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EXECUTIVE REPORT

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This international Webinar on Education and Afghan Refugee Women was organized by Dr. Ourania Roditi, independent consultant based in Vienna, Austria, and Dr. Behnaz Hosseini, Visiting Research Fellow at the University of Victoria, Canada, on 8 December 2021. The organizers wish to express their sincere gratitude to all speakers, moderators, participants and support staff who collaborated in the successful organisation of this event.

Dr. Behnaz Hosseini is currently producing an edited volume on the same topic as this conference¹. Dr. Ourania Roditi and Dr. Mohinder Watson collaborated in the publication of this executive report on the webinar.

We are grateful to the authors who kindly gave us permission to edit some of their work for inclusion in this report as well as to reproduce their photographs.

¹ Special thanks go to Ali Hasannia (Assistant Professor, Department of Qur'an and Hadith Sciences, Shahed University, Iran) & Mansour Anbarmoo, Ph.D. candidate in Political Science at Islamic Azad University, Science and Research Branch, (SRBIAU) Tehran-Iran, whose presentations - for copyright reasons - cannot be included in the current report.

Opening Presentation by H.E. Ms. Manizha Bakhtari, Ambassador of Afghanistan to the Republic of Austria, Vienna - ‘The spirit of Afghan Women and Girls will never die’

In her inspiring statement the Ambassador said:



“I want everyone here today to know, however, that all is not lost. Afghanistan, and particularly Afghan women, made stunning progress over the course of 20 years, and we have seen the possibilities that can be achieved when women are educated, supported, and uplifted. They have not lost their education and experience. This will not go away just because the government has been toppled. The spirit of Afghan women will never die. A big part of this spirit lies also with the Afghan diaspora where women no longer take the possibility to study for granted.”

“To those of you here, I encourage you to take advantage of the educational opportunities available to you. While abroad, like here in Austria, I encourage you all to become role models for your fellow Afghan countrymen and women, by getting educated, polishing your skills and contributing to society, becoming beacons of successful integration in this wonderful country of Austria.”

“I also acknowledge the great achievements Afghan citizens have made here in Austria and I will motivate them to further contribute to the relations between our two countries. The diaspora plays a crucial role in reciprocally stimulating the relations between Austria and Afghanistan. I can say that I have already met numerous young Afghans here in Austria who live a regular life, well integrated, and who greatly contribute to Austrian society, as they pursue fruitful lives as students, teachers, musicians, athletes, business owners, and members of the Austrian community.”

“I implore Afghan women to trust your potential. The more you invest in education, the more you strengthen yourself.”

“As a woman Ambassador of Afghanistan to Austria one of the main priorities of my strategic plan for the Embassy and the Permanent Mission of Afghanistan in Vienna is women’s empowerment, and the advancement of opportunities and access to education available to Afghan women.”

“We must continue to fight for the rights of women and build opportunities for young women through education. The fact of the matter is that education is the key to everything including the upwards mobility of women both in Afghanistan and the rest of the world.”

Ambassador Manizha Bakhtari is a diplomat, lecturer, and author. She was formerly Afghanistan’s Ambassador to Nordic Countries (2009-2015) and served as the Chief of Staff of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Kabul (2007-2009). Prior to her diplomatic career, Ms. Bakhtari was renowned for her work on gender advocacy in the non-profit

sector, namely with the Cooperation Center for Afghanistan. Ms. Bakhtari has published hundreds of academic and journal articles, as well as seven books. Two of her most notable books were previously used as textbooks in the Journalism Faculty of Kabul University and encompass her analysis on reporting methods in news media and her research on journalistic ethics and regulations. In recent years, Ms. Bakhtari accepted social work with the Salvation Army and Ishtar Women's Resource Society in Vancouver, Canada where she employed harm reduction policies to resolve issues of homelessness, poverty, addiction, and domestic violence.

Mohinder Watson – ‘Why the Taliban Should Forget their Threats in Night Letters and Form an Inclusive and Representative Government of Afghanistan’²



The Taliban's rapid and unexpected rise to power in Afghanistan in August 2021 created fear of a return to the harsh control they imposed on Afghans from 1996-2001. The new media savvy Taliban 2.0 promised to respect women's human rights - within Islam - without actually explaining what this would mean for the everyday lives of women in Afghanistan. Unfortunately the Taliban's actions over the past few months clearly show that their attitude towards women has not changed, but they should appreciate that the lives of millions of women in Afghanistan have changed for the better over the past 20 years, and this progress should not be rolled back.

Silently the international community has watched the Taliban gradually re-impose their strict interpretation of Sharia laws and Pashtunwali customs on the Afghan people. The Taliban have issued edicts to restrict women's dress, ban the education of girls over 12, bar women from working outside the home, limit women's mobility in public spaces, require women to be accompanied by a male relative in public and when travelling long distances and have restricted journalists' and media reporting. Does this sound familiar?

While the Taliban have reneged on their promises to respect women's human rights, they seem determined to keep their promises issued in *Shabnamahs* or night letters, to hunt down and punish all those who helped the American or international forces during the US led occupation of Afghanistan from 2001-2021. Night letters written in Pashto were posted on the doors or walls of mosques or government buildings during the night to inform, threaten, instruct, advice, or warn the local population to refrain from collaborating with foreigners or to avoid sending their children to school. The aim of the night letters were to persuade Afghans, particularly in rural communities, to oppose the central government and support the insurgency. In their propaganda, the Taliban often referred to members of the international forces as 'infidels' or 'Christian invaders' and the Afghan

² Sources: Johnson, Thomas H. "The Taliban insurgency and an analysis of Shabnamah (Night Letters)." *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 18, no. 3 (2007): 317-344; Drissel, David. "Reframing the Taliban insurgency in Afghanistan: new communication and mobilization strategies for the Twitter generation." *Behavioral sciences of terrorism and political aggression* 7, no. 2 (2015): 97-128; Foxley, Tim. *The Taliban's propaganda activities: how well is the Afghan insurgency communicating and what is it saying?* Sipri, 2007.

Government as a 'puppet of the West.' The Taliban were fond of saying the 'Americans may wear the wristwatches, but we have the time...'

The Taliban wanted to oust all foreign military forces from Afghanistan and to re-establish the Taliban-run Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. But now that the Taliban have succeeded in achieving these aims, what next?

While the Taliban devoted much time to threatening violence to all those who assisted the Americans or international forces, they appear to have invested little time thinking about how to govern Afghanistan. Now in power, the Taliban are finding it challenging to persuade the international community, including international donors, to accept them as the legitimate government of Afghanistan. Their recent imposition of harsh rules on Afghans, especially women and girls, has done little to inspire confidence.

The Taliban should now be planning how to address the many pressing challenges facing Afghanistan, not least the imminent humanitarian and food security crisis. But longer term, how will the Taliban govern Afghanistan with an inclusive and representative government which includes other ethnic groups? How does it propose to provide public security for Afghans including a credible police force and legal system to provide justice for all? How will it manage reconstruction efforts, including providing universal access to health care and creating much needed jobs for Afghans and to bolster the collapsed economy? What policies and measures will it implement to respect and protect the human rights of all and to respect international law, including fulfilling Afghanistan's obligations to the treaties it has signed, such as the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW)? What will its education policy look like to drive economic and social development? There are indeed many questions to be answered, including how the people of Afghanistan will be able to hold the Taliban to account to deliver these services.

If the Taliban want to be taken seriously as the official government of Afghanistan, they must prove to the Afghan people and the international community, that they will set aside their grievances against all those who helped the Americans and focus instead on forming an inclusive and representative government of Afghanistan which respects the human rights of everyone as well as international law.

Mohinder Watson is a researcher, the Founder of an NGO, 'Action on Child, Early and Forced Marriage' and the Liaison Officer for the International Council of Women (ICW) in Geneva. She has a PhD in health sciences and has conducted extensive research in the field of child marriage around the world. Since 2012, she has combined her health background with her interest in women's human rights and empowerment and has undertaken advanced training at the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies, Geneva and Oxford University. In Geneva she liaises with UN Agencies and follows the work of the Human Rights Council, the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) committee and the Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC) to provide a communication bridge between the UN, the ICW Board and grassroots NGOs. In 2015 she set up an NGO, Action in Child, Early and Forced Marriage to advocate against child marriage based on her personal experience of her family trying to force her into an arranged marriage as a teenager in the UK. Upon refusing the marriage she was ostracized by her family.

Mel Bradley – ‘Secondary and Higher Education for Afghan Girls and Women’

Mel Bradley gave a brief and concise update of the challenges that women and girls faced in different parts of Afghanistan with accessing education:

- Secondary/High schools
 - In Kabul and much of the rest of the country secondary school girls are not allowed to attend classes at the moment (girls are only allowed to attend till grade 6)
 - The Taliban say that in 7 provinces, they are allowing secondary girls to attend schools when taught by female teachers; Rahela Trust could confirm this information for schools located in Herat & Mazar cities and some schools in Helmand
- Universities
 - Rahela Trust is closely working with universities. Regarding private universities, female students are allowed to attend if taught by females or separate from men, but according to estimates, only 50% of the eligible students are attending, mainly due to fear of reprisals
 - state universities are not allowing women at present
 - Taliban say they will try to open universities in March 2022
- Issues with regards to the Restrictions currently in place:
 - 16% of schools in Afghanistan are for girls only
 - Not enough female teachers to teach all eligible girls, certainly at the secondary & university levels
 - Expectation that Taliban will make changes to curriculum, though no announcement yet
- Opportunities
 - COVID has also contributed to the possibility for online learning. There are examples of people providing online courses for women who are unable to attend classes in person. There is a US organization, called the University of the People, who is offering 1,000 scholarships to Afghan women
 - The problem with online learning is over-reliance on power supplies & communication networks, which are unreliable, particularly, in rural areas



In the second part of her presentation, Mel Bradley briefly presented the work of Rahela Trust, which is a UK registered charity founded by Rahela Sidiqi in 2015. Rahela Sidiqi was a refugee to the UK in 2011. It has sponsored 36 women through the university in Kabul, Kandahar and most recently Helmand in the fields of law, medicine, computer science and economics. All students were selected from disadvantaged backgrounds, as they could not afford university tuition fees, but were highly talented achieving a minimum of 80% on their university entrance exams. In other words, they are carefully selected by the charity before the scholarships are provided. 19 of them are still studying in the

3 provinces, Kabul, Kandahar and Helmand and are all able to attend their university lectures at the current time. There is also a requirement for them to empower their communities at home particularly the girls, so they provide liquid teaching (hybrid in-person and online education), coaching, as well as mentoring for younger female students in their local communities

In the immediate chaos following the aftermath of the US troops' withdrawal, most of the women sponsored by the Rahela Trust over the past years contacted Rahela directly seeking ways to flee the country. Rahela tried hard to support them, however, all of them so far have remained in Afghanistan. There is hope that they will be able to complete their studies there without interference. Rahela Trust is working hard to send them emergency funding, as they are struggling in the current economic climate.

Mel Bradley concluded her presentation by listing ways to further assist and support girls and women in Afghanistan. One avenue of action would be for the West to exert pressure on the Taliban to allow girls' access to education at all levels. At the same time, the international community should also find ways to facilitate girls' education within Taliban constraints through:

- Organizations such as the Rahela Trust that provide private university scholarships
- Find ways to train female teachers
- Facilitate online learning and accessibility, especially in rural areas
- Potential for scholarship opportunities in neighboring countries as well as in western countries.

Mel Bradley emphasized that the future of women's education is exceedingly uncertain at the moment but there is perhaps more cause for hope than there was in 1996 provided that the West holds the Taliban accountable.



Rahela Sidiqi has also co-founded OMID International (OI), an Afghan-led social non-profit UK registered organization, with a vast network and partners in Afghanistan, whose work focuses on saving, protecting, supporting and mentoring at-risk individuals around the world. Their work includes saving those at the highest risk of violence, particularly female Afghan journalists, CSO women leaders, former female

judges and police officers, persecuted sports' persons, and artists, and facilitate their evacuation from Afghanistan, supports their emergency relocation as well as immediate and long-term integration into their new host communities, and provides training and support to pursue livelihoods and live with dignity as well as their vocation of advancing human rights for those who remain in Afghanistan. OI also works in Turkey, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and India. Their achievements include providing successful evaluations to journalists, capacity development training for women and youth, food and shelter for women activists and many more.

Mel Bradley ran a small UK-based charity for 15 years building schools across Afghanistan and giving thousands of children the opportunity to gain an education. She is on the board as an advisor for several other Afghan focused not for profit organizations, including the Rahela Trust (<https://www.rahelatrust.org/>), and has managed and delivered large scale projects and events. A catalyst for change, Mel is passionate about impacting people's lives to offer them a brighter future.

Abdullah Ahmadi – ‘The Situation of Women's Education under the Taliban Domination’



It is a bitter reality that half of Afghanistan's population is denied access to their basic human rights: women cannot practice their political, economic, social and cultural rights, are not allowed to work outside the home, do sports in public or appear on TV drama shows and girls are not allowed to go to school. Around 3.5 million girls have been deprived of education since the return of the Taliban. After August 15th, 2021 the freedom of expression, civic space, human rights, women rights and minority rights faced serious restrictions.

A synopsis of the main milestones regarding female education in Afghanistan are the following:

In January 1921, the first girls' school in the history of Afghanistan was opened in Kabul, with fifty students. In 1933-1973 during King Mohammed Zahir's reign, Afghanistan's education system steadily expanded although it was challenged by the country's conservative cultural and religious authorities.

By the 1970s, women made up more than 60% of the 10,000 students who studied at Kabul University. 1978 brought large-scale literacy programs for men and women, and other reforms beneficial to women. During this period leading up to the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, reforms in areas such as education stirred resentment among religious and tribal leaders in the rural areas. Although full implementation of these reforms were limited by political exigencies, women were able to



experience increased access to education and also the opportunity to actively participate as university faculty staff. During the Soviet occupation (1979-1989), Afghans lived through a devastating war and access to education was particularly challenged.

Following the fall of the Communist government, from 1992-1995, the country was divided among warring factions. The religiously inspired Mujahedeen groups ideologically opposed modern education for girls. Millions of Afghans, particularly the educated, immigrated to other countries. Many of the schools which were not destroyed by war were closed due to the lack of security, lack of teachers and teaching materials, or simply because of dire poverty.



The Taliban period lasted from 1996 to 2001 and saw an almost complete ban of girls' education followed by a drastic improvement of their situation from 2001 to 2021. During that time, girls attended school and universities, women were allowed to work and to take on senior roles, such as judges and members of Parliament. The Taliban insurgency caused damage from bomb attacks on girls' schools. In March 2021, 85 girls died and 147 were wounded at an attack at Sayed Al Shuhada School in Kabul.

Since the 15th of August 2021, the Taliban have banned girls from secondary education in Afghanistan and ordered high schools to re-open only for boys. The former ministry of women's affairs was dissolved by the Taliban and its building was taken over by the newly re-established ministry for the prevention of vice and promotion of virtue. According to the Taliban, women's rights would be respected "within the framework of Islamic law". A Taliban spokesperson stated, "We are going to allow women to work and study within our frameworks....Women are going to be very active within our society."



Mr. Ahmadi concluded his presentation by providing a set of recommendations to improve women's education in Afghanistan including:

- Engaging in national and international advocacy for girls'/women's access to education in Afghanistan;
- Encouraging European countries to support women in Afghanistan and ensuring that European governments do not recognize the Taliban government. Most of the Taliban cabinet members are known terrorists, while the majority of their provincial governors are implicated in crimes they committed in the past;
- Raising awareness amongst Afghans about women's rights, especially the right to education;

- Establishing a mechanism to monitor the human rights situation in general and, specifically, girls access to education;
- Providing alternative online education and training through digital technology with the support of international organizations and UN agencies;
- Filing official complaints against the Taliban in International Courts such as the ICJ for violating the basic rights of half of Afghanistan's population;
- Calling upon all EU governments to collaborate with the Special Rapporteur on human rights in Afghanistan recently appointed by the UN Human Rights Council;
- Organizing expert meetings in order to find academic solutions to women's rights and initiate a global campaign to support Afghan Women's Access to Education and their basic human rights.

Sayed Abdullah Ahmadi is the Executive Director of Afghanistan Democracy and Development Organization (ADDO) since 2015 and was also elected Chairperson of the Civil Society Joint Working Group (CSJWG), the largest civil society network in Afghanistan with over 1300 organization members. He is a member of the Media High Council of Afghanistan and winner of the International Peace Prize of South Korea in 2018. Mr. Ahmadi is a human rights activist and focuses on peace building, conflict resolution, human rights and democracy in Afghanistan. He has over 20 years' experience of working with civil society in different positions. He is also a member of several civil society working groups and campaigns such as the Youth Coordination Group, the Rule of Law Coordination Group and the Transitional Justice Coordination Group (TJCG).

Dr. Ayesha Ahmad – ‘Understanding Violence – and Silence - in Afghanistan from a Trauma-Focused Lens: Shifting from Peace Education to the Poetic’



Photography by Nocem Cocello.

Afghan girls and women have suffered the traumas of a gendered conflict, situated within a global discourse of perceptions of violence and victimhood. Their stories are structurally, and systematically silenced and such silence is equated with victimhood rather than silence. However, the symptoms of the lived realities of such sufferings are rarely received and there are significant conflict-related burdens of mental disorders amongst the general population who have lived the story of war for over four decades. Overall, Afghanistan has a severely limited infrastructure for mental healthcare and treatment and serious stigmas and discrimination towards the mentally ill. Understanding war-related trauma also needs a lens that creates a wider paradigm

to view suffering from and not merely as a pathology or psychological disorder. Stories of suffering from trauma provide insight into the destruction of war and the act of creating storytelling is an antithesis to silence.

Peace education in Afghanistan is delivered through the national curriculum in the very same educational settings where girls continue to be targeted and attacked even during the ongoing peace talks. Yet, the connection between trauma and peace is vacuous, and there is a gap between the non-violent approaches that are taught in peace education and the violence that the children are bearing witness to and enduring in their everyday experiences.

This paper considers two aspects; the need for literary spaces in peace education for stories of trauma to be voiced, and the critical gaze for why children are being taught about peace who carry the generational burdens of trauma of multiple conflicts of international invasions. Learning how to reconcile trauma with a peaceful existence is, I argue, requiring the language of poetic expression where suffering is reflected on. To this end, the stories of trauma symbolise spaces of both violence and silence, and the expression of such stories of suffering can aid the transformation of the sufferer into a storyteller. Literary means of expression can be found in individual as well as cultural narratives and draw on literary sources from rich landscapes such as Afghanistan for contemporary historical words from women poets, writers, artists, and activists.

However, such learning is futile without values such as hope and healing. To achieve these values, we need to shift the focus that peace education of civilians, especially children, is the key to transforming conflict from post-conflict to peace. A trauma-focused lens for peace education will help reach narratives of suffering and identify international institutions where peace education needs to be implemented.

Dr. Ahmad holds a PhD in medical ethics and works to integrate ethics and the humanities into global health research and pedagogy. Her research expertise is in transcultural psychiatry and cross-cultural mental health. She particularly works in contexts of conflict and humanitarian crisis resulting from disasters including environmental change. Dr. Ahmad develops trauma therapeutic interventions using traditional storytelling and has an ongoing research project in Kashmir (India) and Turkey, in collaboration with Afghanistan, Tunisia, and South Africa; www.shaercircle.com. Dr. Ahmad's specialization is in psychological trauma and the ethical consequences of concepts that are used in mental health. She has developed both undergraduate and postgraduate courses in culture and mental health. Dr. Ahmad also works as an Expert Witness providing academic reports on asylum seeker cases related to war, mental health, and gender-based violence.

Homa Bazafkan – ‘The Role of Women in Intra-Afghan Peace Talks’



Politicizing Afghan women for the sake of the global war on terror helped the U.S. find justifications to implement the neoliberalism development model in Afghanistan while controlling the Islamic fundamentalist groups and the region on a broader stance. This approach resulted in humanitarian and financial assistance that made the country a wealthier state. Therefore, my research aims to understand the role of Afghan women over the last twenty years in the peacebuilding and development of their country while dealing with aid interventions and gender empowerment programs by the donor community. In this regard, my research sheds light on the underlying reasons

causing the depiction of Afghan women as those without agency and their endeavours to change such presumptions. To achieve this goal, my research looks into the narrative of the war on terror which used women as justification for the nation-state projects and justifying American military intervention in the region. In the name of peacemaking, western military and aid interventions put a greater burden on women's shoulders than promising them liberation and emancipation. The coincidence of conducting my research with the withdrawal of U.S. and NATO forces and the reemergence of the Taliban accentuates the importance of my research.

Homa Bazafkan completed her master's degree in international development at the University of Vienna and she is currently a PhD student in the Gender graduate program at the University of Graz. During her master's degree, she engaged in different projects regarding the integration of refugees with a focus on Afghan refugee women. Recently, she was a student project assistant studying the role of social media in refugees' perception of European Union policies in the communication department at the University of Vienna.

Pashtana Durrani – ‘Education and Afghan Women’



Pashtana Durrani highlights that her work and the work of the organization she founded, LEARN Afghanistan, mostly revolve around finding solutions rather than highlighting problems. This is achieved through the use of digital literacy tools. For Ms. Durrani, one of the factors contributing to the current crisis in Afghanistan is that the world has been mostly talking to those ‘who create problems’ instead of those who ‘focus on solutions.’

Such a solution-oriented example is the organization Ms. Durrani founded - LEARN Afghanistan - which has adapted its work to the political developments in the country. The organization has faced numerous problems including the previous government who were not open to digital literacy solutions, while the situation under the Taliban has been utterly chaotic. In fact, following the return of the Taliban, LEARN Afghanistan expanded its digital literacy programmes to an underground school for 800 girls in Kandahar, while making plans to expand soon to Kabul and probably towards Panjab and Mazar-i-Sharif in the coming two months. For LEARN Afghanistan, the main problem right now is the lack of infrastructure and communication. At the same time, girls’ education is being politicized. Based on her experience, Pashtana Durrani believes that there is one thing

to learn from past and current developments: 'women cannot afford to wait for the men to tell them when to start their education.' They have to take the lead and adapt to changing circumstances.

Addressing a remark on segregation Ms. Durrani emphasized that Afghanistan is not a homogenous country, as there are different cultures within Afghan society that favor segregation and others who do not. Herself, an ethnic Pashtun, same as the Taliban, comes from a background where segregation was the rule. For example, Pashtuns always had segregated weddings, birthdays and dinner parties. This is how central and eastern Afghanistan worked and is still working. As a result, segregation is a deeply entrenched cultural value. Further, schools were segregated long before the Taliban came to power; they were segregated during the 1970s and the 1980s, as well as during the past two decades and even to this date. The reason students attend mixed classes at the university level is because the faculties do not have the financial resources to organize segregated classes; otherwise it is very likely that parents would favor segregated classes even at the university level.

For LEARN Afghanistan the critical issue is to work and focus on the communities that are left out, so that they are given the space to receive the education they deserve. They also focus on minorities, such as the Sikhs or Hazaras. According to Ms. Durrani, in Faryab and Mazar-i-Sharif, the communities are reaching out to them. What she mainly does is to assist them financially and with human capacity. For Ms. Durrani, by disallowing girls' education, the Taliban show their self-destructive nature: If 50% of the total population do not graduate, they will not be part of the workforce and they will not pay taxes. The country will always be dependent on foreign aid and as they do not have natural resources, the same way that Arab countries do, they cannot afford to have half of the workforce staying at home.

Finally, responding to a comment on financing, Ms. Durrani emphasized that they make use of the GoFundMe money they raise. Ms. Durrani also mentioned that she does not believe in working with donors, as they mainly follow and favor the implementation of their own agendas in a country they hardly understand. Her priority is to work at the grass root level, ask what communities need and then deliver through the GoFundMe money they raise. Ms. Durrani believes that Afghanistan does not need trillions of dollars, only the right funds, spent on addressing concrete needs that benefit ordinary people.

Ms. Durrani concluded that Afghanistan is a misogynistic, patriarchal society and the men are leading it. It makes little difference if these men are in government or have joined the Taliban since they all have, more or less, the same goals. Therefore, for Ms. Durrani addressing segregation is not a priority; instead girls' education is the priority, since once girls get the appropriate education, they can decide what kind of future they want to have.

Pashtana Durrani is an activist, Innovator, policy development and implementation expert, social scientist, social entrepreneur, a feminist, writer and poet and marketing expert. Her passion for providing education to those who do not have access, led her to found Learn Afghanistan, an organization dedicated to innovation in education with a focus on women's rights. Her ambition is to build community centers in rural areas and urban slums where children can learn with a special focus on coding. She also wants to ensure that there is a mentoring program for

women where they can learn to code as well as other skills that will help them generate self-sustainable jobs for themselves and their communities.

Professor Daniela Wetzelhütter, Manuela Angerer, Katrin Hasenhuber & Sonja Falkner-Matzinger – ‘Integration of Afghan Female Refugees into the Labour Market in Upper Austria’

The study "Problem areas and challenges of Afghan women on their way into the Upper Austrian labour market - Conclusions for integration projects" was carried out under the project management of Caritas Upper Austria, Integration Department, in cooperation with Upper Austria University of Applied Sciences, Linz Campus, Department of Health, Social and Public Management, as scientific head in cooperation with Johannes Kepler University Linz, Institute of Sociology, Department of Empirical Social Research. The study was funded by the Upper Austrian Integration Offensive Afghan Community.



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In line with Upper Austrian integration policy, participation in the labour market forms an essential basis for a self-determined and self-supporting life, especially for refugees. However, labour market integration of refugee women has been less successful in the past than that of refugee men. For a number of reasons, women with a migration background are still significantly less likely to be employed when compared to the rest of the female population. In particular, recently, there has been a growing focus on women, as there is an increasing awareness of their significant role in the integration process once they are given the opportunity to take advantage of new options in the host society. The challenges that Afghan women face while joining the labour market have been little researched to date, making it difficult to develop appropriate measures to support and promote their integration. As a result, one of the goals of the study was to research and provide data to enable future policy making. The starting point was to identify factors and challenges that Afghan women face in the course of their integration in the labour market in the Upper Austria.

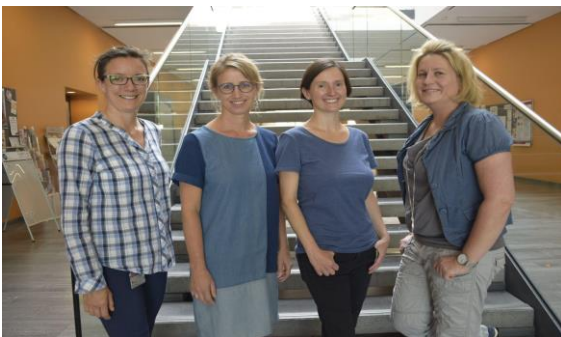
As a result, the objectives of the study were the following: i) identify the characteristics of the target group, namely Afghan women in Upper Austria, as well as ii) the problem areas and challenges they face while integrating in the Upper Austria's labour market, and on this basis, iii) demonstrate how a contribution can be made to the development of measures for the sustainable labour market integration of refugee women.

In order to achieve these goals, information and data from various sources were first compiled and qualitative interviews with experts and employees from support projects in Upper Austria were conducted. Interviews with a target group of Afghan refugee women were also conducted, transcribed and analyzed. The results showed that Afghan women—as expected—need different forms of support, depending on their qualifications, family condition, social resources, personal characteristics and their wishes or aspirations with regard to integration in the Upper Austrian labour market.

To claim that there is one measure that is equally suitable for all refugee women in order to enable successful labour market integration does not do justice to the heterogeneity of the group. The study's results showed that a number of Afghan women are on a quite promising path towards labour market integration, while others face many challenges. For example, regarding qualifications, acquiring a good level of the German language is a challenge. An ideal solution would be to expand German courses and consider women's specific needs (childcare, illiterate or older women). Another example has to do with women who are challenged by gender-specific roles and gender-specific labour division, which means that their career aspirations are not realizable in terms of labour market policy. A measure would be to take into consideration family contexts and impart knowledge about the Austrian labour market. When dealing with women with low education and minimal or no working experience, expansion of basic education courses and school-leaving qualifications would be a suitable measure alongside measures aiming at competence orientation and empowerment and providing incentives to companies to hire refugee women.

Although the transfer of system knowledge is important for all refugees, the needs also differ in terms of information: While the group of promising Afghan women rather needs mostly coaching or counseling in order to enable them to recognise and perceive the possibilities and ways to realize them, the vulnerable groups need more intensive and longer-term support on their way towards the labour market. Tailor-made measures to reduce structural disadvantages are necessary alongside a continuation and/or targeted expansion of integration measures focusing specifically on women.

The results show that there is a great demand for action, but also prove the potential of refugee women: Many of them are working to be able to live financially independent, are highly motivated and want to be a positive role model for their children.



Daniela Wetzelhütter is a professor at the Upper Austria University of Applied Sciences, Linz Campus. She is a sociologist; her research focuses on applied social sciences and non-profit; in addition to empirical social research, her research interests include e.g. migration and prevention research in particular; her current focus is on the standardization of surveys and analyses.

Manuela Angerer is an employee of Caritas Upper Austria, Integration Department. She is a sociologist and has been working on different projects in the field of integration for more than ten years. She is currently involved in strategic process support for municipalities in the district of Steyr-Land, Upper Austria, and in counseling migrant self-organisations.

Katrin Hasengruber, sociologist, is a research associate at the Institute of Sociology (Johannes Kepler University, Linz) and teaches at the Upper Austria University of Applied Sciences and the University of Education Upper Austria. The main focus of her work is on social inequality/migration - education - work, with a particular focus on the interface between these topics.

Sonja Falkner-Matzinger is head of the Department 'International Welcome Center and Students Ombuds Office' at Johannes Kepler University (JKU) Linz. She is a social economist and is the program manager of the MORE Initiative for Refugees at JKU. The focus of her work is on advising and managing needs-based services for international students and employees of JKU who want to live in Austria.

Meena Miakhel – 'Afghan Diaspora Women in Austria'



Amongst all the refugee and migrant groups Meena Miakhel worked with, Afghans seem to face some of the greatest difficulties in adjusting to Austrian and European standards. This is due to a combination of factors: the tumultuous history of Afghanistan, the on-going civil war, the reign of the Taliban and the repercussions their policies had on the educational and personal development of women. Yet, certain differences are detected amongst Afghan refugees who are from Iran and those from Afghanistan. To start with, the number of Afghan refugees from Iran in Austria is truly astonishing. From her personal experience, many of the Afghan refugees in Austria have already been 3rd or even 4th generation of Afghan refugees in Iran. As Meena Miakhel further explained, based on her own rough estimate, three (3) out of four (4) Afghan refugees are from Iran. Amongst them, one can easily conclude that those from Afghanistan face a greater challenge with regards to adjusting in Austria. Yet, and that was also really surprising, even those from Iran, especially women and older people, have low literacy rates. Many of them struggled with learning the new alphabet and language.

Another major problem that Afghans face is structural; namely it has to do with the slow pace of processing asylum cases from Afghanistan. In the meantime, while their cases are under consideration, refugees receive very limited benefits. That makes the Afghans, and particularly refugee women, increasingly frustrated with the system. Even seemingly trivial issues obstruct Afghan refugee women from learning the language. For example, there are limited dictionaries in Dari and Pashtu. Pashtu speakers find themselves especially isolated. Even if they sit a German class, they may have no one to communicate with. This is obviously not a problem for those Afghans who come from Iran and speak Farsi, as they can easily communicate and connect with the sizable Iranian community in the country. These problems, coupled with racism, the difficulties they have in connecting with Austrian people and the traditional conduct of most Afghan families that want women to have increasing responsibility at home, pose additional challenges for Afghan refugee women in Austria.

Last but not least, a major challenge for the Afghan community here is that the different ethnic groups that find refuge in Austria bring with them their values and problems they had back home. In other words and in a way, the conflict that takes place in Afghanistan is reflected in the relations amongst the different ethnic groups who live here. As a result, one can easily identify problems and conflicts arising amongst them. That prohibits them from developing a bond as a minority and diasporic group, supporting each other and developing a community spirit.

Meena Miakhel is a human rights activist and social worker. She is about to complete her studies with the University of Applied Sciences in Vienna. Meena, who is originally from Afghanistan and has lived in Austria for the past 12 years, has collaborated with some of the most renowned civil society organizations working with refugees and migrants in the country. As a result, Meena is uniquely positioned to convey her experience and opinion on the main challenges that Afghan refugee women face in Austria

Shahla Haeri – ‘Mobility, Desire, Agency: Reflections on Afghan Women Refugees in Iran’



Responding to the formulaic and age-old patriarchal justifications for the unsuitability of women for many professions due to their “nature,” Shahla Farid, a law professor at Kabul University said, “Just open the door and let the women out!” Farid thus pointedly expressed the desire and desirability for mobility and the unimpeded freedom of movement for women. Given a chance, women have achieved excellence in all professions that have been made available to them. Excellence is what many Afghan women have shown in their various professions and activities. It is not women’s “inferior nature” that has kept them from realizing their full potentials but the weight of compounded ignorance, dominance, oppression, and discriminatory legislative policies.

I am humbled by the enormity of the intractable problems facing Afghanistan. I am not going to yet again highlight a litany of blatantly misogynist policies by the Taliban – that is painfully obvious and well-known. I want to tell stories of six Afghan women who have operationalized their agency to achieve equality, visibility and voice; to highlight the sociocultural, political and legal injustices in their society.

Growing up as a refuge in Iran, **Sonita Alizadeh** was only 15 years old when she felt the weight of traditional oppression in the depth of her soul and screamed in her “brides for sale,” “for a body exhausted in its cage,” ending her anguished rap, “but I wish you would review the Quran. I wish you knew it doesn’t say women are for sale.”

Born in Iran to Afghan parents, **Sahraa Karimi** returned to Afghanistan and mobilized her resources to realize her lifelong dream of directing films. *Afghan Women behind a wheel* depicts women’s mobility, visibility and agency through learning to drive, and thus control the “wheel” of their lives.

“Being a woman is a challenge in Afghanistan,” said **Masooma Ibrahimi** in an interview in 2021 about her documentary, *Kabul Women*. “So far no one has made a film that represents a different image of Afghan women, one of modern and educated Afghan women. I wanted to show a different image of Afghan women while highlighting their day to day challenges.”

Roya Sadat ventured into making feature films and documentaries on the theme of injustice and restrictions imposed on women. *A letter to the President* deals with the inconsistencies of the Afghan legal system, which vacillates between Islamic, statutory and customary rules. Taking a feminist view, this film presents the cultural

and legal issues women face in this country. In 2018 Roya Sadat was recognized with the Women of Courage Award.

Saba Sahar was trained as a police officer. All Sahar's film productions depict police dramas, and the heroine of each, played by Sahar herself, is a female officer, standing up for justice and integrity against the bad guys, be they Taliban, warlords or drug barons. In her first film, *Qanun, Law*, the hero is a policewoman. No one, she says, obeys the law. "My goal is to show women's power and capabilities."

Sahra Mani is an award-winning documentary filmmaker and Producer. "In this country," she says, "every woman has 100, 'masters,' (sahab). Her father, her brothers, her uncles, her cousins, her neighbors, who think they have the right to make decisions for us." Her award winning film *A Thousand Girls Like Me*, tells the real story of a young Afghan woman's brave fight to seek justice against her father's sexual abuse.

Reflecting on the lives and activities of these remarkable women we begin to see the emergence of certain "female power" in Afghanistan, whose ambition, agency and visibility threatens the foundation of Taliban's "sacred" ideology. In this traditional and deeply patriarchal society, one thing that many of these women share is a capacity to turn the symbols that usually disempower women to their own advantage (Beard 2017, 81). These six talented women have sadly left their beloved country upon the Taliban's return.

Shahla Haeri is a Professor of Anthropology and a former director of the Women's Studies Program at Boston University (2001-2010), Shahla Haeri is one of the pioneers of Iranian Anthropology. She has produced cutting-edge ethnographies of Iran, Pakistan and the Muslim world. Her landmark books include her classic ethnography, Law of Desire: Temporary Marriage, Mut'a, in Iran (1989/2014) translated into Arabic and reprinted frequently, highlighting the tenacious but secretive custom of temporary marriage in Iran; No Shame for the Sun: Lives of Professional Pakistani Women (2002), makes visible lives of educated and professional Muslim women. Her latest book, The Unforgettable Queens of Islam: Succession, Authority, Gender (2020) is a pioneering book on the extraordinary lives and legacies of a few remarkable Muslim women sovereigns from across the Muslim world. Dr. Haeri's video documentary, Mrs. President: Women and Political Leadership in Iran (2002) focuses on six women presidential contenders during the Iranian presidential election of 2001. She is the recipient of many fellowships, grants, and postdoctoral fellowships.

Mohit Singh – Perceptions of Integration in Austria from a 17-year-old Afghan Pupil and Member of IGASUS

Mohit Singh came to Austria 8 and a half years ago and his presentation mainly focused on his experience after socializing, observing and talking to Afghan girls in his classroom. He also briefly referred to the work of the association IGASUS.

According to Mohit, there are two types of Afghan parents: in the first category, parents are uneducated or have minimal education, they are not familiar with western culture, and they treat their girls as if they were in Afghanistan. The only difference is that they allow them to go to school and be taught by male teachers. These girls always wear headscarves and following their graduation, they will marry someone their parents have chosen. In the second category belong parents who are educated and familiar with western culture. They allow their daughters to wear jeans, t-shirts and high heels; they can also have loose hair and headscarves are not obligatory. In this category parents allow their daughters to proceed with their studies even after school graduation. For Mohit, the main challenge for all refugee girls is learning the language; teachers are mostly supportive, and they all hope for a better life in Austria, living free and in peace.

Before concluding his presentation Mohit also referred to the work of IGASUS, whose main goal is to support the Afghan community in the field of education, motivate pupils and students who are new to Austria, and provide them with educational support. IGASUS also organizes workshops for the Afghan community; a recent workshop focused on violence prevention. They also organize graduation ceremonies for young people, where they invite families, journalists and politicians. The goal of this activity is to motivate and encourage young people to continue with their education. Finally, IGASUS also publishes an online magazine, which contains news about political developments in Afghanistan, advice for refugees, educational news, interviews with Afghan personalities and entrepreneurs in Austria and cultural and social news surrounding the Afghan refugee community in Vienna (<https://publishers.igasus.org/>).