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# Hope and Community (dis)engagement of Afghan Women

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**Abstract:** the purpose of this study was to learn about Afghan women levels of community engagement and to describe their life experiences. This study will increase the level of awareness regarding the current situation with Afghan women realities and will describe the obstacles to their participation in community life.

## Introduction

Afghanistan is a landlocked mountainous country located in Central Asia between Pakistan, Iran, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan in territories once occupied by ancient civilizations. For more than twenty years, the Afghan people have suffered the effects of war which eventually resulted in extreme poverty and violations of international human rights (Amowitz, Heisler, & Iacopino, 2003). Tribal disagreement inside the country has also led to a steady presence of foreign troops in its territory. While Afghan realities are extremely difficult for many, there is significant inequality between the lives of men and women. For centuries, Afghan women are excluded from education, healthcare, employment, participation in family decision-making processes and in public life in general. Women are deprived of the human rights to inheritance, to vote, to work and to choose their own partners in marriage. These rights are denied by official government decree or by their own husbands, fathers, brothers and even mothers. With the fall of the Taliban, a radical fundamentalist Islamic movement in 2001, the issue of the violations of Afghan women's human rights has become of crucial concern for the international community and the new government in Afghanistan (Amowitz et al, 2003). When considering the role of citizens in rebuilding Afghanistan, it is necessary to determine what role, if any, women may play. Therefore, this study examines Afghan females' levels of engagement and life experiences in their communities.

## Theoretical framework: Hope Theory

The theoretical framework of this study is based on the cognitive hope theory of Snyder (1991), collective hope of Braithwaite (2004) and the hope-no-hope phenomenon of Parse (1999). Snyder et al (1991) described hope as a bi-dimensional thinking process that includes agency (goal-directed resolve) and pathways (goal-directed planning). Agency involves an individual's motivations and self-perception, while pathways toward a goal require specific planning. Developing hope can be hindered through negative events, neglect, and abuse (Snyder, 1998), and hope can be also destroyed through physical mistreatment at which point goal-directed thinking shuts down (Snyder, 2002). These experiences can have significant implications for developing hope in future life. Braithwaite (2004) described the possibility of collective hope as "genuinely and critically shared by a group" (p. 7). Collective hope, according to Braithwaite, is formed through *institutions of hope*, which are "sets of rules, norms, and practices that ensure that we have some room not only to dream of the extraordinary but also to do the extraordinary" (p. 7). The last conception of hope theory which relates to the purpose of our study is Parse's (1999) notion of the hope-no-hope phenomenon. Parse indicates that "hope-no-hope is a

paradoxical lived experience of health and quality of life” (p. 2). The researcher investigated hope from an international human becoming perspective and argues that “...as the human engages with others, ideas, objects, and situations, hope-no-hope is an ever-present rhythm surfacing as expectations of possible achievements” (p. 4). In this study, we describe hope as a perception of self and world that can be held apart from a current reality or condition that moves in a pathway toward the anticipated and desired (Waterworth, 2004).

## **Related Literature**

### ***Signs of Hope for Afghan Women in Literature Review***

Despite the violence and chaos in contemporary Afghanistan, Afghan women can see the signs of hope in three areas: in health and family services (Huber, Saeedi & Samadi, 2010; Bainbridge, 2011), in business and government services (Lemmon, 2010) and in networking (Povey, 2003). Some Afghan women, by becoming entrepreneurs, midwives, civic leaders, and military officers, take many risks to help their communities and their country (Lemmon, 2010). The wave of trained midwives is one of the successful initiatives taken in Afghanistan and, as Bainbridge (2011) noted, may help to reduce maternal mortality. Another successful program was initiated in family planning services through introducing contraceptives into three rural areas with different ethnic populations (Huber, Saeedi & Samadi, 2010). The researchers worked closely with communities, providing information about the safety and non-harmful side-effects of contraceptives and improving access to contraceptives, pills and condoms. The study showed that cooperation between community and religious leaders, as well as health workers, led to culturally accepted innovations. This model was further adopted by the Ministry of Public Health for scaling up contraceptive services nationwide (Huber, Saeedi & Samadi, 2010). Among the mechanisms for women’s empowerment, Povey (2003) listed participation of women in networking as well as organization. Although many female activists were persecuted and tortured during the Taliban regime, they continued their struggle for better lives and became an inspiration for other women. Povey contends that by creating the secret organizations, Afghan women have put the foundation for building social capital and by becoming the members of these organizations; they show their optimism and willingness to participate in the process of reconstruction of contemporary Afghanistan.

### ***The Institutions of Hope: Afghan Women’s Involvement with NGOs and Local Communities***

Afghan women have been employed in a number of internationally operated non-profit organizations as well as in non-government organizations (NGOs) operating in Afghanistan for more than thirty years. Among the internationally operated non-profit organizations, the most noticeable ones are: The Organization for Advancement of Afghanistan which was formed by Afghan women professionals living in New York City and New Jersey; the Afghanistan Women Council (AWC) and the Afghan Women’s Network - were formed in Peshawar, Pakistan; a third-generation humanitarian association (AINA) was founded in France by world-renowned photojournalist Reza Deghati. These organizations are committed to empowering Afghan women by building their capacity, enhancing their self-reliance, improving their health and living conditions and educating Afghan women and their children. A number of Afghan women have been involved in NGOs operating in Afghanistan. These NGOs include: the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA), the Women’s Vocational Training Center, the Women’s Association of Afghanistan, Women of Hope Project, and the

Afghan Women Lawyers and Professional Association. These organizations have been fighting for Afghan human rights and social justice, have been offering courses related to income-generating activities such as sewing, knitting and handicrafts, and are providing community-led adult literacy courses. According to Povey (2003), these NGOs play a critical role in creating opportunities for Afghan women to have access to educational and income-generating programs and contribute to their overall well-being.

The work of the many NGOs discussed above may function as institutions of hope, as described by Braithwaite (2004). Indeed, the increase of Afghan women's activities through international and local NGOs, as well as women's networks "may give the appearance of a movement resonating outwards" (Riphenburg, 2003, p. 204). But this movement, as Riphenburg (2003) states, is not united by a globally focused political strategy. Riphenburg contends that only with global leadership and with a global movement for economic justice, peace, and human rights will the lives of Afghan women be improved.

### ***The Culture of Silence***

Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger and Tarule (1986) argue that despite the progress of the women's movement, many women still feel silenced in their families and schools. Ashton-Johne and Thomas (1990) state that silence to Belenky et al means "experiencing the self as voiceless and without the capacity to receive or generate knowledge" (p. 276). Freire, in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1972), states that it is difficult for the oppressed to become aware of their true situation because they belong to a 'culture of silence' and thus, "they are excluded from any active role in the transformation of their society" (p. 30). He continues that the oppressed do not only have a voice but they are also unaware that they do not have a voice, meaning that they "cannot exercise their right to participate consciously in the socio-historical transformation of their society" (Freire, 1972, p. 30). A culture of silence causes the oppressed to come to see themselves as the oppressor sees them – as incompetent, thoughtless, and powerless (Crotty, 1998). One of many ways to help women to engage in the struggle and to regain their voices is to share their voices with other women or, as Freire (1972) believes, to engage them in dialogue. Prins (2001) takes this argument further and adds that literacy has the potential to contribute to women's empowerment and social change by helping them "to develop a sense of self, exercise power in relationships and work with others to solve collective problems" (p. 56).

## **Research Design**

### ***Conceptual Frameworks***

This study was framed by three paradigms: social constructionism, phenomenology, and critical feminist perspective. Crotty (1998) states that "social constructionism emphasizes the hold our culture has on us: it shapes the way in which we see things (even the way in which we feel things) and gives us a quite definite view of the world" (p. 58). Since we were interested in the lived experiences of Afghan women, phenomenological elements were also used in this study. Phenomenology focuses on the essence or structure of an experience (Patton, 1990). Critical feminist perspective is the third conceptual frame. Feminist scholars place gender at the forefront of critical analysis (Merriam, Caffarella & Baumgartner, 2007). Feminist research, as Crotty (1998) points out, "is always a struggle to reduce if not to eliminate the injustices and unfreedom that women experience" (p. 182). Feminist research approaches are based in

the communal, collective, and emotional. Through gatherings with their peers, women share their experiences and receive support in a safe space.

### ***Data Collection in an Unfriendly Environment***

Data were collected through focus group interviews. In this method, we sought to provide a safe environment for our participants that would allow women liberally to share their experiences in the company of women from the same socioeconomic groups. According to Krueger and Casey (2002), focus groups are less threatening to research participants, and provide an environment that is helpful for participants to discuss their ideas, perceptions and opinions. In our study, thirteen focus group interviews were conducted in ten different locations in Afghanistan in 2010. Our focus group interviews were conducted by Afghan women in the houses of the participants' relatives or the facilitator relatives' house for safety reasons.

### ***Participants***

A total of 107 females (ages 15-25) participated in thirteen focus group interviews. Of the 107 participants, 60 women were married, 28 were single, 19 were engaged and three were widowed. 52 women indicated having no children and 55 women had from one to six children. Most focus group participants were from rural areas, and they were not formally educated.

### ***Analysis***

After the focus group interviews were collected from Afghan women and transcribed into English, our team started the analysis process of the collected data. In the data analysis process we followed the five steps offered by Taylor-Powell and Renner (2003). These steps are: getting to know the data, focus analysis, categorizing information, identifying patterns and connections within and between categories and interpretation. We worked toward integration of the codes in weekly meetings over a four-week period during which we shared and critiqued our developing coding schemes. Several themes were identified during data analysis which are: women as a societal problems, women are not recognized as humans in the society, Afghan women's lack of human rights, absence of choice and decision-making, and some exceptions: "a very safe family, but unsafe place".

## **Findings and Discussion**

As the purpose of this study was to learn about Afghan female's levels of engagement and life experiences in their communities, the findings indicate that our rural participants do not engage in the community life. Moreover, they are not even participating in life within their own homes and family. These patterns of disengagement in the community life are due to a lack of freedom of mobility inside and outside the home, a lack of communication between women, their families, and the community, a lack of education, and finally a lack of self-esteem.

Afghan women from rural regions indicate an absence of interactional and relational experiences that would likely develop a sense of hope in their lives. Instead, these women witness and experience abuse from family members, are in dangerous situations outside the home just for being female, are denied formal education, and are ignored in family decisions. The ongoing physical and emotional abuse that our participants experienced weakens the development of hope over time as Snyder (1998; 2002) proposed. Our participants' position in the home and community is completely predetermined by the

Afghanistan patriarchal structure, which leads to mistreatment, inequality, oppression and silencing of Afghan women. These women in accordance with Belenky et al's (1986) findings resemble a form of knowing in *silence* by experiencing the self as voiceless and with no capacity to gain knowledge. Moreover, they do come to see themselves as their society sees them as being problems in society which Freire (1972) explains as a result of the culture of silence. The study reveals that our participants are missing the "hope-no-hope" phenomenon as described by Parse (1999). On the contrary, our participants experience little to no hope in *anticipating possibles* or in *imagining the knowings of what might be*. The findings also disclose that Braithwaite's (2004) collective hope, which may be possible through the work of institutions of hope, is absent in the lives of our participants as well. Sets of norms, rules, and behaviors are needed to mobilize women into spaces that not only allow them to dream of extraordinary change, but also to work toward effecting that change.

### Conclusion

Although there exist opportunities for Afghan girls and women to engage in some community educational activities, to learn about and fight for women's rights, and to interact with NGOs dedicated to Afghan women's emancipation, our study suggests work is needed to effect change at sociocultural philosophical levels. Afghan women's organizations and NGOs must provide information, education, and services that offer relational-interactive experiences necessary for women to develop the habits of mind necessary for hope, and for change. Mezirow (2000) refers to habits of mind as a set of attitudes and cultural messages that make up our meaning perspectives. The transformation of Afghan women's perspectives on self, on women, on community, and on their roles in society will require "reformulating reified structures of meaning by reconstructing dominant narratives" (Mezirow, 2000, p. 19). Ripenburg (2003) suggests this work must be done with the support of global leadership and world-wide movements for peace, human rights, and economic justice. Our study also suggests transformation will need to be initiated at the local cultural level, in families and in individuals. As community organizations strive to engage Afghan women in participation in society and in their own lives, educators, social workers, and community representatives will need to work together to help women (and men) to deconstruct the social customs that devalue women and impede their development of hope for liberation and equality.

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