afghan representative in 2001 (Ibrahim, 2015), stated the protection of human rights and women rights in Afghanistan (Krook, O'Brien & Swip 2010; Ibrahim, 2015). In a similar vein Grenfell noted that the Bonn agreement promoted the possibility of women contribution in politics which resulted women's participation in democratic elections in 2004. One of the most practiced ways to prevent women from participation in politics is to threaten them. In bomb blasts by opposition groups, during 2004 elections many women died. Afghan women have been threaten from different groups and they are facing challenges to participate in politics and use their right of citizenship (Ibrahim, 2015).

The rise of political gender quota in Afghanistan

The political gender quota policy is used to increase women in political institutes and its goal is to promote gender equality in an international level (Weeks, 2016. p. 49-52).

“Three main types exist: 1) voluntary party provisions (“party quotas”), often included in party statutes; 2) laws that require all political parties to include a minimum percentage of women on their candidate lists (“quota laws”); and finally 3) laws that require women to be elected to certain positions, rather than only nominated (“political reservations”)” (Weeks, 2016. p. 50).

Eagly (2002) argues that, scholars believe that quota laws have positive effects on women's representation in parliaments and governments, it also increases the number of female candidates in politics.

According to Norris, in 2004 Afghanistan’s constitution decided to reserve seventeen percent of seats in the upper house and twenty-seven per cent of seats in the lower house for women. Reserved seats for female candidates were divided according to the population of every province. Although because female candidates did not outright, those women who won maximum votes were elected to the reserved seats in the lower house. While in upper house, the president selected one-third of members which consisted of fifty per cent female members (Krook, O’Brien & Swip. 2010).

In order to implement the concept of quota in Afghanistan, transitional government, international community and women’s rights activists made a major contribution. While women were divided into two groups, some believed it as an important and essential policy while others believed that adoption of quotas is unachievable and difficult. Human rights and Wordswoth (cited in Krook, O’Brien & Swip, 2010) noted that, now when international actors are collaborating with Afghanistan’s government and population, quota policy will remain to be considered in the near future too, but the doubt is that if women are empowered by adoption of quota. Women are being killed and threatened by religious fundamentalists for rising their voices. According to Krook, O’Brien and Swip (2010) *“Thus, in the absence of sustained support from international actors and the cultivation of a female constituency within the provinces, reserved seats in Afghanistan may guarantee descriptive representation but fail to produce substantive representation”*.

Literature review

Ahmad-Gosh (2003) defines the historical aspect of Afghan women. She also discusses the future of women in Afghanistan in the socio political and cultural sphere in her research. Another article written by Ahmad-Gosh (2006) is also used in this thesis where she interviewed Afghan women and defined the importance of economic development for Afghan women. She explains that women's participation in politics is dependent on their economic level and security.

Coffé and Bolzendahl (2010) discuss that men are more likely to engage in politics as an active member of political parties or in collective actions. While women engage in private activism and are more likely than men to have voted in elections. Mahnaz and Friedl (1997) discuss Muslim women's contribution in politics. They also discuss about the implementation of platforms for action in order to increase women's movement in Muslim societies.

Coffé and Dilli (2015) discuss the gender gap in political participation among 13 Muslim-majority countries. They argue that in Muslim nations men are more active in politics than women which depends on their socioeconomic characteristics and political attitudes. Weeks (2016) defines the concept of gender based quota laws and its impacts in political system. He also discusses the importance of quota and how it helps to increase numbers of women MPs in parliaments.

Boesen (2004) has written about women's situation during 29 days of fieldwork in Afghanistan. In cooperation with a NGO, he visited Afghan women and men in tribal areas who shared information about their experiences of the past and present. Eagly (2002) explains the obstacles women face in order to succeed in high level positions and leadership. He also discusses about the expectations from female leaders behaviour and prejudice towards them. Ibrahim (2015) discusses the present situation of women in Afghanistan and a short introduction of their past status during different regimes. He explains the concept of "political participation" in an Afghan society and also the challenges and obstacles which prevents women to participate in politics in Afghanistan.

Purpose and research question

The purpose of this study is therefore to identify and describe the underlying reasons for women's diminished representation in politics than men in contemporary Afghanistan. I want to examine how do Afghan women conceptualize the reasons for their lack of political participation and inability to enter politics to the same degree as men. According to investigate the question in a more specific

way, I would like to use Afghan women as a case and the question is: *What reasons for not participating in political process exist among Afghan women?*

One sub-question is also added:

How women perceive their role in Afghan society?

As mentioned in introduction section, previous research has overlooked the individual perspectives of Afghan women toward the reasons for their diminished participation in political institutions. There are many articles and reports about Afghan women that lack their own perspective about their situation. This study includes interviews and opinions of Afghan women living in Afghanistan, and their perception of reasons behind not having fair representation in Afghan political institutions. Earlier literatures are used as starting point to build the results and answer the main questions with the help of statements of respondents. This essay intends to contribute to the overall question of women's diminished role in Afghan politics and can be utilized for future researches to conceptualize their present status.

Methodology

Qualitative interviews are chosen because the subject matter is complex that I preferred to gain in-depth insights from Afghan women into how they perceive their own subjugation.

Interview guide

According to Esaiasson et al (2017) interview surveys provide a better scope in this research because a qualitative study provides interpretation and descriptions expressed by subjects. In order to receive convincing answers we should be clear about how to implement an interview and understand the phenomenons, which will be the starting points of an interview process (Esaiasson et al. 2017: 261-266). In the current circumstances, where people avoid to meet each other directly because of Corona pandemic (The Public Health Agency of Sweden, 2021), the most appropriate way to do an interview is via zoom or telephone. This process would not be as interviewing someone in person but in this situation this is the most appropriate way to do it and being an Afghan I have the possibility to find and interview Afghan women living in Afghanistan. The group of

women I chose to interview are Afghans of different age groups with different educational backgrounds. The reason I chose different age groups is that they may have experience about different levels of religious practices and regimes in Afghanistan. As the history section laid out above, Afghanistan has gone through many variations in terms of the level of regime support for women's political participation and so age is likely to affect perceptions of what hinders women's political participation in the country. I also suspect that education determines attitudes about women's political participation and so I chose a sample with varied educational backgrounds.

The interviewed people should be with "centrally located sources", which means the people who are related to the research problem or those who can answer the questions (Esaiasson et al. 2017: 267-268). Before implementing the interview, respondents were informed that their identity will be anonymous and nothing will be recorded or noted without their permission. Even if later someone changes her mind, I can erase their interview and not include their answers in my thesis.

Respondents were also told that they are free to skip questions they consider invasive or personal.

It is necessary to create a dynamic environment, small talks and warming up questions to motivate the interview person before starting an actual interview. An interview survey is not based on "right" or "wrong" answers, it is about knowing and understanding other's perception about an issue. It is necessary to create an understanding with interview person and to avoid long and academic questions. Hence, the questions are not long and complicated, they are designed in way to encourage respondents to endorse their input by adjusting ideas to the conversation (Esaiasson et al. 2017: 237, 274-278). The interview guide consists of three main themes and concluding questions. The first theme starts with "warm-up" questions and small talks in order to build mutual understanding and to make the situation comfortable for respondents to share their experiences (Esaiasson et al. 2017: 273-274). It also helped to make the conversation interesting by asking some general questions about their political interests. The questions are arranged in way that they fit all the selected individuals (Esaiasson et al. 2017: 237) with different age groups and ideologies.

Second theme invites respondents to a deeper conversation about the restrictions they face from their family members, social and patriarchal norms in the country. This theme is connected to the main question and sub-question of the thesis and this is where they are answered by the respondents. Respondents are asked about their conceptions about restrictions for women to participate in politics and their thoughts about male dominance in Afghan political system (see

Appendix). Respondents who struggle for their rights are asked about the obstacles they face and women who chose to not rise their voices are asked about the reason behind being silent. According to respondents' reflections and reactions, follow-up questions are asked after scripted questions and the motto was not only to discuss the main thesis question in a deeper level but also to encourage respondents to reflect as freely as possible. Many respondents believed *education* as one of the reasons behind gender inequality in Afghanistan's political system, the third theme (questions about girls education) starts from questions about their experience of education and later discusses the role of education in political engagement.

As the first theme starts from "warm-up" questions and their perceptions about the present situation of country's political system, "theme 2 and 3 are more focused on the main reasons and obstacles behind women's less participation in Afghanistan's political system. Both (second and third) themes answer the main questions of the thesis as they have reflected about the restrictions they are facing to not claim a powerful position. The last theme, concluding questions gives the respondents the opportunity to suggest what kind of reformations could change their situation and help the country to develop. All the respondents are given the chance to express their ideas and meaningful follow-up questions (are also mentioned in appendix section) were added after scripted questions in order to invite the respondents to a deeper conversation and have better material for analysing.

Respondents

Because the case study is Afghanistan, respondents born and living in Afghanistan are chosen for interviews. Finding Afghan women who are between 23 to 58 years old and have the possibility to connect in a video call was quit demanding. In fact it is difficult to conduct an interview via video call to Afghanistan (because of the poor internet connection and women's less access to mobile phones) and it was their first time participating in a research interview. It was explained for them that their names will remain anonymous and they will not face treats on the basis of their given answers or expressed opinions.

A pre-interview meeting was made before conduction of the actual interview in order to explain the interview questions in general and to know if they are the relevant group to answer the questions (Esaiasson et al. 2017) (see Appendix). As explained in introduction section, this thesis aims to include Afghan women's conceptions about their political participation and the diversity between

respondents is suitable according to the demanding task. Although a greater variety and quantity of respondents (more Afghan women living in other provinces, specially in tribal areas and not only in Kabul, and women who are politically active in Afghan government) would increase the variety of ideas and counter examples, but in this situation (while interviews are held from long distance), ten respondents are appropriate for this thesis.

The decision to include Afghan women living only in Afghanistan is motivated by the fact that Afghan women living in Afghanistan face restrictions under their conservative interpretation of Islam (Ibrahim, 2015) and are in direct contact with such restricted norms than Afghan women immigrated to developed countries.

Ten Afghan women living in Kabul, Afghanistan, in different age groups and with different educational backgrounds were interviewed (as presented in table 1). Telephone and FaceTime interviews were conducted with all ten respondents and every interview took 20-50 minutes to complete which depended on how much respondents had to say. The interviews were conducted in Dari in May 2021. The interviews are translated from Dari to English but the real meaning of the answers are not changed.

The interview questions are designed in a way where they motivate the respondents to describe their opinions. The interview questions fit all respondents (Esaiasson et al. 2017: 237) in every age group. Even the respondents who had no interest in politics, their opinions about social and cultural norms in Afghanistan and patriarchal society are useful for this research.

Table 1. Respondents

Respondent nr.	Age (Born year)	Political interest	Education	Occupation
1	23 (1998)	Yes	School and one semester university	Jobless
2	32 (1988)	Yes	University	Jobless
3	38(1983)	No	10th grade	House wife
4	56(1965)	No	School	House wife
5	32 (1988)	Not much	University	Jobless
6	58(1963)	Not at all	Illiterate	Jobless

Respondent nr.	Age (Born year)	Political interest	Education	Occupation
7	27(1994)	Yes	University	Dentist
8	43(1978)	No	University	Administrator
9	48(1973)	No	Illiterate	Housewife
10	24(1997)	Yes	Masters degree	Women rights activist

Unfortunately, many women rejected participation in interview process, either because they were afraid of political questions or because they were worried to give wrong answers. Thus, my sample may be biased towards women who are less shy, on average. Much research employing interviews and surveys suffers the same bias. Several individuals I wanted to interview had no idea about political representation and questions I asked. But the individuals interviewed showed their willingness to participate whether they are interested in politics or those who are not aware of country's political system.

Method of analysis

In order to find an appropriate base to build the analysis of the thesis and identify the main and common reasons of women's less participation in Afghan political system, every individual's interview is processed by studying all statements several times and the interviews are summarized and categorized under specific dimensions.

The method used to analyse interview material is called "mapping method" which allows us to divide the concepts into different categories and highlight them with impactful quotes. The method helps us to classify the similar statements of different respondents into similar quality. The divided categories are not only dependent on interview material but also to the researcher's perspective, which is necessary to create a balance through the analysis and make more perspicuous explanations (Esaiasson et al. 2017: 280-282)

The entire material is divided into *internal* and *external dimensions*, which are further classified into four sub-categories; *Engagement*, *women who adopt patriarchal norms*, *patriarchal social norms* and *education*. Each sub-category is illustrated by quotes from respondents, which are translated from Dari to English. During the process of translation the meaning of the quotes are not

effected. Through this method statements that are similar of several respondents are categorized into one quality, such as *politically uninterested* (R3) and *no time to care about it* (R6) are categorized into the dimension engagement. All the statements that consisted of women who accepts the restrictions and obey patriarchal norms are considered into women who adopt patriarchal norms. Statements that describe the patriarchal and social restrictions are categorized into patriarchal social norms (such as R5 and R7 statements). And statements that discusse girls education are into the education quality.

Results

The reasons behind women's less participation in politics is shown in table 2. The phenomenon of lowered participation is divided into two categories; internal and external reasons. The internal category is divided into two dimensions; *engagement* and *women who adopt patriarchal norms*. The external reasons are also divided into two dimensions; *Patriarchal social norms* and *education*. Under every category reasons of less participation in politics by respondents are listed.

Internal reasons

As mentioned above, the internal reasons of women's less participation in politics in Afghanistan are; *engagement* and *women who adopt patriarchal norms*. Which are categorized as internal reasons because they are one's own wants/desires and are from the circumstances that lie inside the "self".

Engagement

The engagement category comprises of reasons respondents mentioned about their less participation, ranging from not having interest to participate to simply not caring enough.

Respondents described that they have no time to engage in politics and they are uninterested in it.

"...I am not interested in politics. Not even news... We have to be quiet when my husband watches the news. It is very irritating, both for me and my children. No one is allowed to speak during news and political debates" (R3).

Women face lack of confidence in this realm and that is why they prefer to keep away from it. Several interviewed women mentioned that they do not even have information about the process. According to R7: *“Because I have never tried (to engage in politics) I cannot answer your question. But I think it is not possible for us to participate in politics in Afghanistan”* (R7).

Women who adopt patriarchal norms

Patriarchy and Social norms are external dimensions because women are expected or pressured to adopt them from sources external to the subject (explained under ‘external dimensions section’).

Then the extent to which women adopt patriarchal social norms or not are internal dimensions.

Internally some women do adopt such norms - they say they don’t know much, they say women “prefer” to do things that women should do according to patriarchal norms.

The society and patriarchal structures prevent women from decision making or even to express their opinion about it. These not only lead to lack of information about politics among women but also their less engagement in it. Respondents showed that; they don’t know much, they are told not to care and so they do not care. Women “prefer” to do things that women should do according to patriarchal norms. They feel powerless or that politics is not their proper role. Respondent 3 described:

“...I have always seen that men are more interested in politics than women. I have not heard much women discussing politics or watching news. Usually men do it in our home. My father-in-law, my husband and his brothers watch news, we (female members of the family) never interfere when they discuss politics” (R3).

When asked why do they not dare to express their opinion or ask what is happening in the country? R3 reflected on her experience: *“Because they will be angry... it is simply non of our business ... men believe in my family”* (R3).

Several respondents believed that it is a common tradition in Afghanistan to treat girls unequally, and they have lived whole their lives in this way. A 58 years old respondent is quite convinced that women are not born to participate in politics: *“I think it should be like this. Women are not made for politics or decision making. It is a man’s job to decide about important matters”* (R6). She generalized women as not interested in politics at all. She mentioned that it is right for a woman to take care of her family instead of thinking about politics.

“Women are usually interested in houseworks not politics. They prefer to take care of their families, which is right for them. There is no need for them to get involve in matters they do not know about” (R6).

Another respondent who believes that patriarchy is a part of Afghan tradition. She has adopted it as a norm and believes that it is right to experience inequality;

“...People start to teach their daughters from a very young age to remain silent no matter what happens at their in-laws. It is a part of our tradition. I would never like my daughter to speak against her husband, if it is the equality you mean. Sometimes education make women “rebellious”. When a girl is married she has no place except her husband’s home. Where would she go if she fights with him? She is not allowed to go back to her father, and that is why she must obey her husband and remain silent, no matter what happens.” (R9).

Even if several respondents are not interested in politics and have never tried to participate in it, they believe that men have drawn a line (of limit) around them and they are not allowed to cross it.

“...I have not much information about it. But I think...women are always supposed to be less than men in politics in Afghanistan. Like why we had never a female president in Afghanistan” (R4).

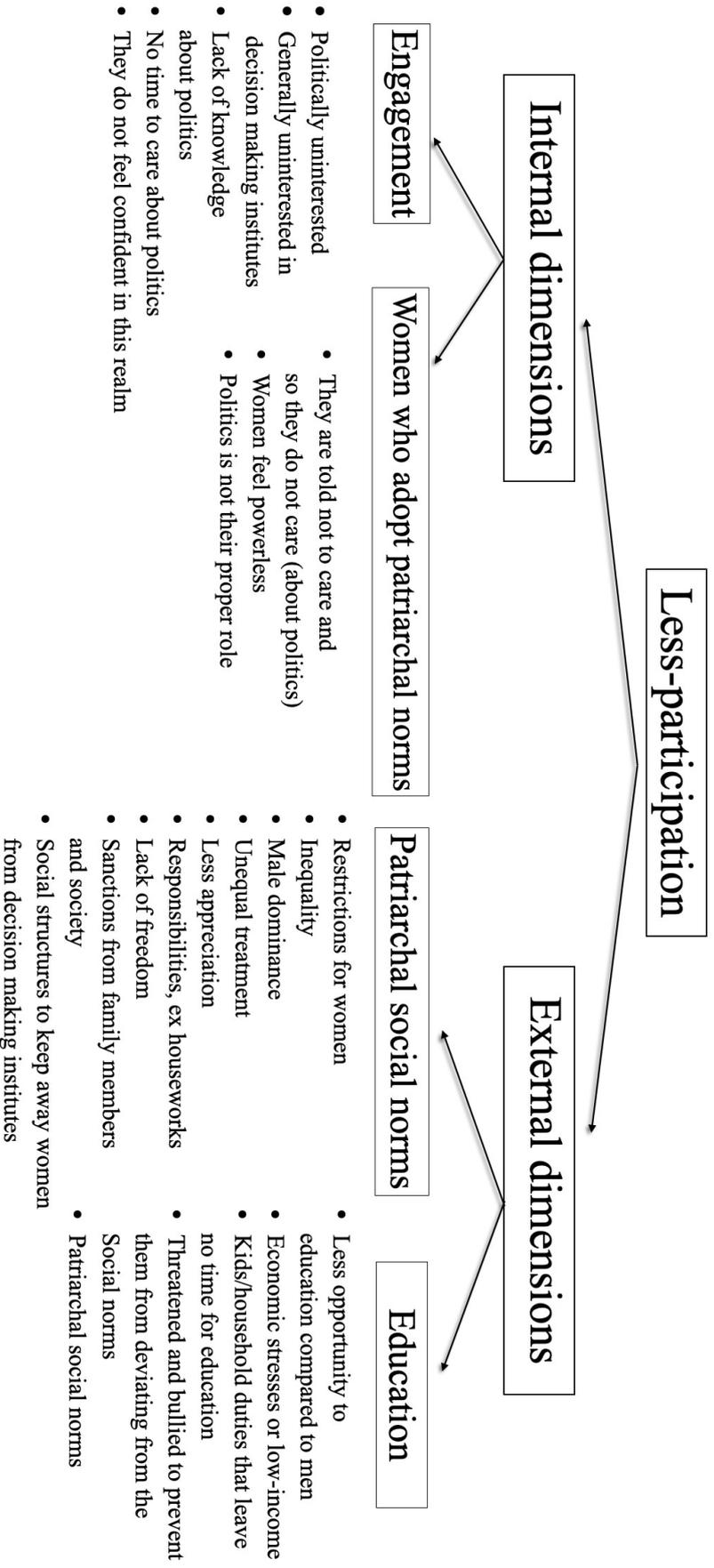
External dimensions

External dimensions are divided into *patriarchal social norms* and *education*. The category external dimensions are the ways in which societal factors or others in society prevent women from gaining a voice in politics. The reasons categorized as external reasons originates from the sources related to the outside of the subject.

Patriarchal social norm

According to the respondents, women in Afghanistan are expected to behave or think according to the patriarchal social norms. They feel either obligated to do or that they will be sanctioned for not adopting such norms. Respondents mentioned, Patriarchy and male dominance contribute in their less participation. *“...because it is a male dominant society. The society is very restricted for women...they push women outside the legislative institutes” (R5).*

Table 2. Category schedule for reasons for women's less participation in politics in Afghanistan



Note: Reasons are based on conceptions of interviewed respondents

Those who have interest in participation in politics are worried to be sanctioned by the male dominant society. Almost all the women interviewed believe that they are unable to enter into powerful positions in politics. Males being the ‘rightfully’ dominant sex treat women as the lesser sex.

“...Of course I do feel lack of freedom to engage in politics. Because I must take care of my family... I must help my mother in houseworks...I don’t think someone will take me seriously. Men are sexist here in Afghanistan and my opinions will be not respected by them. Democracy is just by the name, otherwise Afghan culture and traditions do not allow us (women) to develop” (R7).

Almost all respondents have experienced unequal treatment from their family members, less appreciation (compared to their brother(s)), from their parents and unequal treatment in the broader society in which they live.

“...I am not allowed to do things my brother is allowed...I have to help in houseworks. But my brother is not forced to do it just because he is a boy. This is an unfair Afghan mentality” (R7).

R5 is a 32 years old educated girl who exemplified: *“I wanted to go to my friend, I took a taxi and in the whole way the taxi driver was looking at me like I have committed a sin and he caught me. When I reached to the address, I had just one thousand Afghanis and no change to pay him and I asked him if he could take my money and give my change back, like any other passenger. But he told me: If you were a good girl you would never get out of the home alone. I was shocked...it had nothing to do with the money...” (R5).*

Education

Another external dimension is education, which is given as a reason by several respondents. Most of the respondents believed that education has an important role in engaging in politics. They also described that educated women are more independent than illiterate women.

“An educated woman is usually the one who do not need her family’s financial support. A working women is not dependent on her husband, father or brother. I do not say that she can do whatever she wants but I would say, an educated woman is less prisoned than an illiterate woman in an Afghan society” (R10).

“Education has a very crucial role. It is very important... As much we are educated that much open minded we become... And it also decreases differences between men and women” (R7).

All the respondents interviewed for this thesis agreed that, usually women in Afghanistan receive less opportunity to education compared to men.

“Most of the families do not allow their daughters to educate. They force their daughters to marry the person their parents choose for them. Just some girls succeed to finish their studies. It is very difficult for women to study after getting married. Their in-laws do not allow them and because of home/family responsibilities, they cannot do all things at the time” (R10).

Respondents 5 describes how she was stopped from studying what she wanted;

“I studied university and wanted to go to English course to learn English. But my ex mother-in-law told me that: the “Education Centre” is far from us and you do not need to go there. My ex husband never allowed me to work. Otherwise I studied university to work as a teacher. I insisted a lot, but my ex in-laws never allowed me to work” (R5).

Women are prevented from education or they are not given the money to pursue it (while their brothers are) or they are forced to marry and to take care of kids and household duties prevent them from studying. They are threatened and bullied to prevent them from deviating from the social norms. The social norms themselves and others in society (ex-mother-in-law or ex-husband of R5 for instance) who buy into these norms dictate women must do all these household tasks that leaves no time for them to get an education, even if they try to pursue one on their own. Respondent 6 was forced to marry when she was a child: *“My brother is engineer. He studied university in Russia while non of us (sisters) were allowed to go to school. All our elders (women) were illiterate” (R6).*

The other reasons mentioned by respondents that obstacle girls from going to school/university are, family's low income and migration. R4 described: *“...I had to help my family and later my husband's family (in houseworks). I could not study university because we could not afford it” (R4).*

Respondent 3 described;

“My father did not allow me to continue studying... He told me that I am getting married then why should I continue to study. I have studied till 10th standard and can read and write, it’s enough according to them. The war had started and my father was afraid if someone will kidnap or rape me. People preferred to marry their daughters and migrate to Iran or Pakistan. It was also said that, if someone had an unmarried daughter, Mujaheddin in the way would rape or take her” (R3).

Counter examples

Several women seem to want to go against the patriarchal social norms, they want an education, they want a gender quota and think it is only fair that women are represented in political institutions. Several respondents believed that there should be an equal number of men and women in parliament, since women make up about half of Afghanistan’s population. *“...half of the population of Afghanistan are women. They must take the power in their hands because they have the same rights like men” (R5).* According to respondent 2; *“It is every citizen’s right to contribute in their country’s political system. Women should represent in parliament and be equal as men and take decision for their country” (R2)*

Women realize they are being treated unfairly and they would like to see a change. There is hope here as women believe that they will start to push for more political participation and fighting the patriarchy. Apparently respondent 1 does not think the patriarchal norms are fair or right and she has tried to demonstrate against them;

“Unfortunately I have experienced inequality and less appreciation compared to my brothers from my parents whole my life... My elder brother was always treated better than me just because he was a boy...From eating to receiving financial support from my parents to study an expensive English language course. I have taken stand against it even when I was a child...I could not understand this...that why he spends much more than me and why should I help my mother (in houseworks) but not my brother. While my brother was student like me and he had no other job” (R1).

While R7 believed that no matter men or women, the most capable person should represent in parliament. She believed that women do not have to be given priority just because we face lack of women politicians.

“If we see other country’s parliaments, it is not necessary to include 50 per cent women in the parliament. There shouldn’t be nepotism. It is not necessary to divide parliament into two equal groups between both genders, it is important to elect capable MPs in parliament, right people for the job, not right gender” (R7).

Respondents believe that women should unite and rise their voices against inequality in society. Through education it is possible to teach people that both men and women have equal rights and should participate equally in a country’s political process.

“The only way to increase women in politics is to inform people about equality. More women should nominate themselves in elections...I mean it will be normal for the society to have female leaders. Women are afraid of being sanctioned or harassed. Women should help each other. They must be active in politics, and their presence in politics will also increase their representation. Not only men but also women are sometimes violent to each other. If women are united and start supporting each other, men will stop making fun of them. The problem is that, in Afghanistan even women do not support each other” (R5).

Discussion:

Women have different attitudes towards participation in politics, several respondents mentioned that they do not have interest or they simply do not care about political matters. The results also showed that women are usually kept away from political process or decision making bodies. According to Boesen (2004, p. 8-9) women’s situation may differ on the basis of individual personalities and social contexts. Respondents discussed that, lack of information and home responsibilities lead to their less engagement in politics. Women do not feel confident in this realm and they mention lack of time as a responsible reason for their absence. According to Boesen (2004) there are many factors like shame, shyness, lack of interest, being illiterate and fear of sanctions from male members of the family behind women’s less participation in public affairs.

Internally women do adopt patriarchal social norms, or are obligated to adopt such norms in order to prevent them from decision making. They finally become convinced that, politics is not their proper role. R3 mentioned that, she has only seen men interested in politics. Unfortunately they also believe that these unfair acts are part of Afghan culture where every women should practice them.

R6 is a 68 years old lady who believed that women are only interested in home responsibilities not politics and they must obey male members of the family.

Patriarchal social norms are the key reasons which effect women's engagement in politics. All the respondents believed that, Afghanistan's political system is male dominated. They feel lack of freedom in participate in decision making institutes. R7 mentioned that not only it is difficult for the community to accept her as a politicians but also she is afraid of her family's and people's sanctions. She also argued that democracy has never been practices in Afghanistan. According to Boesen (2004) in Muslim countries, male community is negative towards women's participation in public (Boesen. 2004, p. 48-49), women are seen as subordinated and their problems were not important enough to implement reformations in patriarchal societies (Mahnaz and Friedl, 1997). Especially in tribal areas in Afghanistan, women are often used as materials and their bodies are men's property (Ahmad-Gosh, 2003).

Reasons for women's less participation in politics also include unequal treatment from their family members and broader society. All the respondents described that they have been unequally treated and according to R10, this is considered as a norm in Afghanistan. Boesen (2004) noted that, mostly men play dominant role and protect women as a family property by keeping them veiled and at home. He also mentioned that a woman's life is controlled by a men, while her labour in domestic and traditional household is believed to play an important role, still she is divested from taking decision for herself (Boesen. 2004, p. 8-9). R7 described that not only she was less appreciated than her brothers but also prohibited to do things her brothers were allowed. R5 mentioned that she was harassed by the taxi driver when she traveled alone. Ahmad-Gosh (2003) argued that women are expected to be obedient and voiceless. Women living in capital city Kabul do not experience violence at the same level like tribal areas. In tribal areas, a girl is not allowed to choose her partner and divorce is forbidden because marriages are believed to create relation between groups.

As previously discussed, education comprises a key reason of women's less participation in public affairs and politics. Educated and economically empowered women belong to a class of independent women (Ahmad-Gosh, 2003). Working independent women get the skills of political participation and inspire other women to engage in political sphere (Coffé & Dilli, 2015).

Respondent 10 and 7 argued how lack of education make women unable to participate because it makes them unable to connect to the outside world. Respondent 6 described that her brothers have studied university while she and her sisters were not allowed to go to school.

In conclusion, women are likely to participate in politics more in Afghanistan when the social norms change to promote more gender equality and when more women are allowed to get an education. Policymakers and development practitioners could try to develop programs that will shift these norms and seek to empower the counter-example women who do not adopt the patriarchal norms in Afghanistan and would like to see them change. Bosen (2004) argued, women should have the right to contribution in reconstruction and development of the country, they should be part of decision-making process, especially those aspects which impact their own lives.

Conclusion

Empirically observed reasons for women's less participation in politics in Afghanistan are conceptualized by Afghan women, and the respondents not only believed that these factors (listed in table 2) contribute to decrease women's presence in political process but also they censor their voices to fight for equality. Using qualitative interviews this thesis has presented individual-level reasoning for less participation in politics among Afghan women.

The answer to the first question of the thesis, "*What reasons for not participating in political process exist among Afghan women?*" is described in table 2. The reasons range from internal dimensions (*engagement and women who adopt patriarchal social norms*) to external dimensions (*patriarchal social norms and education*). The results emphasize that all these factors contribute for women's absence in politics, and a single factor cannot be the only reason behind it. The answer to the sub-question added; "*How women perceive their role in Afghan society?*" is that several of the respondents perceive themselves as subordinated or they have accepted patriarchy as norms in the society. While all women do not buy into the patriarchal norms. Respondents showed that, how women realize they are being treated unfairly and they would like to see a change. They mentioned solutions like implementation of gender equality in Afghan society and they hope that things will change. Women want to get an education in order to practice an independent and free life. Mahnaz & Friedl (1997) points out that, cultural and social norms have impacts on women's status in Muslim countries but the only way to bring equality in a community is through education. According to Ahmad-Gosh (2006) women in Afghanistan are dependent on their families and partner. Male family members take decision for them. They are forced to marry or stopped from going to school. Many of the respondents discussed about their marriages in young ages and when they were asked to stop going to school because they will be housewives and do not need to study.

As mentioned, women's situation varied during different epochs in Afghanistan. During Taliban and Mujahideen regime, women were oppressed and had almost no rights (Ahmad-Gosh, 2003). Boesen (2004) argues that, the community's previous history of contact with the wider world, including international NGOs and the literacy and education of men and women in the community, influence women to increase their participate in politics. Though it is necessary to mention that, in post-conflict Afghan society, women contributed not only within sectors like health, education, agriculture and traditional Afghan economy but also in decision making and political development of Afghanistan (Boesen, 2004).

The main strength inherent to this thesis is that it focuses on individuals perspective about their present situation and its responsible reasons. It might be impossible to claim that the whole picture of women's less participation is captured and defined by respondents, but the main and key reasons which they believe are underlying obstacles, are discussed. Usually studies about Afghan women do not include their own opinions about their status, while this study's main focus is on Afghan women's perception about their role in Afghan society.

The next step within research is to develop a deeper explanation of internal and external dimensions responsible for women's less participation in politics. Further researches can help to explore more underlying factors which are responsible obstacles for women's subordination. Especially religion's impact on society members political participation is an interesting dimension to investigate within political science research. Answer to the question like, "*How can Afghan society and government contribute in order to increase women's participation in politics?*" would be interesting to develop and consider for further research. Although several respondents interviewed in this thesis framed their demands for recognition of their sociopolitical and cultural rights. They believed that government is accountable for a fair participation in political process among the citizens, and gender based reformations should implemented. They also mentioned that, we should start teaching our children from a young age (at school/home) that girls and boys have equal rights. Women must unite to rise their voices against inequality and fight against patriarchy. According to Ahmad-Gosh (2003), women can claim political legitimacy by educating themselves and empowerment.

Many people may not have the idea about how women are marginalized from center of power in countries whom have men dominated political systems. This thesis thus contributes to a more

diverse social discussion about participatory obstacles among Afghan women and how democracy is damaged by excluding a gender from a country's political system. With the help of previous literature, the thesis is built on perceptions of individuals about their less engagement in decision making institutes. The respondents have given counter examples and demanded for their rights. They have expressed their ideas that how families and government can create reformations in order to make the society more righteous. The information in this study and respondents' opinions can be utilized in future researches about Afghan women status in politics, studies about gender based restrictions and gender based reformations.

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Appendix

Interview guide

A pre-interview was conducted with the respondents where they were informed about the study. Their age, political interest and education was registered. The interview and pre-interview were not recorded because most of the respondents preferred not to record their voices. All the answers were noted carefully in Dari and later translated to English.

Briefing

Thank you for participating.

The interview I will lead you through today seeks to learn about your opinions about issues having to do with women's less representation in politics in Afghanistan. I will not mention your name in my research or any other place.

I am asking your opinion for the following questions and there is no 'right' or 'wrong' answers.

Feel free to ask questions and terminate the interview at any time you want. I can erase your answers in case you change your mind later.

Theme 1: General questions:

1. Are you interested in politics?
2. Do you feel lack the freedom to engage in politics in Afghanistan?
3. Have you seen yourself unable to enter into powerful positions in politics?
 - a. Why?
4. Do you think there should be equal representation of men and women in Afghanistan's political institutions?
5. Do you think it is right for women to be elected as MP to parliament?
6. For instance, since women make up about half of Afghanistan's population, do you think there should be about an equal number of men and women in parliament?
 - a. Why?
 - b. Why not?

Theme 2: Cultural and social norms:

8. Have you experienced unequal treatment from your family members?

9. Have you experienced less appreciation (compared to your brother(s)) from your parents?
10. Have you experienced unequal treatment in the broader society in which you live?
 - a. (If a participant says no, I would ask her to explain with an example or two)
11. Do you think political participation is more restricted for women than men in Afghanistan?
12. Do you think that Afghan political system is male dominant?

Theme 3: Education:

13. Can you tell me about your experience with education?
 - a. How many years did you study?
14. Why did you stop going to school?
15. Were you pressured to stop going to school by someone or by society?
16. What do you think about role of education in engaging in politics?
17. Do women in Afghanistan receive less education compared to men, on average?
18. Is it easier for an educated women in Afghanistan to participate in politics?

Concluding questions:

19. What do you think the possible ways to increase women's political participation in Afghanistan?
20. How do we implement gender equality in our society, where girls and boys have equal rights?
21. What do you suggest?
22. What would you change about present social or political system if you could to gain more equality between the genders?
23. Could increasing women's educational attainment levels lead to more gender equality in Afghanistan?
 - a. Why?
 - b. Why not?

Information about the publication of the thesis.

Exchange of contact information.

Ending.