

Development Practitioners' Perspectives on the Role of Islam in Afghan Girls' Refugee

Education: A Qualitative Comparative Case Study

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Introduction and Research Question

Decades of armed conflict in Afghanistan have tarnished the Afghan education system, leaving many children with no viable or safe ways to get an education in their country. Oppression and overall instability linked to the presence of religious extremism continues to contribute to a weak education system with little access for girls, giving reason for Afghan families to leave the country. As the world's largest refugee population, 2.6 million Afghan refugees have found asylum in neighboring countries such as Iran and Pakistan (Guterres, 2017). In the case of a protracted conflict, it is essential for Afghan refugees to seek an education during their time in refugee camps, especially if they did not have access to quality education at home. Unfortunately, as the Afghan refugee crisis continues, girls struggle to find opportunities for quality education in emergency situations. Indeed, more than half of the 43 million out-of-school children in conflict-affected countries are girls (Kirk, 2011).

In response to this crisis, development organizations are attempting to design and implement education programs for Afghan refugees. Fleeing from instability, discrimination, gender inequalities and gender-based violence, and religious extremism, Afghan refugees are in a difficult situation when balancing life as a refugee and practicing and preserving their own cultures, norms, and religions. Practitioners may face the challenge of creating culturally appropriate educational programming for Afghan refugee girls. In order to increase access to education in displacement, new approaches to education in refugee camps arise. These approaches may intersect with traditional and cultural practices, which inspired the following research questions on the role of religion in Afghan girls' education in refugee camps: *How do NGO and IGO practitioners' perceptions of the role of Islam in refugee education impact their design and implementation of educational programs for Afghan girls in refugee camps? How might decisions about the role of religion in girls' education for Afghan refugees contribute to mitigating gender-based obstacles to facilitating access to education?*

Overall, there is a lack of research that specifically addresses the role of Islam in bringing Afghan refugee communities together. For this reason, this study questions whether and how Islam may impact women and girls' education in camps by exploring the ways in which it can be used as a form of cultural coercion or a tool of community and identity building even outside of Afghanistan. Additionally, this study shares suggestions for approaching the intersection of religion and education for Afghan refugee girls.

This study finds that education practitioners who work with Afghan refugee girls

in camps recognize the communities' religion, culture, traditions, and other values as essential for providing respectful education in a safe, comfortable environment for refugee girls. Their awareness of Afghan religion and culture can help mitigate gender-based discrepancies and patriarchal norms in education through educational programming that supports girls' educational ambitions.

Background

The limitations to Afghan girls' access to education both in Afghanistan and refugee camps stems from political, religious, and cultural factors that have been exacerbated through many years of conflict and political shifts. After the fall of the Soviet Union, the Afghan government overturned policies that had previously brought widespread literacy and increased enrollment of Afghan girls during the Cold War (Lee, 2009). The Islamic State of Afghanistan, according to Lee (2009), took away right after right, ultimately leaving women with virtually no mobility or agency. Years later, although Afghanistan is a signatory to the Convention for the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), the Afghan government and dominant Islamic groups, namely the Taliban, turned a blind eye to neglect and abuse against women (Lee, 2009). Many Afghans fled their homes in fear of persecution by religious extremist groups like the Taliban and al-Qaeda, which have had a dominating presence in politics and society for many years. Over the past three decades, Afghan refugees have made up the world's largest protracted refugee crisis (UNHCR, 2016). As recently as 2010, there were six million registered Afghan refugees, but the number has decreased to 2.6 million after repatriation efforts mostly from Pakistan in the past few years (Guterres, 2017).

Despite more recent laws and policies to denounce or criminalize discrimination against women, gender inequality is rooted in Afghanistan's culture, such as its male-dominated society, dislike of modernism, and lack of commitment to social services (Lee, 2009). Girls disproportionately experience limited access to schools, higher dropout rates, and gender-based violence in school during conflicts than boys (Kirk, 2011). In contemporary Afghanistan, there has been a recent rise in demand for secular schools for girls, but opposition from the Taliban threatens the quality and existence of these schools due to the Western bias implied with the implementation of secular schools (Alvi, 2003, Bahri, 2004). Due to The Taliban and the destabilization of the central government, the education system in Afghanistan has fallen victim to closures and restrictions that have kept girls from attending school. The most recent UNICEF data on primary school net attendance ratio for girls was 46%, which falls far behind the boys net attendance ratio of

62% (UNICEF, 2015). For secondary school, attendance is even worse with only 27% of girls attending in comparison to 47% of boys (UNICEF, 2015).

Migration patterns show that Afghans are emigrating for a variety of reasons due to factors such as economic turmoil, political instability, and personal reasons (Dimitriadi, 2017). Personal reasons include security and protection from threatening groups such as the Taliban, who have jeopardized economic and educational opportunities for many Afghans (Dimitriadi, 2017). However, even having fled Afghanistan in hope for a better life, including access to education for girls, millions of refugees may still experience barriers to education due to cultural and religious norms (Sajoo, 2004). Therefore, this research analyzes how practitioners facilitate education for Afghan girls in refugee camps in light of the role religion plays in education in the girls' home country. It intends to explore if the role of religion in girls' education for Afghan refugees mitigates gender-based obstacles to facilitating access to education.

Literature Review

This literature review takes into account research on religion in education, gender-based discrepancies in education in emergencies, and education for Afghan refugees. While there are very few studies on the intersection of religion and refugee education, the current literature has not ignored crucial details in refugee education for girls that ultimately guided this research towards its theoretical approach, discussed in the conceptual framework section following this review.

The best foundation for this research assesses the national education programs of Turkey, Pakistan, and Indonesia and argues that neither purely universal nor culturally relative approaches to education in regards to Islam are suitable (Sajoo, 2004). Development actors should be cognizant of the implications of mixing religion and education, especially if the community adheres to strong religious norms (Sajoo, 2004). Certain religious groups view education as a hindrance to faith (Alvi, 2003, Bahri, 2004); therefore, the influence of strong religious groups can sometimes inhibit education development plans if not planned properly (Sajoo, 2004). This framework will be pursued through a feminist critical lens that takes into account cultural (or religious) relativism in a gendered society.

The concept of the two faces of education in conflict states that education can either assist with social rebuilding or further exacerbate inequalities (Bush & Saltarelli, 2000; Kirk, 2011). Davies (2015), drawing on both the positive and negative role of education in conflict, argues that women and children's lives in the camps are still

structured around political and social values despite fleeing religious extremism, and that religious extremism can impact formal and informal education even when in camps (Davies, 2005). Gender-based grievances can continue in camps. Families and their students may face discomfort attending mixed-gender class or learning from teachers of the opposite gender (Winthrop & Kirk, 2011). Social benefits of education in the Afghan context include preventing youth from joining religious extremist groups that often act as a coping mechanism for a loss of control in a young person's life (Davies, 2015), adjusting gender roles in new settings (Kirk, 2011), and recognizing and gaining agency (Dimitriadi, 2017).

While religion and religious values on gender are often indicators in studies on education and identity, there is not enough focus on how religion shapes the facilitation and outcomes of refugee education. Rostami-Povey (2005) asked female students and teachers directly about their personal roles and goals and how they may differ from pro-Taliban acquaintances and family members. After years of conflict, social cohesion and gender norms have been rebuilt in Afghanistan through the hard work and resilience of the affected women (Rostami-Povey, 2005; Kanji and Cameron, 2011). Refugee schools also provide more opportunity for teachers to interact with families and community leaders (Kirk, 2011). Fiddian-Qasmiyeh (2014) explains that through religion-based lessons, education can shape a girl's identity and life trajectory when in such a difficult situation. Refugee education is also a form of psychosocial support (Davies, 2015).

Youth in refugee camps are of major concern in terms of their mental health and mental development, as they can be harshly affected by the constant mobility the subsequent instability of being a refugee (Dicum, 2005). Afghan youth require strong support both through formal education and informal education that can be provided by the community, but is not always provided by the host country (Dicum, 2005; Ghufuran, 2011). Similar to this study, Dicum (2005) analyzes the intersection of emergency education and children's identity through interviews and qualitative analysis of school systems, classrooms, and curricula, but there is no discussion of religion as a formal educational tool.

The complex global refugee crisis, while sparked by public, violent, tangible conflicts, is also catalyzed by underlying social reproductions, inequalities, and problematic societal structures from before the crisis. (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2014). These inequalities can be further exacerbated in displacement. Refugee girls face obstacles in their home and host schools related to gendered structures and roles, trauma, lack of resources and support, and enrollment issues (Ghufuran, 2011; Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2014).

They are also prone to dangers such as sexual assault and violence due to being in an unfamiliar place (Kirk, 2011). At school, a sampling of educational materials from refugee schools in Greece and Pakistan shows that gender inequalities are still perpetuated through schooling even in a different setting (Kirk, 2011). Although the INEE Minimum Standards do not explicitly address gender equality, several of the standards prioritize safety, equity, and psychosocial well-being, all of which pertain to fair treatment of girls (INEE, 2000). Several international organizations have made efforts to focus on gender equality in future education clusters (Kirk, 2011).

Despite that girls are still prone to gender inequalities during displacement, they often have more opportunities to attend school in camps than at home (Kirk, 2011). Education provides structure and security for refugee children and prepares girls for adulthood through literacy and numeracy training (Machel, 2001; Kirk, 2011; Winthrop & Kirk, 2011). NGO-supported schools built in or near camps are more accessible and safer (Kirk, 2011). Additionally, in displacement women often have fewer household chores and are less likely to ask their female children to assist them at home, allowing for more time to attend school. Parents of refugee students in Pakistan were also said to have more confidence in NGO schools, and therefore were more willing to send their girls there regularly (Kirk, 2008; Kirk, 2011). Educational settings are considered safer spaces where gender issues can be addressed and females have more opportunity to excel (Larson, 2008).

Conceptual Framework

This research intends to determine if development practitioners' views and actions concerning religion in education align with those of the girls, teachers, and community. In this study, a *practitioner* is defined as an actor from a nongovernmental or intergovernmental organization who has worked in refugee educational development, in a role such as a curriculum designer, program analyst, manager, fieldworker, or teacher. All of these types of development practitioners play essential roles in designing and implementing education for refugees in camps, but their cultures, social positions, and lived experiences differ from those of Afghan refugees.

This theoretical framework builds mainly on Gender and Development theory, which challenges male-dominated social structures, by extending it to refugee education. To do this, the research is written through a feminist critical lens to expose the ways women (or refugee girls) are oppressed through cultural and social means. The feminist critical lens also helps to understand how practitioners in the development sector can

make decisions that could shift gendered structures in education. The research is also based on the idea that practitioners' perspectives of agency, feminism, and patriarchy may not align with those of Afghan girls and women due to their different backgrounds (Chilisa & Nsteane, 2010; Kirk, 2011; Jamal, 2014).

The goal of Gender and Development theory (GAD) is to reach gender equality that includes a change in mindset on gender roles and also catalyzes a shift in men and women's power relations (Jamal, 2014). In this study, GAD exposes how education practitioners can be agents of both positive and negative change for their refugee girl students. Kirk (2011) highlights the importance of paying attention to empowerment needs of girls and women in displacement as identities, gender roles, and aspirations may shift in conflict contexts (Whitworth, 2004; Kirk, 2011; Jamal, 2014). The GAD approach looks for ways development efforts (refugee education) mitigate patriarchal norms and obstacles; however, identifying ways that development efforts can also exploit women and girls is just as important (Jamal, 2014). Teachers and other education practitioners may impose their own values and agendas on refugee girls without recognizing the potential harm (Chilisa & Nsteane, 2010; Kirk, 2011; Jamal, 2014).

This study's approach also draws on Sajoo's (2004) argument on religion and education that questions to what extent religion should be incorporated in education. She emphasizes the importance of finding the correct balance between using universal values and culturally-relative structures and pedagogies when constructing educational programming (Sajoo, 2004). In that regard, religion can create obstacles for girls' development, so it is crucial to study whether development practitioners take into account how religion can both harm and help refugee girls. Through this analysis, this research intends to provide suggestions and beneficial trends that could inform future research on educational programming for Afghan refugee girls (see Appendix 1 for visual framework).

Methodology

This research was conducted in the style of a comparative case study of development practitioners' approaches to the intersection of religion and education using semi-structured phone and Skype interviews of practitioners in conjunction with a document analysis of NGO/IGO policies, curricula, procedures, and reports (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This study is based on ten interviews of practitioners in the humanitarian aid and education development fields. With the research design in mind, it is necessary to gather the practitioners' personal accounts of their fieldwork and official, published material

from their organizations.

For the interviews, the researcher compiled a list of practitioners in the humanitarian aid and development sectors by means of network sampling through professors, colleagues, and their acquaintances who have worked in or with these refugee camps who could provide personal and professional insights on Afghan refugee education (Maxwell, 2012). The researcher completed a pilot study in March 2017 that interviewed two women who have worked with Afghan girls in the education realm. The complete study, which took place from March 26, 2017, until August 1, 2017, included ten interviews with practitioners who have worked with Afghan refugees in the past decade. Only two participants were from the same organization, but had different roles (i.e. director of education, teacher, program manager, consultant), meaning no single organization is overrepresented in the data. The participants have worked with Afghan refugees in several countries, including Serbia, Greece, Pakistan, Italy, Jordan, and Australia. Each participant was assigned a pseudonym to ensure confidentiality and anonymity.

These semi-structured interviews (Appendix 2) focus on the practitioners' work, plans, and discourse on Afghan girls' education in refugee camps, and the role of Islam in education. The interviews start with broad questions about the practitioners' workplaces and affiliations, and then discuss their approaches to gender, religion, and Afghan culture, respectively. Following the interviews, the researcher coded the transcripts in July and August 2017 using the qualitative software program NVIVO to organize the information into groups related to religion and cultural aspects, education in refugee camps, the Afghan experience, women and girls, work strategies, and programming.

The method of triangulation of information with interviews, member checks, and document analysis also ensured that the findings are valid and do not misrepresent the perspectives of the interviewees and the work of their organizations (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Member checks conducted in July and August 2017 with the participants after coding and analyzing the data make certain the accuracy of these findings and reevaluate any misinterpretations (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). These member checks were selective in nature. The researcher contacted interviewees in cases where data was unclear or possibly controversial.

Regarding the variety of perspectives, each participant's experiences have led to include eleven confirmable programs in six countries for Afghan girls; however, the sample is not wide or random. Through network sampling, this study was organic and uncovered patterns and tactics that may not be formally documented, despite the

magnitude of appropriate, safe, empowering, and self-determining education that refugee girls require.

As an American woman who has visited only two refugee camps in Greece and has not traveled to Afghanistan, the researcher cannot guarantee the complete validity of conclusions regarding the extent of the intersection of religion and girls' education without the voices of the girls themselves. Ethical considerations include how much the practitioner should disclose about their experiences and affiliations, as well as their personal opinions surrounding refugee camps, religion, and women and girls. Another major limitation is the interview will prompt practitioners to evaluate their programs, rather than hearing from refugee girls directly (due to lack of access to camps, language barriers, legal liabilities).

Findings and Discussion

The following analysis of ten interviews of international education development practitioners has been constructed through, but is not limited to, the lens of the Gender and Development theory, therefore identifying trends in strategies and key perspectives related to challenging gendered structures through development work, which in this case is refugee education. While this research is focused on the intersection of religion (Islam) and education, it quickly became apparent that this study could not be done without adjusting the paradigm to religion *and culture*, as they are intertwined and often confused with one another. There is no doubt that these two concepts are different, but they are not mutually exclusive and their connection cannot be ignored.

This analysis is divided into four sections that ultimately lead to the overall findings (section 5). In section 1, it establishes the important perceptions of religion versus culture. It continues by explaining the distinctions between religion *versus*, *on*, and *in* education. Then, in section 2, the analysis discusses perceptions of religion *on*, *in*, and *as* education. Section 3 breaks down the practitioners' perspectives on education in refugee camps into four parts: access and attendance, community relations, relations with leaders, and cultural sensitivity. Section 4 addresses the participants' views on gender-based discrepancies in education. In the conclusion in section 5, this study reflects on Islam's role in Afghan refugee girls' education *vis-à-vis* curriculum content and teaching, community relations, and access to education. Recognition of cultural appropriateness and gender norms guides their education programs to challenge patriarchal norms and increase Afghan girls' access and retention in refugee camp schools.

1. Religion versus culture

An unexpected concept that dominated half of the interviews is the apparent dichotomy between culture and religion. Culture was not one of the elements factored into the original *religion/refugee education/gender norms* equation of this research, but it reoccurred so often in the interviews in the form of “culture versus religion,” “cultural awareness,” “cultural appropriateness,” and more, that it cannot be ignored. Primarily, the most commonly expressed thought on culture and religion is that both are omnipresent in education. In Ella’s opinion, religion permeates all aspects of education, such as textbooks, the gender of teachers, classroom materials and resources, course subjects, and even games played in class (apparently, some Muslim children were upset with playing the game “Hangman,” as it represents the human form.) Several teachers discussed the celebration of Ramadan and how it can disrupt the school calendar due to days off and general fatigue of students when fasting. In another woman’s opinion, who has visited several countries’ refugee camps,

“I think [religion] is always present, whether it’s formally acknowledged, in such a way of learning or reading with the interplay, I think it’s always present, or I think it should be always present in the way a structure exists, even in a multi-cultural/religious institution” (Sandra, personal communication, June 21, 2017).

Regarding the perceived relationship between religion and culture, it seems that there is a general skepticism among the sample about the separation between religion and culture. While a person’s values or actions can be either attributed to religion or culture, the two concepts are intertwined; “you cannot extricate the two,” said one participant. It is important to recognize that not everything that is religious is cultural, and not everything that is cultural is religious, leading to the question of whether the culture and religion dichotomy really exists, or if it is a spectrum. The consensus among participants is that culture and religion are usually not mutually exclusive, but certain values or actions are derived from just one or the other.

The interviewees are not the only people who are confused about this dichotomy; according to the interviews, the Afghans themselves may share the confusion. Ella cites the lack of literacy, resources, and education of the Afghan people as a reason behind this confusion. She said, for example, that Afghans often treat the word of the mullah (religious leader) as the word of Islam, but in some cases, she claims, those ideas are just traditional Afghan norms. If a mullah tells a community that girls cannot go to school according to Islam, the illiterate may not have means to figure out if this is true or not; they cannot read the Quran or other holy texts. In actuality, traditional patriarchal norms may keep girls out of school, but there is not enough discussion around that subject.

Recognizing misconceptions of religious and cultural values and finding respectful and non-intrusive ways to explain them is a step towards changing attitudes on access to education. In order to promote girls' education, several seasoned practitioners encouraged learning the Quran's and hadiths' respective teachings on education in order to clarify Islam's take on education. They cited instances where they read excerpts from the Quran about education to the community to spread support. Another option, they said, was to partake in dialogue directly with religious leaders on the importance of education and possible religious restrictions or limitations in school.

Religious and cultural norms can be taken out of proportion and mislabeled. Tariq, a practitioner from Pakistan, warns us to be wary of negative interpretations of religion that often take the blame for limiting girls' education and overall access to education. He states the problem lies with the "global media conflating religious tendencies" and misinterpreting them, rather than blaming the cultural practices that have existed for hundreds of years. Additionally, Tariq says we must be careful not to assume patriarchal norms come from Islamic norms. Instead, he claims, the patriarchal approach comes from cultural norms. Though this does not condone anyone's support of patriarchal norms, it shows how complicated the intersection of religion, culture, and gender norms can be.

How cultural and Islamic norms are carried over and practiced in refugee camps versus within Afghanistan is also very important. Unfortunately, evaluating socio-cultural shifts in the Afghan refugee community is not within the scope of this research. Instead, this study uses the Gender and Development theory to understand, on a smaller scale, the extent to which development work has shifted educational practices and viewpoints.

2. Religion and education

From the interviews, it is clear that religion play several roles in refugee education. This section addresses religion *on*, *in*, and *as* education in the context of the Afghan refugee crisis. The participants not only discussed the role religion plays in education, but also provided examples of Islam's teachings on education as a way to prove their understanding of the refugee population and handling of the situation.

2.1. Religion on education

Many participants felt compelled to explain what Islam says about education before any discussion of the role of religion *in* education. For example, two practitioners, both of whom have worked in refugee camps Pakistan where Islam is commonly practiced,

sought knowledge of the Quran and its teachings on education for girls. One of these two practitioners said about the relationship between religion and refugee education for girls,

This is a curious thing, and I had several discussions with several different Afghans about religion and girls' education. And what they say is 'it is not in our religious text to deny girls education,' ... there is actually a lot of religious verse that does encourage and promote girls going to school. (Ella, personal communication, March 26, 2017)

In regards to the political and social turmoil in Afghanistan due to decades of war and religious extremism, it is reassuring to know that some of the Afghan refugees this participant interacted with were aware of the Quran's support for girls' education. It is not uncommon to hear Islamist groups claim that girls have no place in schools and should adhere to traditional gender norms; but according to this practitioner, there are no claims to preventing girls from attending school in the Quran. Curiously, Ella refers her Afghan communities to a prominent symbol of females in education: the prophet Mohammad's wife Aisha, who was known to be a schoolteacher.

In the other interview that referenced Quranic teachings, Tariq also referred to misinterpretations of the Quran as obstacles to girls' education. He clearly stated, "religion promotes the right of education, for girls and boys equally" (Tariq, personal communication, June 21, 2017). However, he said the concept of not sending girls to school on religious grounds is actually a misunderstanding; tribal leaders within the Afghan refugee communities are the ones barring girls from attending schools, and not religious leaders. He emphasized that "it is the religious leaders' job to tell the community at last that the [tribal leaders are] not right. It has nothing to do with religion, and religion does not negate or stop women from getting an education, or stop girls from getting education" (Tariq, personal communication, June 21, 2017).

In these cases, speaking with the community leaders on the topic of girls' education is essential for making progress and creating an education-friendly environment. In sections 3.2 and 3.3, this paper will discuss the education practitioners' views on community engagement and relationships with religious and tribal elders.

2.2. Religion in or as education

Religion can play a role in the subject matter and structure of refugee education, but it seems to vary by camp. From the ten interviews, few participants had examples of either explicit or implicit usage of religion in refugee education. There were, however, some creative uses of religion-based topics that engaged student learning and interest. Overall, the trend among participants was the absence of guidelines or discussion around the role

of education for refugees.

Three out of ten participants had knowledge of religion being taught directly in their schools. Two of them were from the same camp in central Greece. The cases included Quran classes and Islamic classes, with neither class intersecting with the regular school day or subjects. Additionally, in the school that hosted Quran classes after the regular school hours, the children had the chance to learn about the cultural customs surrounding Eid and Ramadan such as clothing, food, family gatherings, and celebrations, rather than the religious foundations of the holy month. Although, the researcher observed that in one of the classrooms for teenage students, there were drawings and coloring activities hung on the walls that depicted prayer and other religious symbols.

Only two out of ten provided some examples of religion or religious values intersecting indirectly with their refugee camp schools. Refugee teacher Vivienne recounted a story of her teenage class with both Afghan and Syrian students in which she led a discussion about the song "Imagine" by John Lennon. When she prompted the class to comment on the lyric "imagine a world without religion," her class engaged in a debate about religion's role in the world. She said her class came to a consensus that they did not want a world without religion, "because 'it's the basis of society, it gives us our moral grounding and our values, it is the base of society, you cannot have a world without religion'" (Vivienne, personal communication, May 31, 2017). This scenario is an example of how religion, while not playing a formal role in refugee education, can be incorporated appropriately by asking students their own opinions, rather than just lecturing on religious values or related topics that might fit into another academic subject.

Practitioners' and other foreign workers' religions can also be incorporated into lesson planning and classroom management in refugee schools. One participant who conducts research on education in camps in many countries experienced the ways that teachers and volunteers' own religions may play a role in *how* they teach and *what* they teach. She expressed her concern for people working in the camps proselytizing or spreading their religious values to Muslim students both unintentionally and intentionally. In her opinion, this issue of indirect connection with religion and education can be due to a lack of cultural awareness and cultural appropriateness, or a personal bias that the workers' religious foundation can benefit the refugee community.

The most common thread between interviews on the subject of Islam's general role in refugee education was its absence. The interviews revealed that many practitioners believed or were told that there is no room for religion to play a direct role in education in

refugee camps. Six participants, including some who discuss religion with their students informally, explained that the schools they worked with either had no clear guidelines on incorporating religion or religious values, or had prohibited the topic of religion in schools altogether. From those who said that their organization had no clear guidelines on Islam's role in education, their only recollections of anything regarding religion or religious values were suggestions from supervisors to be outwardly respectful of the Afghan students and families' religious traditions.

This absence is unfortunate, since Islam has a potential to have a positive, psychosocial impact in education. If teachers acknowledge students' religious backgrounds and values, students might be more comfortable in class or driven to attend school. Development practitioners should be engaging with the community to better understand the community's views on educational ambitions. With these ideas in mind, the following section analyzes the participants' personal comments, feelings, and reactions regarding refugee education for Afghan girls in their respective camp experiences.

3. Perspectives on education in refugee camps

This section is dedicated to participant practitioners' personal feelings, experiences, and beliefs on the intersection of education for Afghan refugee girls and religion. The ten practitioners' views show that Islam does not play as large of a role in refugee education for Afghan girls as culture. There were many topics discussed among the sample about education in refugee camps, but these fall into four broad categories: access to education, community relations, relations with religious or tribal elders, and cultural sensitivity. In some form, all of these topics contributed to the participants' respective opinions on the intersection of girls' education and religion, and these perspectives have potential to help generate best practices for refugee education for Afghan girls. The following subsections will consider each in turn.

3.1. Access to education and attendance

Much of the discussion focused on general access to education in the camps. The consensus was that access in refugee camps is an opportunity for stable, easy-to-access education for boys and girls. Compared to Afghanistan, children in refugee camps have safer and closer access to formal and informal schools. One person expressed that the benefit of a refugee camp setting "is that you have a captive audience" in a closed environment where everyone is safe and included. In an interview with Rosa, a director

of a refugee school in Greece, she shared,

Our mission is to bring education to children, to the community, so to empower the community. We provide real education, although it is nonformal, but it is real education to the children. We have developed a holistic approach to the education. We want the children to basically not fall behind, and to have some children who have never been in school be ready for school when they resettle. (Rosa, personal communication, July 26, 2017).

Her organization's mission is not only to bring education to the students, but also to engage the community and prepare them for resettlement. Although her mission does not specifically address girls, it shows her openness to include all children.

Whereas some participants only talked about access for the whole camp population, others brought up the implications for girls' access. In their camps, practitioners are finding that girls are attending school in higher proportions than in Afghanistan, where unsafe routes, gender expectations, lack of facilities, and even threats from the Taliban thwarted them from going to school. Some practitioners even shared their plans for increasing girls' attendance, such as using "specific indicators and project interventions" for promoting and mainstreaming girls' education. These include community engagement, hiring of female teachers, and better school facilities for girls.

Several practitioners brought up an issue that is not commonly discussed: returning to Afghanistan does not guarantee continuing their schooling. They explained how much the girls enjoyed attending school, an opportunity the girls did not have in Afghanistan. Ella, who worked in Pakistan and Afghanistan, said,

[The Afghan girls] love being in the refugee camp because they're able to go to school. At home, they weren't allowed to go to school, and in the refugee camp, they've experienced school now. When they go back home again, they're going to absolutely and utterly insist that they keep going to school because they've been exposed to it. (Ella, personal communication, March 26, 2017)

According to the participants, there is a visible ambition among the girls to continue their education. This type of conversation with the Afghan girls is a clear example of development work initiating shifts in gender norms. Given the opportunity to attend school for an extended amount of time, the refugee girls now know the benefits of doing so and are determined to continue their education in their home country. Whether or not these girls will be able to convince their families, religious leaders, and communities to provide them with access to education is uncertain, but the shift in mindset is a key step.

In two cases, the discussion on access included access to religious education. A practitioner currently working in Pakistan explained that in his camp, all students have the opportunity to attend religious classes. Not only does this imply full access for boys and girls to general education, but also that girls are entitled to religious education, which

is not a common practice in Afghanistan, as secondary or religious schools are not required and often discouraged for girls. On a smaller scale, students in a Greek camp were given access to informal Quran lessons after school, also highlighting girls' access to religious education.

Otherwise, regarding access, the participants barely spoke about Islam. Rather, they touched upon cultural expectations that could be considered religious, assuming that religious and traditional norms are intertwined or at least related. It seems that these cultural expectations continue on in some refugee camps, and they can inhibit girls' access to schooling. One participant cites "harmful traditional practices," such as child marriage, as a limitation to girls' education in refugee camps. His choice to use the word "harmful" shows his negative opinion of certain norms (whether religious or cultural is unclear), but recognition of their existence. For him, the role these traditional practices play in refugee education is detrimental to girls.

However, the interviewees have seen a shift in girls' ambitions to obtain an education, despite the expectations that they need to get married and care for their families. Even though these gender norms exist, the fact that girls are insisting on gaining access to school upon return is paramount. This practitioner's perspective sums up the positive outcome of the situation:

These girls were just so proud that they could read and write, and their mothers were so proud that they could read and write. They were going to insist change when they get back, when they get home again. That is something about refugee camps; they really do promote change. (Ella, personal communication, March 26, 2017)

According to these interviews, there may be an increasing trend in girls' attendance and ambitions to stay in school in refugee camps. Ideally, these communities will become more willing to send their girls to school, especially in hopes of familiarizing girls with schools in time for relocation in new countries or resettlement in Afghanistan.

3.2. Community relations

Maintaining community relations is a significant factor in the facilitation of refugee education, especially in the case of Afghan girls. Half of the participants talked about the importance of good relationships with the locals for running a successful education program for Afghan girls. They expressed that they prioritize meeting with community members and leaders to ensure religiously and culturally appropriate schooling for the refugee children. A few of the participants emphasized respecting the customs of the community when meeting with them and working in their spaces.

As a vulnerable population, refugees should be fully consulted on their needs and opinions on work being done in the camps. Running a successful education program for girls and boys alike requires consent from the community. Having a community liaison is essential for building healthy, trusting relationships between the education practitioners and the refugee community. Shayda, who volunteered in Greece, shared she felt “like people over there were so desperate to have someone who could speak their language and help them out.” (Shayda, personal communication, July 31, 2017). She was overwhelmed with requests for help from the Afghan refugees because she could speak their native language. Five participants, including her, had examples of how positive community relations are an asset to education development and girls’ access to school.

Finding a compromise between one’s own customs and those of the refugee community is a way to kindle better relationships in school, echoing Sajoo’s (2004) balance of religion and education. At first, one participant in Greece treated Afghan refugees in the same way that she was accustomed to treating youth in Europe. She has come to a personal realization, a compromise, stating “in terms of women, my mistakes or challenges that I faced in teaching Muslim women was to assume that they were happy to be treated the same way as men.” Engaging with teenage/young adult women allowed her to recognize their customs and not impose her own values. Another participant shares the same idea of adjusting to community standards in order to show respect, but she reminds us that failure is inevitable sometimes “because at the end of the day, I’m still going to be a foreigner.” (Sandra, personal communication, June 26, 2017)

3.3. Relations with religious and tribal leaders

Religious leaders have a role in Afghan refugee girls’ education and should be consulted and engaged in decision-making processes around education. Finding a community liaison or becoming friendly with the community is not always enough to ensure girls’ attendance in school; there are power structures within the community that need to be addressed. These include both religious and tribal hierarchies that communities may adhere to. Four participants explicitly stated the importance of working directly with the leaders to promote girls’ education. The religious leaders have a direct say in their communities’ matters in many cases, therefore, their support of girls’ education is essential in refugee camps. On the other hand, a few participants mentioned that there are no religious leaders and no relation to Islamic values at all in their schools. This may be due to differences in the camp demographics or the host country’s rules on religious practices.

Often, development workers and volunteers need permission from elders or male guardians to work with the Afghan women and girls. Four practitioners discussed the important role of religious and tribal leaders in the community. One man warned that if his organization made decisions around girls' education without consulting the religious or tribal leaders, it is likely the leaders (and the community by proxy) would reject those decisions. Tariq in Pakistan explained,

I have engaged with the religious leaders about the rights of women. ... If a tribal leader, for example, says women and girls cannot go to school, then you have to engage with religious leaders and tell them 'well, this is not what religion says.' So when a group of people has negated it or goes against it, it is the religious leaders' job to tell the community that this is not right – that it has nothing to do with religion, and religion does not negate or stop women from getting an education, or stop girls from getting an education. (Tariq, personal communication, June 21, 2017)

His example clearly shows the spectrum of religion and culture in the Afghan refugee communities. Once again, religion and culture overlap in refugee education, this time in decision-making, social hierarchy, and patriarchal values.

Some instances may require more action than just dialogue with the leaders. A few classrooms and school buildings required male security guards or chaperones for the girls. In one camp, Islamic community leaders would observe classes to ensure teaching material was religiously appropriate and that the women and girls were not being corrupted by foreign education. Finding a level of respect and trust with the tribal and religious leaders through discussion and observations in class has been a successful method for some participants.

By and large, consulting religious and tribal elders on education for girls has some patriarchal implications. Without the approval of these men, some families may not send their girls to school. With the backing of a community leader, families tend to spread the word and follow suit. By engaging with the religious and tribal elders, development practitioners are using the role of religion in the Afghan refugee community to support girls and promote education.

3.4. Cultural sensitivity

When participants were asked how they address students' religious values and practices, they mostly directed their conversations to cultural sensitivity, appropriateness, and awareness. The term *cultural sensitivity* in this paper is based on topics within the interviews such as "awareness of sensitivity of the topic," "cultural irresponsibility," "culturally appropriate," "recognition of difference in culture," and "recognition of

others' values." All ten of the interviewees discussed one or more of these five subjects. This is the main point where *religion versus culture* came into play and led this study on religion in refugee education to become more complicated and intertwined with culture than initially intended.

In sum, there is a general awareness about cultural appropriateness and sensitivity in refugee camps. All ten participants emphasized the importance of being sensitive to the students' and communities' cultures when teaching or running schools in the camps. The practitioners were conscientious of their behavior as not to clash with the Afghans' norms or expectations. Vivienne, a teacher in a Greek refugee camp, made sure that she did not offend her students by using words or Western gestures that might be interpreted as inappropriate in a Muslim community. Another ensured that she always tried to be open and accepting of Afghan cultural practices, in order not to seem judgmental or critical. These two examples indicate a general approach to Afghan refugee education based on respect, safety, and level of comfort of students.

The majority of the examples of cultural sensitivity in education dealt with gender norms. The interview protocol prompted responses both about addressing cultural and religious norms, and ways in which educational programming is designed around girls and gender norms. Many of the following examples are a combination of both. According to three practitioners, respecting gender norms in class is essential for retaining students and managing a classroom of Afghans. Two explained the importance of having female teachers for teenage girls, as it can be inappropriate for teenagers to interact with adults of the opposite gender. On the other hand, others said that catering to these types of gender norms could make children ill-prepared for relocation to European schools.

There was discussion on how educational subject matter should be designed as to not offend any gender norms or expectations. The practitioners showed a clear directive to respect and accommodate gender norms so that girls would not be removed from class or become too uncomfortable to attend. This includes changing images in textbooks or adjusting classroom discussions; one teacher explained, "I don't want to make the mothers uncomfortable by setting an expectation for their daughters," and "I wanted to make sure I both seemed encouraging, but also not judgmental" (Bailey, personal communication, July 31, 2017) of the girls' behaviors.

Many of the participants were wary of their own personal biases and cultural norms. There were sixteen times throughout six interviews that participants talked about their own personal bias, comparisons to other cultures, and relation to their own cultures. They are aware of how foreigners in the camps might misconstrue Afghan culture and

Islamic religion, contradict each other's values, and take advantage of the refugee situation to teach their own values. In this case, the role of religion (and culture) in education can be detrimental to the students if volunteers, teachers, and others are not careful.

The overwhelming importance of *cultural sensitivity* in this study's interviews cannot be ignored. Awareness of gender norms and the intention not to undermine them is the most prominent way in which practitioners' address cultural sensitivity in education for Afghan refugee girls. Taking all of the conversations on cultural sensitivity in education into consideration, we can see that practitioners intend to respect local norms in order to run a successful, respectful classroom. The following section looks deeper into how their views on how gender norms affect girls' education development.

4. Views on gender-based discrepancies in education

Practitioners' views and decisions on Afghan gender norms can have both negative and positive effects on girls' education development. Once again, there is a blurred line between the impacts of religious versus cultural practices on girls' education. In this research, references to Afghan gender norms are written under the assumption that the practitioners and the Afghans themselves are unclear about the distinction between cultural and religious gender norms. Relating back to the research questions, dissecting conversations about gender-based discrepancies in education and finding a balance between Islam and culture has made a positive impact in the refugee camps. With the GAD theory in mind, this section analyzes whether refugee camps are a place of opportunity for change in the dynamics of girls' education or a site for perpetuating patriarchal norms.

4.1. Discrepancies derived from religious norms and expectations

Altogether, seven participants talked about the very direct, inhibitive role of religion in relation to gender norms and education. In that regard, it is important to distinguish which gender norms and barriers the participants believe are attributed to religion. The practitioners cited Islamic beliefs as exacerbating gender norms in the classroom. Whether or not this is true in Islam, it is essential to consider that the practitioners themselves believe that Islam is behind the following behaviors. In this sense, their goals are to decrease the impact of these detrimental behaviors in order to support girls' educational ambitions and attendance.

The most well-known example of gender-based discrepancies within classrooms

is segregation by gender, but it is not mandated by Islam. In seven out of the nine schools discussed in this study, classes were not segregated by gender, though sometimes girls and boys sat on opposite sides of the classroom. According to the participants, it was not uncommon for girls to be reluctant to work alongside boys in groups or at desks when mixed-classrooms were introduced, since they are often discouraged from working with boys and male teachers. Three participants believed that Islam reinforces patriarchal norms that do not allow boys to interact with female teachers, nor allow girls to interact with male or less conservative female teachers on a personal level.

Also, there were other gender barriers that the participants could not overcome single-handedly, such as child marriage and domestic work. Child marriage is deeply rooted in Afghan society, with 33 percent of children (mostly girls) being married before the age of 18 (UNICEF, 2016). In order for the girls to continue their education, families would need to be seriously persuaded to delay those marriages. The participants seemed genuinely concerned about their female students dropping out of class to get married or help their families.

4.2. Challenging gender-based discrepancies in education through refugee education and religious understanding

The practitioners provided methods they use to challenge gender-based discrepancies in education while focusing on attendance and class segregation. Moving forward from there, understanding the religious reasoning behind gender-based discrepancies in education has helped many of participants facilitate educational programming that promotes higher attendance of Afghan refugee girls. Higher attendance and better support has in turn increased girls' ambitions to stay in school and to continue their schooling upon resettlement. While support through religious understanding cannot single-handedly combat gender-based discrepancies in school, it contributes to Afghan refugee girls' empowerment and may mitigate patriarchal norms in education in refugee camp settings.

5. The practitioners' perceptions of the role of religion in education for Afghan refugee girls: more about culture, community-based interactions, and support

Primarily, these interviews were meant to survey practitioners' perspectives on the role of religion in Afghan refugee girls' education in camps. Secondly, this research was meant to highlight how educational practices and religion-sensitive programming can or cannot contribute to girls' development and challenging of patriarchal norms in education for Afghan refugees. Considering the strongest overlaps

and agreements in all ten interviews, we can see that religion does play an important role in Afghan girls' refugee education. Taking into account the role of religion, practitioners are consciously trying to minimize patriarchal norms and gender-based discrepancies in education that have disadvantaged Afghan refugee girls in their home country and in camps. They understand their ability to facilitate gender- and religion-sensitive education in a safe, stable setting. However, they realize their limitations in challenging patriarchal norms in a social structure that is not their own. The following are the key takeaways on approaching religion in refugee education and gender norms:

1. Recognition of the communities' religion, culture, traditions, and other values is essential for providing respectful education in a safe, comfortable environment for the refugee girl students.
2. Practitioners' awareness of Afghan religion and culture can help mitigate gender-based discrepancies and patriarchal norms in education through educational programming that supports girls' educational ambitions.

Understanding religious influences on gender-based discrepancies in refugee girls' education can help alleviate harmful patterns. By supporting girls in class and developing positive relationships with their religious and tribal leaders and communities, education practitioners are lessening the impact of patriarchal norms and gender expectations that inhibit Afghan refugee girls from obtaining the best possible education while living in camps. The camp setting is an opportunity to design and facilitate schooling that is not impacted by the Taliban or other patriarchal pressures found in Afghanistan.

Suggestions and Future Research

From these findings, there are several suggestions that could potentially benefit Afghan girls' refugee education in regards to the role of religion. When considering these solutions (and common practices mentioned above), practitioners must prioritize challenging patriarchal norms and gender-based discrepancies in education through development work. Evidently, there needs to be continued awareness and caution when addressing religion in refugee education. According to the ten participants, they and others in their refugee camps are already adhering to this idea. They encourage increased awareness of cultural sensitivity to others working alongside them. Further development of capacity building strategies regarding religion and education could benefit educators and students in refugee camps in any host country.

Next, there needs to be a better understanding of the religion versus culture

dichotomy (or spectrum) discussed throughout this study. It is important not only to be aware of this dichotomy, but also to be careful not to assume values, practices, or norms are attributed to either religion or culture, but may be a combination of both.

Additionally, there is the option that the Afghan communities themselves are not clear on this distinction and may interpret their traditions in various ways.

On a more technical side, there is need for more Farsi and Dari speaking teachers and community liaisons that can facilitate better relations and educational programming with the communities. It is commonly difficult for education practitioners in refugee camps to convince the Afghan refugee communities of the importance of the girls' attendance. With Farsi or Dari speakers, it is easier to discuss educational matters with the parents, religious leaders, and other decision-makers to ensure girls' attendance. Parents, leaders, and even students themselves are more likely to open up to speakers of their native tongue. This can help with designing more comfortable classroom settings and lesson plans for girls. Similarly, to create a more comfortable school environment, it is good to hire female teachers to work with teenage girls in order to encourage them to stay in school. This provides a way for community decision-makers to be more accepting of teenage girls attending school.

Lastly, initiating and growing strong relations with both cultural and religious leaders and community members in the Afghan refugee camps is essential to successful education programming. Having community liaisons does more than just break the language barrier; it creates trust between education development practitioners and the Afghan community. Through these relationships, we can hope all parties partake in challenging gendered norms and barriers within the education system to benefit Afghan refugee girls.

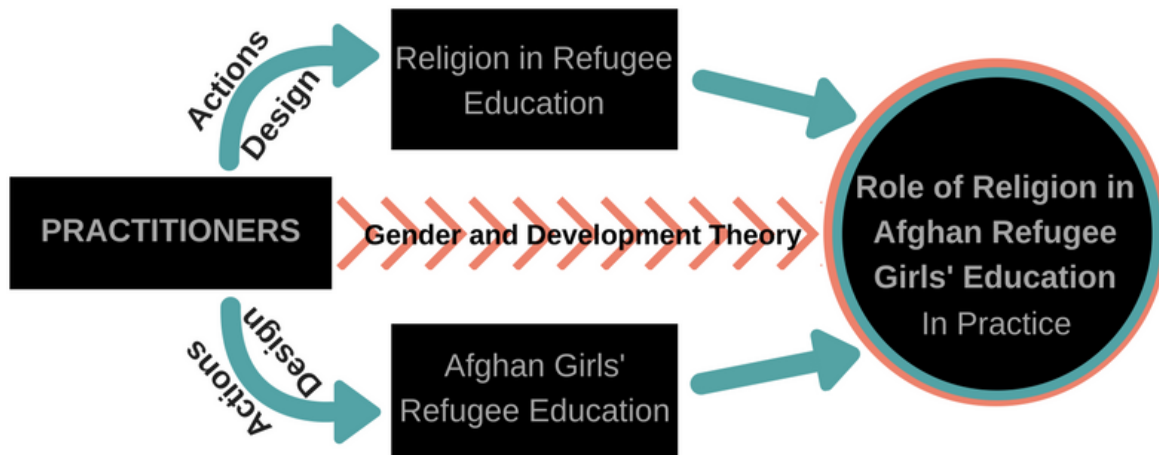
Regarding future research, the debate between religion versus culture and its impact on gender norms should be studied in more depth. This research study stands precariously on the blurred line between religion and culture, as it was unclear in many cases whether certain patriarchal norms or gender-based discrepancies in education were attributed to Islam, culture, or both. Alternatively, it may be irrelevant to make such a distinction in practice. There may not be danger in simply viewing norms for what they are, rather than trying to categorize them in complex ways.

That considered, there is a general need for more information on how Afghan gender norms affect girls' and boys' preparation for European schools, regardless of where the norms come from. There must be undivided attention to the ongoing Afghan refugee crisis, even though many refugees have been repatriated in recent years. With so

many hundreds of thousands of children still not getting the education they deserve in refugee camps, all of these studies can be beneficial to improving their prospects for a thorough, appropriate education in refugee camps.

Appendix 1: Conceptual Framework

How do practitioners' perceptions of the role of religion in refugee education impact their design and implementation of educational programs for Afghan girls in refugee camps?



Appendix 2: Interview Protocol

1. Have you worked in Afghanistan, with Afghans outside of Afghanistan, or both?
2. How long has your organization been involved with refugee camps?
3. What is your organization's mission particularly in relation to education?
4. Does your organization work directly with Afghan girl students? If so, how?
5. Could you tell me about any educational programs or policies designed around girls' education?
6. How does religion come into play in your work?
7. How does your organization address religious and Afghan cultural values?
8. Could you tell me about your experiences designing curriculum for Afghan students if you have any?
9. Do you have any examples of when you had to work with religious communities in camps or schools? Have you come across any challenges?
10. Do you have any experience with religious education for refugee girls? If so, can you tell me about it?
11. What is your experience with discussing religion in Afghanistan or religious-based conflict with your students?
12. If any, what are the differences between Afghan girls' and boys' refugee education?
13. Did you ever anticipate that religion could have an impact on curriculum design?

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