

# Academic Hijra: Exploratory Case Study Investigating Factors for Emigration of Afghan Female Scholars

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## Abstract

*This paper presents the findings and discussion on the factors responsible for the emigration of female Afghan academics and scholars from Afghanistan. The review of literature had highlighted a significant lacuna in engagement and voice of migrant female Afghan academics.*

*Thereby, the research undertaken through an exploratory interpretative-narrative case study approach uncovered three emergent themes leading to the identification of a single major factor influencing their decision. The interview schedule, as an ensuing narrative, uncovered the loss of individual liberty; the paucity in criticality in academic thought-practice (praxis) and the 'lack of belonging both within academia and society' as underlying factors, which the study classifies as emergent themes to formulate and identify the driving force and motivation for emigration, the major finding of the study, which is encapsulated in the notion of an 'enforced disengagement'.*

**Keywords:** Female professors, migration, forced deprivation, freedom, academic challenges

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## Introduction

*"With a drop of my sweetheart's blood, shed in defence of the motherland; Will I put a beauty spot on my forehead, such as would put to shame the rose in the garden."*

(Malalai of Maiwand, 1880)

The legend of Malalai of Maiwand recalls the heroism of an eighteen-year-old Afghan woman, who inspired her people to victory over the colonialist British at Maiwand on July 27, 1880. To raise the morale of her people and the troops, she took off her veil and hoisted it as a flag in the midst of battle and marched defiantly towards the enemy and her immortality in martyrdom. It was both an auspicious action and occasion, for it was also her wedding day (Ewing, 2025).

Therefore, the consequences of her decisions are celebrated, revered and eulogised through folk tales, songs, poems and even national anthems as a reference to the sacrifices of all Afghan women (Noorzai, 2019). This narrative encapsulates within the personality of Malalai of Maiwand the analogous characteristics of the Afghan women within its nation, such as piety, traditionality, loyalty, courageousness and selflessness. Conversely and congruently it also symbolises the status of the women and their struggles for survival akin to the nation.

*"Women are perceived as the receptacles of honour hence they stay in the domestic sphere, observe the veil and are voiceless. The honour of the family, the tribe, and ultimately the nation is invested in women."*

(Ahmad-Ghosh, 2003, p.2-3)

The literature argues that the concern of women's rights in Afghanistan has been historically guarded by the patriarchal defined traditional communities and tribal leaders by preventing the separation of a woman's identity from that of her family and tribal community (Kandiyoti, 1996; Moghadam, 1997)

History, as a braggart of traditional socio-culture norms, testifies to this perspective as can be witnessed by the widespread rebellions and protest to King Amanullah's reforms for women in 1923, which definitively ended his reign (Gregorian, 1969: Dupree, 1973) Further examples include the mass rebellions against women reform programs post the monarchies during the leadership of the communist-backed Peoples Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA), which eventually culminated in the decade long war between Afghanistan and the Soviet Union (Mendelson, 1998). Therefore, Afghanistan has been plagued with a succession of divisive central governments which have not been able to reconcile the inherent tribal feudal culture with modernity. This has been further compounded by the destructive intrusions and invasions of imperialist powers such as the British, Soviets and most recently the Americans, which have contributed to the instability in governance and total abnegation of trust in western democracy and ideals. Thus, creating a vacuum, which has currently

been occupied by a seemingly Islamic government in the guise of the Taliban led Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan.

Thereby, with consideration to the recent historical reality of the nation, the policy decisions undertaken by the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan to suspend all female education after the ages of twelve on the 17<sup>th</sup> of September 2021 (Harrison, 2021), although seemingly antithetical to the Islamic tradition, was not necessarily an unprecedented affair in a deeply conservative and rural nation.

The interest and focus of this study, whilst acknowledging and appreciating this socio-political context is the impact of the decision to suspend female education upon the women of Afghanistan and specifically those female Afghan academics that left the country either as migrants or refugees.

Therefore, the central objective of the study is to address and identify the 'factors responsible for the decision of female Afghan academics to emigrate'.

The discussion begins with a review of literature examining the emigrational trends of Afghans, specifically women, and the application of international legislations on their legal residency status. The review highlights a significant lacuna in the field with regards to engaging with female Afghan academics working outside of Afghanistan; thereby justifying the undertaking of this exploratory interpretative narrative case study, which is discussed and delineated before the presentation of the analysis of data and the findings.

### **Literature Review**

The United Nations High Commissionaire for Refugees (UNHCR), also referred to as the UN Refugee Agency, estimates that there were a reported 6.4 million globally and nearly 10.9 million Afghan refugees including internally displaced people (IDP) within Afghanistan and neighbouring countries at the end of 2023. This encompassed nearly 5.82 million refugees in Iran and Pakistan alone (UNHCR, 2024). However, since September 15<sup>th</sup>, 2023 (Gul, 2025), whereby Pakistan effectively evicted and deported some 650,800 Afghans, thus to date there are an estimated 3.2 million IDP within Afghanistan alone (UNHCR, 2024). The UNHCR's 2023 Global Trends report observes that Afghan refugees comprise the third-largest displaced people, globally after Syrian and Ukrainian refugees (UNHCR, 2023). *"Afghanistan's displacement crisis is one of the largest and most protracted in UNHCR's seven-decade history. We're now seeing a third generation of Afghan children born in exile..."* (UN High Commissioner for Refugees: Filippo Grandi) (UNHCR, 2024). The causes for this mass displacement formulate an aspect of this study but are far too broad to be discussed here. Suffice it to state that the study recognises that the nation of Afghanistan and its people have endured some four decades of continual conflict, alongside suffering from the impact of devastating natural disasters; leading to poverty, chronic shortages of sustenance, domestic provisions and essentials. These factors were only exacerbated through the COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns and further intensified

through the chaotic anarchic transition of governance from the NATO led coalition to the recouping of power by the Taliban, in the emergent guise of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan in August 2021. According to the World Bank's Afghanistan Welfare Monitoring Survey (2023), the new government has been fraught with major issues and challenges, which include food insecurity, financial poverty, access to labour markets, education, and health care services. Moreover, the situation has been compounded by the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan decision to prohibit women's education after the ages of twelve and their involvement in educational institutions such as schools, colleges and universities.

*"Collectively, this means half of the population cannot contribute to the country's socio-economic development. Globally, this makes Afghanistan the only country that denies women the right to education and work, significantly harming its foreign relations and its international standing."* (ICMPD, 2024)

The literature argues that Afghan women have been systematically vanquished from the visual societal sphere as they are prohibited from holding official and unofficial positions of authority, power and influence in Afghanistan (McAullife & Iqbal, 2022).

The report commissioned by the UN Women's group, 'Summary of Countrywide Consultations with Afghan Women', claimed that it "...captures the voices and concerns of women across Afghanistan" (UNWomen, 2024). The consultative report presented several key findings, such as seventy-nine per cent (79%) of women respondents were denied access to public spaces, such as parks and health centres; Sixty-nine percent (69%) felt unsafe leaving their homes by themselves. The respondents indicated that they perceived this to be responsible for their social isolation, demoralisation and increased mental health issues, such as depression and anxiety. This has also contributed to the decline in the general attitude and enthusiasm of the local communities to struggle for girls' education (primary education 47%; secondary education 65%). However, the report observes that "...some families continue to educate their daughters in secret, while others focus on vocational skills or religious education as practical alternatives given the current circumstances" (Ibid).

Studies suggest that even before Taliban ascended to power and governance, Afghan women were already subject to oppressive socio-cultural norms and practices, which restricted their roles in societies. For instance, in the pre-Taliban era forty-two percent (42%) of women migrated from Afghanistan primarily due to concerns related to their personal safety and security and subsequently reasons relating to a lack of individual liberty, economic poverty and escape from domestic abuse and violence (MMC, 2018). However, at the current time, despite the increased security and safety provided by the Taliban regime, a respondent to a survey conducted by Samuel Hall researchers shared that *"The main concern for myself is that I can't work and go to university anymore. I have been restricted, and I am not a free person. When I think about my past efforts, my heart bleeds. Now, I am zero with no achievements..."* (James & Alizada, 2021)

The findings of the survey revealed that their female respondents all asked in trepidation: "*What will await us now?*" (Ibid).

However, 'escaping' or 'migration' within the context of this study, especially for Afghan women has been, and is currently, a sensitive and hazardous ambition. The literature argues that the influence and conditioning of socio-cultural norms and the political context implies that migration is gender biased with the significant proportion of those migrating from Afghanistan being young male adults and unaccompanied boys. Thereby, leaving the women to tend to domestic affairs of the home (McAuliffe, 2017). Migration studies show that the time constituting the pre-Taliban era, unaccompanied women and girls were on average three years older than their male compatriots and accounted for only thirteen percent of the migration flows from Afghanistan, in contrast to fifty percent for unaccompanied male adults and boys (IOM, 2018). Furthermore, migration for women is a perilous journey that becomes subject to the whims and motives of the human traffickers. This entails both the economic costs and the serious threat of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) during their migration (Donini et al., 2016). Thereby, the literature shows that women adopt alternative routes and modes of transport in comparison to men, such as the utilisation of air travel, as it provides both safety and security (MMC, 2018). Additional considerations have also been impacted by the antagonistic immigration, refugee and residency policies of fraternal neighbouring nations such as Iran, Pakistan and even Turkey (Kaya, 2024). Thus, many Afghans are now pursuing refugee status within the EU and North America. Thereby, many former employees of international organisations have been afforded safe passages into the EU, UK and the U.S., as they were potential retaliatory targets for the new regime (ICMPD, 2024). In terms of empathising with the plight of Afghan women, a number of EU nations have granted unconditional refugee status to all female Afghan asylum-seekers on the basis of gender, since December 2022 (Orav, 2023). Firstly, these nations are signatories to the international human rights declarations and treaties such as the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, the *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights*, the *European Convention on Human Rights*, the *Convention on the Rights of the Child* and the *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women*, which have all been construed to protect rights of all women and girls across the world. Secondly, their decision identifies and recognises women and girls in Afghanistan to be subjected to levels of discrimination that can be classified as the *persecution of a social group*, as defined in the 1951 Refugee Convention:

United Nations 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees (Refugee Convention)

*"A refugee is defined in Article 1A(2) of the UN 1951 Convention as a person who 'owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country*

*of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it" (UN, 1951).*

This is then further supported by Article 9 of the EU Qualification Directive, which recognises 'persecution' to be, '*sufficiently serious by its nature or repetition as to constitute a severe violation of basic human rights*' or '*an accumulation of various measures, including violations of human rights, that is sufficiently severe as to affect an individual*' (Eurlex, 2024). Thereby justifying the requirements for granting refugee status to Afghan women and girls (Ineli-Cigger, 2022). Henceforth, in December 2022, Sweden and Finland, alongside Denmark in February 2023, granted refugee status to all female applicants from Afghanistan and decided to open all previously rejected cases (James & Alizada, 2021).

Whilst Rwanda, working in partnership with the International Organization for Migration (IOM), offered to host the relocation of the School of Leadership, Afghanistan (SOLA), an Afghan all-girls boarding school originally based in Kabul in 2021. The school states on its website that "it provides a safe space for Afghan girls to receive a secondary level education, with a vision of creating a generation of female leaders". SOLA's Founder, Shabana Basij-Rasikh reflects that:

*"March 2023 marks one year since the Taliban closed the doors of girls' schools in Afghanistan, denying Afghan girls the right to study past 6th grade. It is incredibly meaningful to me that they are now arriving in Rwanda to pursue their education, and I am endlessly grateful to IOM for helping facilitate their safe travel to our school where they will grow to become members of a generation of leaders who one day will help rebuild Afghanistan." (IOM, 2023)*

This requirement for reconstruction is a consequential repercussion of the United States of America's (U.S.) tenure as the overarching purveyor and overseer of the NATO led occupation of Afghanistan. Therefore, the U.S. has also rather unsurprisingly experienced a steady increase in the number of Afghan refugees. Whereby the Afghan immigrant population has increased from approximately 54,000 to 195,000, from 2010 to 2022 (Montalvo & Batalova, 2024). This figure was significantly impacted by the Biden administrations initiation of Operation Allies Welcome (OAW) in 2021, which allowed 76,000 displaced Afghans, the status of 'humanitarian parole' to enter the U.S. According to the U.S. Census Bureau 2022 ACS, there were approximately 250,000 individuals of Afghan diaspora in the U.S., that were either born in Afghanistan or identified with an Afghan heritage.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Afghan communities were mostly settled in California (39 percent), Virginia (14 percent), Texas (10 percent), and New York (6 percent): Source Available Online: <https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/acs>

In terms of education, the data reveals that 702 students from Afghanistan were enrolled in U.S. colleges and universities in the 2023-24 academic year (Opendoors, 2025). Moreover, thirty-two percent (32%) of Afghan men and twenty-four percent (24%) of Afghan women migrating to the U.S. between 2020 and 2022 were university graduates with twenty-three percent (23%) of men and thirty-six percent (36%) of women not having completed secondary education. Many of the Afghan nationals who arrived in the U.S. before 2021 or without the designation of 'humanitarian parole' had served as translators or interpreters during the U.S. led NATO occupation of Afghanistan. They have been resettled in the U.S. under the government program, Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) which was created in 2006 to protect them and their families from reprisal and retaliation from anti-coalition actors including the present Taliban led government (USDS, 2025). The SIV is an official pathway to legal permanent residency (green card) for Afghan and Iraqi translators and interpreters employed by the U.S. military.<sup>3</sup> However, Afghan nationals afforded the 'humanitarian parole' status have only been granted an impermanent interim stay with no pathways towards residency or citizenship.

This ambivalent attitude is slightly perplexing considering that the previous U.S. administration under President Joe Biden had, through USAID, the Department of State and the Department of Defense provided nearly \$4.8 billion for programs focusing on the protection and advancement of Afghan women.<sup>4</sup> Although section 7044 of the Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2023 prohibited "*direct assistance to the Taliban*", it nevertheless stipulated that the Secretary of State and USAID Administrator present a report "*detailing plans ... to protect and strengthen the rights of Afghan women and girls*" by May 2024 (U.S. Congress, 2022). Previously, the FY2021 National Defence Authorization Act had prevented the utilisation of funding to withdraw US forces from Afghanistan beneath a critical level. The conditions mandated the submission of an administrative feasibility report, which provided the assessment and analysis of the impact of a U.S. withdrawal on Afghan women's rights. This was subject to a waiver, which President Trump issued in his first term in office in January 2021 (Thomas, 2024). However, now with President Trump at the helm in his second term, he has swiftly moved to disband USAID and a majority of the overseas funding programs (MCCABE, 2025), as the testimony from a researcher claimed before congress that:

3Although the Taliban Government to its due credit has guaranteed assurances of amnesty and exoneration for those wishing to remain the country and work with the regime See for example: 'Taliban declares general 'amnesty' for Afghan government officials': <https://www.france24.com/en/asia-pacific/20210817-taliban-declare-amnesty-urge-women-to-join-government-according-to-shariah-law>; The discussion on this topic is beyond the scope of this study, although it suffices to state that literature, alongside mainstream media reports are generally biased towards presenting an overwhelmingly anti-Taliban narrative with no identified academic studies presenting the Taliban perspective.

4 This is in accordance with the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) report, between 2002 and 2020, Available Online: <https://www.sigar.mil>

*"USAID's humanitarian aid system is broken. In Gaza, American aid financed Hamas's campaign to exterminate Israel. Similarly, in Afghanistan, Yemen, and Syria where we lack physical presence to ensure that our aid is not being diverted to terrorists. Our aid has been sustaining war economies." (Primorac, 2025)*

Therefore, the implications of the recent American elections and a change in government in the U.S. will have a profound impact upon the plight of Afghan women akin to the ascension of the Taliban. The previous U.S. administration's bargain to recompense Afghan teachers on the condition that the Taliban reopened schools to girls and assist them in developing a pathway for women's education as mandated through legislation in the 117th Congress appears to have been suspended by the Trump administration, thus leaving the issue of Afghan women's education in a quagmire.

Thereby, a broad review of the literature reveals that although there is an emerging area of concentrated examination and analysis upon the status of Afghan women both within Afghanistan and aboard, there are a limited number of studies and even social media focusing specifically upon the factors for migration of female Afghan academics. Therefore, this review highlights the lacuna in the field and the justification of this study.

## Methodology

This study utilises an interpretative-narrative case study methodology to explore the core objective of the research question:

*What are the factors responsible for the emigration of Afghan female scholars and academics?*

Therefore, the central objective of the study is to address and identify the 'factors responsible for the decision of female Afghan academics to emigrate' through a case-study based approach.

Case study research is interpreted as an empirical investigation into a phenomenon within its context, especially when the parameters between the phenomenon and context are ambiguous or equivocal (Yin, 2012). This is specifically apropos of ". . .those areas of research that are new and for which existing theory seems inadequate" (Eisenhardt, 1989). The categorical framework of the identified phenomena as scrutinised through the interpretative perspective stipulates ". . .that social reality is something that is constructed and interpreted by people rather than something that exists objectively out there." (Denscombe, 2002). Thereby, with consideration to the study objectives, the onus is on capturing the "*lived experience*" (van Manen, 2016) of emigrant Afghan female academics as a single case study with each participant formulating a separate subunit of analysis.

These participants represent the broad spectrum of social actors within a similar context, experiencing equivalent circumstances and reasons for emigrating from Afghanistan. This approach facilitates the appreciation of the experienced reality of the participants, by exploring "*the details of the situation to understand the reality or perhaps a reality working behind them*" (Saunders et al, 2009). This implies focusing upon the social context of these social actors and garnering an appreciation for the participant's engagement with and within that space. This necessitates an examination into the formation of their cultural narrative and the influence of "socio-cultural process" (Taylor et al, 2016) in interpreting their life-experience and developing their underlying motivations (Spradley, 1997). Consequently, individuals participate in meaning and sense-making through the formation of narratives to interpret and share their experienced phenomena. The linguistic structures and terms utilised to develop narratives are insightful as they reveal their worldview perspectives and depth of engagement they possess in its formation, for the discussion concurs that ". . . *the limits of my language are the limits of my world. . .*" (Wittgenstein, 2009)

## Methods

The research design comprised of an exclusive and specialised sample population, utilising purposive or judgmental sampling to identify participants that were relevant to the objectives of the study. Henceforth, the sample is homogeneous as all participants share similar genders, ethnicities, nationalities and educational qualifications, thus allowing for a generalised analysis of the individuals as a case study group. This, however, does not imply that the dialogue will be monolithic but rather demonstrate "*the complexity of interpretation found amongst a group of people with shared ideals, norms, and careers*" (Suddahazai, 2024).

The participants engaged in this study and selected for the in-depth interviews or non-standardised, "qualitative research interviews" (King, 2004) were five female Afghan academics living and working within foreign universities, who had emigrated due to the current Taliban Government's policy on the prohibition of women's education after the age of twelve.

The interviews were conducted in five separate schedules, whereby each schedule entailed an in-depth interview conducted telephonically with each participant.

The data derived from the interviews and the review of literature review, alongside personal observations of the Afghan educational system under the administration of the current governmental regime, were captured through a dialogical narrative and analysed as an inductive enquiry, counselled through the research objective to reveal the emergent themes formulating aspects of the factors motivating female Afghan academics to emigrate from Afghanistan.

Due to the extreme sensitivity surrounding the focus of the studies topic and context, with specific regards to Afghanistan, the names of the participants have been changed with the adoption of aliases, selected by the participants. This further reinforces the recommendations of anonymity and confidentiality in accordance with ethical guidelines provided by BERA

(2024). Thereby, the participants have been listed as their aliases as per Table 1 below.

Female Academic Alias	Nation of Emigration
Aisha	USA
Khadijah	USA
Hafsa	Germany
Ruqaiyyah	Sweden
Zaynab	Qatar

**Table 1:** Sample aliases for Female Afghan Academics

## Data Analysis

The captured data, through a dialogical narrative from the five interviews and personal observations, was subsequently analysed through an inductive approach to identify the emergent themes.

The inductive approach was undertaken through a “two-stage data analysis” process, whereby the first stage entailed a process of ‘categorisation’ and the second stage, ‘summarising’ of the gathered data.

- **First Stage:** Categorisation (grouping) of meanings: Developing categories and Unitising data (associating specific bits of data to them as relationships)
  - Developing Categories: Data gathered from the interview with the study participants, alongside a review of the literature lead to development of categories, which identify the emergent themes detailed in Table 2 below. (The study identified three themes from the open-ended interview questions)
  - Unitising data: Relevant ‘bits’ of data, (‘units’ of data) from the interviews, were classified under the relevant category.

Identified Themes
Liberty
Criticality
Belonging

**Table 2:** Identified Themes.

- **Second Stage:** Summarising (Condensation) of meanings or purpose and Structuring (ordering) of meanings using narrative:
  - Summarising (Condensation): Identified points of discussion from the interviews were summarised into a meaningful dialogical narrative addressing each emergent theme.
  - Structuring (ordering) of meanings using narrative: The narrative perceived as 'a broad account of the experience in a sequential format (Coffey, 1996), is organised to present a narrative of the participants' experience.

### Discussion and Findings

The inductive analysis of data guided by the research questions revealed three emergent themes, whereby each question uncovered its own emergent theme, therefore, providing a holistic set of data to address the central research question:

*What are the factors responsible for the emigration of Afghan female scholars and academics?*

This section is structured to address the guiding research questions and discuss the identified emergent theme as a definitive finding of the question.

#### Emergent Theme 1: Liberty

*"Although in my working experience, which I gained whilst NATO was still occupying Afghanistan... there was a lot of talk about empowering women in academia... So, opportunities to attend University became more available... and it was there that I decided that especially in a post-conflict traumatised society like Afghanistan, teaching career provided a respectable job opportunity and a source of income and some form of independence for women..." (Hafsa)*

There is a resounding concurrence amongst the participants with regards to their motivations for pursuing academic careers. Hafsa's exposure to the University environment and culture inspired her decision making with absolute contextual consideration for her societal circumstances.

This point is furthered by Zaynab, with the added emphasis on her experience and impact of the academic teaching staff within her university department.

*"It wasn't just that they taught you like they do at school, but for first time I felt as if I was part of the learning process... My views and opinions were important to the class, the discussion and so on... so I learnt to interact with people...I never used to even speak outside my small circle... but the lecturers and my supervisor really showed my what I was capable of and so I developed love for my subject and a desire to be a scholar like my teachers..."*

Ruqaiyyah's journey to academia echoes similar sentiments, as a consequence of her experience and interactions with teachers at her school and college.

*"Going to school for me with all my sisters, cousins and friends was one of the best experiences of my life... we lived in a small village so everyone knew each other ...we had so much fun... we were together all day... we got to learn new things and our teachers were amazing... they never shout on us... they make jokes and when someone do well they get special mention in assembly and prizes... but most importantly they create in me the love to learn... not just religious subjects but science, philosophy, history... everything...it became my jihad because of them..."*

There is an overwhelming sense of recognition and gratitude for the educational institutions the participants attended and their engagements with the teaching personal, thereby creating an ideal, which they have internalised. Khadijah reflects upon the creation and establishment of educational paragons that are uniquely situated to address the Afghan context, as a significant influencing factor, which has motivated her academic pathway.

*"I am not sure if I say that I went to an American school in Afghanistan that I was lucky or fortunate or something but that was my experience. It was here that I fixed upon my career aspirations, I knew I wanted to be in academia, my Baba (father) was an academic, so I had the exposure and therefore knew for the ordinary person the journey into and through academia in Afghanistan was challenging. So, I had to reach a stage where I could contribute and give back and create the frameworks which allow everyone the opportunity like I had."*

Khadijah's desire to reform her society through altruistic endeavours is supported by Aisha's contention:

*"What my experience of school and what I learnt from my teachers and now working in academia has taught me is that it's the personal responsibility of every Afghan to contribute towards change and development of a new educational infrastructure in Afghanistan, which recognises its Islamic and tribal heritage alongside embracing contemporary scientific approaches required to function in a globalised society."*

Aisha is extremely articulate and shares of early educational experience like Khadijah within a private American school in Kabul and its impact on her aspirations. She reflects on being introduced to literature and narratives that enraptured her imagination and fomented a desire for learning and exploration. However, with the looming ascension of the Taliban to power due to US and International forces withdrawing from the country, Aisha's father was afforded the opportunity to migrate to the U.S. with his family through the US governments SIV program.

*"It was not my personal decision to move to the U.S., but my family's and I thank them for it. At that time, I had just completed my Masters in Sociology and was able to get a job as a lecturer at the University... but as you know, as soon as Taliban came to power, they literally put a stop on women's lives..."*

She declares unequivocal support for her father's foresight for migration, which entailed increasing suppressive public policies towards women and the consequential ban on female education.

*"I thank my father for his wise decisions and the opportunity his sacrifices have provided us here in the U.S. ...as we see now... I would have literally been imprisoned in Afghanistan but instead I am building a life for myself and my family..."*

Aisha is pragmatic upon her reflection of migrating to the U.S. and is extremely appreciative of the opportunities that have been made available to her.

*"In studying and teaching in the U.S. is totally different to Afghanistan... like two different planets... At the college I am working at now...I get to do so much... firstly I teach Persian history within the history department and Persian and Dari within the language departments... then I am also involved with local projects for refugee welfare and recently I completed my basic first aid course and did a course in disaster management with the local fire department... they are using my skills and knowledge... I can't describe how*

*supportive they are and how much my colleagues will go out of their way to help me... also my supervisor has from day one helped me to map out my career goals and ambitions... something unheard of in Afghanistan..."*

It would appear that Aisha has become deeply and instantly immersed in the American academic culture. Although the absolute reasons for this surpass the remit of this paper, it could be argued that the American context has embraced her potential, talent, creativity, personality and ambition. Therefore, utilising her person to further their own academic experience to the detriment of the Afghan nation and its people. However, as Aisha recognises this is not accidental or conspiratorial but related directly to national policies and their implementation by civic society. For instance, she was surprised to learn that many of her academic colleagues were active and engaged members of society, thereby contributing back to their communities through charitable and philanthropic endeavours.

Khadijah shares a similar narrative to Aisha, but her eventual migration to U.S. was eventful as she passed through several nations en-route, which included a refugee camp in Türkiye to an immigration detention centre in the UK before arriving in the U.S.

*"It was really tough to get here, but now on reflection it was worth it. Once the Americans and NATO had effectively abandoned Afghanistan it was going to be impossible for people like my father who was a very devout Muslim but held moderately liberal views, to stay there."*

Khadijah explicitly cites her father's role in their migration and most poignantly his consideration for her education and future.

*"Baba understood the policy of the Taliban as he was a Professor of Political Sciences and so knew that once they took over, they would enforce bans against women's education... considering Baba's dream was for all of his three girls to be highly educated he just wanted to get out of the country for our sake..."*

The reflections shared by Aisha and Khadijah provide for evidential data countering the narratives of families and fathers in particular as significant barriers to women's education. Although it could be argued that both these participants are from privileged, affluent backgrounds with the requisite social and cultural education, thereby explaining the resolute support of their fathers. However, in migrating to a new country, Khadijah accepts that her families former influence in Afghanistan held no currency in the U.S. and thus she had to immerse herself in a new world whilst maintaining her identity and pursuing her academic ambitions.

*"In the U.S. I have been very fortunate Alhumdulilah to complete a Masters in Linguistics and then be able to get a position to teach Farsi at the state college on an accredited program..."*

Khadijah is deeply appreciative of the opportunities she has been offered and subsequently taken. In contrast, Hafsa's route to an academic career and life in Germany could be described as coincidental or even accidental. Hafsa was in Germany on a scholarship to undertake her doctorate research in Management Sciences when the Taliban came into power.

*"I don't know what to make of it really... I was already here in Germany and when they announced the ban on Female education, I knew I couldn't go back but at the same time all my family was there, so I was torn between two worlds..."*

As is the experience associated with migration, Hafsa had to reconcile her identity, belonging and family with a new reality in which she had to not only survive but thrive.

*"My family was amazing; my father and mother really support me and encourage me to carry on with my studies and not to return home as there was no opportunity for me to teach or even study."*

As per the previous responses, Hafsa received unconditional support from her family and thus was able to continue her educational journey. However, as she concedes, even in Germany she was not immune from discrimination and encountered it from an entirely new perspective.

*"Although yes there were many problems in the beginning, such as the way they looked at you as a Muslim, especially with Hijab and act suspiciously towards you..."*

This initial cultural response not only shocked Hafsa as she had never encountered Islamophobic attitudes but led her to introspect on the notion of discrimination and its manifestations within different cultures and civilisations.

*"I would say without any bias, that for me it was a wakeup call... there is no place in the world without its own prejudices...the biggest difference I experience here is that they have problems with my Muslimness and in Afghanistan it's because I am a woman."*

Hafsa identifies a pertinent debate highlighting the stark paradox reality of Afghan Muslim women living in Western Europe. However, she observes poignantly that although some of her initial misgivings about the nature of Islamophobia in Germany and throughout Europe is well informed, she realised that migration entailed a reciprocal responsibility. Whereby it was incumbent upon the migrants to actively engage with their communities and societies.

*“...Once I got settled after a year and a half, I understood that the ordinary German is not a bad person but wants to know about us... So, I engage more with the local peoples and I have had good experience so far... at work my bosses and fellow lecturers are all very helpful, understanding and nice human beings... they discuss about Afghanistan... women’s issues... Taliban and of course what Islam has to say about it all...”*

In a truncated concise manner, Hafsa’s migratory experience delineates a corporeal, and intellectual academic journey that at inception began with a sense of resentment but has over time and with consideration to the events in her home nation of Afghanistan transformed into appreciation. Ruqaiyyah’s story unveils and echoes Hafsa’s experiences in that on initially moving to Sweden she also experienced a general cultural shock. However, her journey to Sweden varies significantly in that she has only recently arrived there, having lived several years under the Taliban rule.

*“It had become impossible for us to stay in Afghanistan. We tried to be patient and wait for the government to change its policies but that never happened, and the situation got even worse. I was not able to teach, study or find any work that I was qualified to do within universities, government or even corporations.”*

Therefore, under duress and in desperate circumstances, Ruqaiyyah reveals that she left Afghanistan with her spouse.

*“My husband and I decided to leave Afghanistan last year and initially went to Türkiye before going to the Sweden, where we have many relatives.”*

Sweden proved to be a fertile migratory destination, as she was able to integrate and establish herself through a network of Afghan social welfare organisations and associations alongside established academics and scholars within Swedish universities and colleges.

*“Although there is nothing like home and I Miss Afghanistan very much, I can’t say I regret moving here. I have recently started my PhD on a scholarship provided by a Muslim charity and begun to teach Islamic Studies at a local college and an Islamic school... as well as being involved in an Afghan society that works towards the welfare of the Afghan migrant community. These are all opportunities I could never have dreamt of in Afghanistan during this time...”*

Ruqaiyyah’s narrative, as per the previous participants, speaks of the desire for liberty and independence to fully realise the latency of their self-potential. Zaynab, as did Ruqaiyyah, migrated to Qatar after living under the current regime and decided that it was too suppressive and would ultimately damage her mental health and wellbeing.

*“I came to Qatar a year after the Taliban took over... my brother alongside some of my professors insisted that I should with my whole family move to Qatar as I was in a really depressive mental and emotional state.”*

As has been the case with the encountered migrant female participants, they received unprecedented support from their families and most intriguingly from their close male relatives. Zaynab recalls her close relationship with her brother and his unwavering commitment to provide for her education.

*“He knew about my educational ambitions and was actually supporting my education and paying for my degree. I was in the final year when they decided to stop us from finishing our studies. I was studying to be a doctor.”*

Although her ambitions to become a doctor were thwarted, she was fortunate enough to be studying under highly influential and respected authorities in the field, who eventually helped her to migrate across the border, despite the ongoing political tensions between the two nations.

*“Although there were many issues with us getting visas for Qatar, my senior Professors who were now working at Qatari universities arranged for us to travel there and get student visas.”*

Zaynab was fortunate in that she received incredible encouragement from her family to continue her studies and then was able to work with academics with tremendous international influence and persuasion to migrate and establish herself in a new nation. Although she is ambivalent with regards to leaving Afghanistan, it’s not a decision she regrets.

*"Of course I love my home and want to go back and teach at my university but there is no chance of that and it saddens me a lot but at least here in Qatar which is just like Afghanistan to be honest, the culture and way of life is Islamic... however, here the women participate in all areas of life... from being journalists, corporate professionals to top level University professors... so they have inspired me to develop myself to become a top doctor and to help my people in Afghanistan in the future."*

Zaynab is now driven by her passion to help the people of these nations and to become an ambassador of sorts to create harmony and understanding at the official levels whilst providing assistance and care to the destitute and needy. This has also led her to consider her career options as she feels that alongside her medical practice, she could also be teaching and undertaking active research within an academic environment and work with girls like her from Afghanistan or other developing nations with limited opportunities due to social, economic and political barriers.

*"Although I enjoy practising medicine, the university experience has led me to develop more interest in the academic teaching side and so alongside my residency I also teach undergraduate subjects within the biological sciences to develop my academic experience and knowledge... and then eventually work with girls that don't have the opportunities that I have had for example or like my teachers did for me... provide those for them..."*

It can be deciphered from the aforementioned narratives that the migrant Afghan women with ambitions to further their educational goals and objectives were forced into moving abroad not out of choice but necessity and even desperation.

However, the reasons for their migration cannot be attributed merely to the ascension of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, but factors associated with their specific policies on education. This entails the prevention of female higher education, which is compounded by the general malaise in the scholarly and intellectual fields and academic institutions.

Further, the conversations with the participants revealed an unequivocal direct reference to Islamic sources throughout their discussion in justifying their perspectives. For instance, Khadijah observes *"Islam came to guarantee our freedom... just look at the story of the name I have adopted for this study, she is a pioneer, an international businesswoman, traveller, first convert to Islam, first supporter of Islam and the prophet (s) and the wife of the Prophet (s)..."*;

Whilst Hafsa argues that, *"Did the Qur'an not give us our rights, our hukook, it's not about having what men have ... it's about equality in us being able to do what Allah sbt has commanded us to do as human beings..."* Aisha repeats the point in identifying that the "...Quran as our guide and word of Allah sbt gives us

*freedoms to be part of society and not hidden from it... look at the stories of umm Khadijah and umm Aisha and how they helped to spread Islam and even fight for it on the battlefield..."* Thereby, Ruqaiyyah concurs that the "role of women in Islam is significant as firstly Allah sbt has given us our full rights and the Sunnah of the Prophet and our mothers, his wives is that they were faithful, religious and active members of the community..."

Thus, Zaynab qualifies the discussion with a quotation from Surah and Nisa, aptly titled the women, the 4th chapter of the Quran: "*O mankind! Reverence your Guardian-Lord, who created you from a single person, created, of like nature, his mate, and from this pair scattered (like seeds) countless men and women. Reverence Allah, through Whom you demand your mutual (rights), and reverence the wombs (that bore you); for Allah ever watches over you (4:1) ...*" She reflects that "...you can see from this ayah that Allah sbt has given us rights and women have a special place because they give life, that's why Prophet (s) said that Jannat is under the feet of your mother... it's your service to her... every woman can be a mother and so giver of life... to understand this you must think on the Quran and Sunnah and not just shout slogans to show how religious you are..."

Thereby, the next identified theme addresses this concern and the emergent theme of 'criticality' or the dearth of its comprehension and practice in Afghanistan as another contingent factor in the migration of these female scholars from Afghanistan.

### **Emergent Theme 2: Criticality**

*"Having studied and then actually do some teaching as well in Afghanistan shows that I have the experience and the right... to form my own opinions and speak critically on real issues in my country."* (Khadijah)

Khadijah justifies her authority as per all of the participants to demonstrate their engagement, experience and intimate knowledge of the functionality of academia in Afghanistan. She shares the formation of her subjective objectivities through her early childhood educational experiences.

*"I know I had a slightly or to be honest much better education experience than most people in Afghanistan but even that compared to education here in the West is not even basic... Mostly it's a rata system where the teachers just make you memorise text and repeat it... there is no space for the child to even think or question..."*

She speaks of an environment wrought with conflict, insecurity and oppression, whereby the educational opportunities have become limited and restricted due to overwhelming authoritarian models of teaching and administration.

Zaynab also supports this contention with a recollection of her own educational experience.

*"When I was growing up, I never really had the opportunity to explore anything outside our home or our school classrooms... I mean we couldn't go out into the neighbourhood... or even to the bazaar never mind the city...it was always too dangerous ... so we grew up with this scared mind... the teachers even at our high school and college were good but always had these ready-made answers that you couldn't challenge... I always had so many questions to ask but the teachers made sure there was no opportunity to ask them anything... and then just with people and friends there was no discussion on anything academic or scholarly just politics and religion..."*

It is apparent through the dialogue and voice of the participants that they identify the absence and paucity of the notion of 'criticality' as a significant contributor to the sterile and banal Afghan academic environment. Aisha furthers this contention by sharing that she was exposed to a greater wealth of intellectual tools whilst at university than school.

*"Although at our school we had the opportunity to question our teachers and then discuss the literature we read... At university it was a completely different experience ... What used to frustrate me most was that there was no questioning of the teachers... the students just used to accept everything as they were given it... they were not really taught to engage with the teachers... the teachers themselves had no concept of engaging with the students so the whole relationship became very one sided and what I found or was beginning to experience was that I wasn't really developing or growing as a student and then academic scholar..."*

This is compounded by the fact that even in cases where broader curriculums and syllabuses are available, the resources are scarce and the credibility of the teachers' qualifications and knowledge extremely ambiguous. Ruqaiyyah's recollection of college and university life reads typically of the developing world educational context, which provides the underlining justifications and motivations for so many emigres. Although she does not harbour any resentment towards her educational experiences, it did however foster a desperation to leave Afghanistan, albeit reluctantly. She observes that the educational system never evolved, and she felt like a child even throughout further and higher education.

*"My experience as I grew up and attended college and university was that it felt just like school... we were not really allowed to ever grow up and become responsible for anything ...even when I did my MA in Islamic Studies, I never felt like I was a real academic or that I actually knew anything or even had my own view or opinion on anything..."*

Ruqaiyyah had a sudden realisation of her shortcomings once she had moved to the Sweden and was engaged with academic life there.

*"When I began teaching, I realised that I couldn't actually answer questions... I could only really deliver the set material as it had been taught to me... and to be honest I only now realise this once I moved to the Sweden and started my PhD and began to work in the education system here..."*

Aisha concurs with Ruqaiyyah in that she realised the impact of her educational experience only after moving to U.S., as she was able to compare contextualise and quantify her intellectual skills with her colleagues.

*"I only realised this once I got to America that I had no real-life experience or even method to understand it in an objective rational fashion... When I first came here, I found I would be arguing with my fellow classmates and then students more emotionally and out of some kind of pride or feeling of loyalty to my faith and nation... So, I guess even though it wasn't my explicit decision to leave but it was then it would be because as an academic you need intellectual tools and being critical and questioning things are crucial... and if you can't develop that then what is the point of that academia?"*

Whilst Hafsa furthered these reflections as she also experienced similar sentiments in her initial interactions with German academics.

*"The notion of criticality is really big here in German academia and everything you do must be qualified by it... When I first got here, I was totally lost and didn't know how to read critically or write critically ...I basically just copied or repeated what I had heard or learnt as I was taught in Afghanistan..."*

Hafsa was forced through necessity to ponder upon her own condition through an overarching reflection upon the educational context within Afghanistan.

*"Now being here and even teaching in this system I can see that we in Afghanistan do not have an education system but a very basic system to indoctrinate children in some religious and cultural facts which they are not allowed to question or more importantly never taught to question anything..."*

Hafsa exemplifies the essence of the discussion with all of the participants, in that they identify the lack of critical thinking and thought as a major contributor to the stagnant and impotent educational infrastructure with little to no influence upon society.

*"I would say that we lack critical thinking and ability to genuinely have honest discussions because they may uncover uncomfortable truths about ourselves and so the system in Afghanistan is almost designed to make the student completely uncritical..."*

This provides for a critical reflection on the educational context of Afghanistan based upon lived experience, which identifies the deeper causes for the extant attitudes and approaches currently prevalent in the pedagogical methodologies inherited by successive generations of educators.

Hafsa corroborates this insight through a process of self-analysis, which revealed uncomfortable truths about her own development.

*"I began to realise over time that I actually had no objectivity within my thinking because all I knew was what had been taught to me and so my views and opinions on the world were not informed by my own thinking or reflections but rather whatever the teachers or those who design the curriculum wanted us to learn or know and what I know realise is that the education system is not designed to allow the development of what is called the critical conscious self, which knows why it believes what it does and what it doesn't based upon reason and logic rather than just blind faith with no rationality... this then creates awareness in the individuals and so education becomes a process for that to happen to students... there is no space for that to occur in Afghanistan."*

Hafsa's dissection of the Afghan educational infrastructure reveals an intellectually bereft institution operating for the purposes of operation rather than a functional purpose or benefit for society and the nation. Thereby, educational institutions are unable to produce students and scholars that can genuinely transform society or establish the pathways for that to transpire.

Khadijah provides an almost verbatim response, which identifies the same factors for becoming an underlying cause for the continual indoctrination of students as opposed to their education.

*"I would say that we lack critical thinking and ability to genuinely have honest discussions because they may uncover uncomfortable truths about ourselves and so the system in Afghanistan is almost designed to make the student completely uncritical..."*

Khadijah's contentions imply that there is a systematic societal process that encompasses educational institutions at all levels, which is designed to create a submissive society with limited tolerance for notions of self-volition and individualism.

*"The entire Afghan culture is based upon being submissive to elders, learned people, authority... so now you have a situation where no-one knows how to actually think for themselves and that's very dangerous for the people and nation because anyone with enough power and influence can control the masses very easily..."*

Khadijah ultimately perceives the current educational practice as an ideal scenario for internal and external socio-political actors, to exploit young malleable students for their specific nefarious purposes.

Zaynab, in accordance with Khadijah's argument and summarising the points shared by the other participants on the impact of and by culture on education, observes that:

*"The culture is such that we just don't know anything about ourselves because we never had the opportunity to ask who we are as individuals... I think this is the cause behind much of the violence and extremism in this country... we never question why we believe what we do because it's just put into us... so these poor youngsters especially in rural areas who don't know anything about the world are easily influenced by whatever they are told and especially that which speaks to their poverty and struggle..."*

Furthermore, Zaynab is able to contextualise the Afghani condition with Qatar and deem it to be alike with similar attitudes to social issues and taboos.

*"This is a deep rooted cultural issue which is the same here in Qatar... we don't want to question anything because it might challenge our understanding of what is truth or what everyone else is happy with so we fit in with the crowd... this is really an internal form of brain washing undertaken through the culture and the practices... which means that the students are like programmed with information but they don't know what it means or why they have learnt it..."*

This speaks of a greater issue related to the psychological conditioning of society through its historical and cultural influences. As both Afghanistan and Qatar have shared Islamic values, their attitudes it appears are

not too dissimilar. However, unlike in Afghanistan, the Qatari governmental attitude and policy towards women is based upon equality in accordance to the constitution and the Sharia which they have sought to uphold despite challenges from both extremist religious and secularist groups, thereby providing Zaynab with the opportunity to undertake real academic and medical practice.

*“These were deep rooted issues that were really beginning to depress me and lose all hope really in Afghanistan but thanks God, I had opportunities to go after my dreams and although everything is not perfect... the academic culture here is systematic...higher level and you have opportunity to learn and then have the opportunity to practice what you want... in that sense there is no comparison really between the nations”*

Zaynab's comparative analysis between Qatar and Afghanistan reveals a gulf in attitudes towards the role of women in society at both official governmental levels and within the public milieu. Despite the shared ideological norms and values of these nations, Qatari policies have been formulated to not only be accommodating but are designed to be equal and inclusive.

Thereby, the third identified emergent theme from the dialogues engages with the notion of 'Belonging' as determining factor in the expatriation of these female scholars from Afghanistan.

### **Emergent Theme 3: Belonging**

*“I never felt like part of the whole thing... I always felt like I should be present but not seen or heard ... just do my studies when I was a student and then as a teacher do my lessons and go home... from the university management side there was no real involvement or giving me feedback...”* (Zaynab)

Zaynab reflects upon a discrepant educational experience, which appeared to marginalise her person from the process, whereby she, alongside the other females she studied and taught with, felt like mere instruments or resources for application. Although this attitude was not prevalent amongst all the staff, especially her academic advisors and lecturers.

*“...Don't get me wrong my teachers and my professor were great people... I was lucky that our teaching staff had experience from abroad and were great help but in general other than the handful of these people, the rest of the experience with the University made me feel like an outsider rather than an Afghan working within an Afghan institution...”*

She clearly attributes this to her gender status but does not perceive it as a point of definite bias. Rather Zaynab understands the situational context and prevailing attitudes to be a reflection of the culture and historical sensitivities, which have developed under duress and existential threat.

*“Yes, I believe a lot of it has to do with fact that I am a women and it’s not that men hate women or something like that but due to our culture and religion there is shyness and this then becomes a barrier over time and then practice and the norm you can say... so it’s not a blame game but in a professional environment there has to be respect and men and women must learn to work together professionally otherwise how will any institution run...”*

However, Zaynab recognises that despite the cultural and historical barriers, there is a desperate need for officials in all institutions to develop a professional working culture, which allows for appropriate and requisite interactions between genders. She has already experienced this approach in her adopted home.

*“...Even here in Qatar, which is as I said just like Afghanistan, but there is professional culture in the universities and my own head of department is a Qatari women with great influence...”*

Zaynab has been inspired by the women around her in Qatar and wants to emulate their achievements and social status whilst maintaining and without compromising her cultural identity and faith.

Ruqaiyyah provides for a similar insight and although recognises the significance of the inherent discrimination they are encountering, as per Zaynab’s contention, demonstrates a higher and much deeper comprehension of the phenomenon.

*“You can’t blame the people teaching at the universities... these people are too low on the scale to have any power or decision making ... it’s the management you have to look at because most of them are not even academics but people getting jobs because of political or social relationship... this is a big issue here... they give unqualified people jobs over qualified and so the system can’t work because these people have no idea about academics and what is supposed to happen there.”*

Ruqaiyyah identifies the issues to be derived from an inherent form of nepotism and corruption, which then translates over time to the dearth in educational practice and resources as unqualified personnel take helm of the teaching and unethical administrators become incumbents to the finances and resources.

*“So, we have situation where, there are barely any adequate facilities or resources to undertake even basic research or do studies in the field, especially as a woman... where security issues become a bigger concern than the actual work we are supposed to be doing.”*

Ruqaiyyah laments just like the other participants on the state of academia in Afghanistan and argues voraciously that it reflects the state of the nation and its history. Ruqaiyyah reveals that only after arriving in the Sweden was, she able to grasp the holistic picture and formulate a comprehensive perspective on the educational infrastructure and condition in Afghanistan.

*“In working here in the Sweden and studying for my PhD, I can see that in Afghanistan in general there is no potential for academic development or research in in terms of developing new courses, projects or ideas and theories because the culture is too restricted and people do not have the vision to be able to do things systematically... the people are not dumb or stupid but have no direction and you can see it on the streets... they make incredible inventions on the roads, in the shops in the fields to survive or make life easy but this talent is not being studied or developed in any way... just exploited for cheap labour or as been the case for decades ... used as dummies for wars and conflicts...”*

Ruqaiyyah observes that Afghanistan is extremely blessed to possess both natural and human resources, which are being exploited instead of being utilised for the welfare and future of the nation. Hafsa concurs in that she only realised the depth of her own intellectual despair and development on migration to Germany for higher studies.

*“For me what I realised as soon as I got to Germany was that I didn’t even know what or how a proper university is supposed to be functioning... I was just used to a school type of process but here I realised that academia itself has its own identity and a whole process of being a certain type of person that is independent, curious you can say and always questioning everything... well I never knew about those things really... I had never really debated before like in academic way and defended my position with so many evidences and logics because I had never been taught to and simply I didn’t have any opportunity... it was like I wasn’t allowed... really it’s as simple as that... I had no opinion...”*

Hafsa demonstrates a tremendous amount of despair, frustration and jeremiad at her educational experiences in Afghanistan compared to Germany and moves on to relate and contextualise the situation in a broader Muslim sense across the world.

*“Therefore, I realise that the whole system of education in Afghanistan and most of the Muslim countries has no academic identity, which means that it has no focus or even purpose other than to get a job and then that is not competent to give the skills required in the modern industry...”*

She identifies the comprehension and appreciation of the notion of education within formally colonised Muslim societies to be a serious contributing factor towards the social ills that have plagued their societies, which is exemplified and made apparent in the case of Afghanistan.

*“The major problems I see now from here outside of the box is that the decision makers are always the same types of people... they are political peoples and academic and they are there to push the points and agendas of those in power... It was the same under NATO. Yes, I did benefit from some of their programs, but the system was far from clean—there was widespread corruption, and education was turned into a tool for promoting extreme liberal ideas. Now, the Taliban are excluding more than half of the country’s population from education*

Hafsa concludes her discussion by arguing passionately on the impact of the ban of education on women under the Taliban and the corruption wrought by the occupation of NATO, which only served to strengthen, embolden and legitimise certain extremist and criminal elements in the country.

Aisha concurs with Hafsa's contentions and shares her anguish in no uncertain terms, which also demonstrate the pain and hurt she is feeling.

*“I just can't see the change, I wish I could say that there was something in the horizon and it looks positive but there is only doom and gloom...”*

Aisha argues that her perspective is not reactionary nor derived from her cultural and intellectual exposure to the American liberal education system but based on her own experience, insights and intimate knowledge of the nation and its people.

*“Even under NATO there was a lot of noise around what they were doing but in reality outside of Kabul there was nothing... and to be honest with you I am not sure what you can do... From my experience there is no culture of self-accountability or incentive to act or take responsibility for anything especially within the university environments, no one wants to upset the apple cart so to speak and lose their jobs, reputation or worse be accused of blasphemy... how can you make a career, study and do serious academic work in that environment...?”*

Aisha presents an inscrutable and intractable depiction of the academic environment in Afghanistan, which depreciated under the administration and occupation of NATO, especially within the last decade, and now under the Taliban Government has been considerably affected. Although she concedes that she is only able to share these sentiments as she is in the U.S. but nevertheless as a scholar, woman and an Afghan she feels it her duty to address these issues so that possible solutions and compromises can eventually be reached through these intellectual initiatives.

*"I know I can say these things now sitting in the U.S. but obviously I am here and so that's my situation and what I see now is a very oppressive environment obviously for women its beyond oppression now... they are effectively deleted from the scene but even the average Afghan male academic in the universities has no support or recognition for his work..."*

Aisha is despondent and summarises her overarching perspectives within a fatalistic framework, which also comprises of male academics and scholars. However, the choices open to women speaking out against this culture in Afghanistan is to be martyred for their cause or to flee the nation, as she had to regrettably undertake.

*"So, yes as women there is obviously zero room for us in Afghanistan and looking back at it now emigrating was a life saver... otherwise what would I have done... become an activist and got shot, blown up or even worse in our culture abused in some way bringing shame onto my family and tribe... no one would have stood up for me and there are no courts that I could go and present my case before... So, I feel as do many highly qualified Afghan female academics that just for our very survival we had to migrate and we also know this is a great loss to the country over time... but they just don't care..."*

Aisha's reflections make for sombre reading, as she speaks with genuine authenticity and emotion on the current circumstance and its impact on the people, economy and educational environment, which has and will continue to experience a significant brain drain leading to intellectual impoverishment and ultimately social destitution of the nation.

Khadijah argues that the paucity of academia and intellectual activity in the country is an attestation to the abject collapse of the education system both in Afghanistan and the Muslim world in general.

*"This is the result of a failed education system, as you can see all across the world and especially the Muslim world... Our case in Afghanistan is of course very extreme and the ban on women's education means*

*the fall of education... this type of behaviour is unheard of in even our own history...only under Taliban this has happened..."*

Khadijah observes that the policy banning further and higher education for women is unprecedented and is a broad illustration of the appreciation and comprehension of the educational system and its role in developing and maintaining the nation.

*"The general state of academia is not good anyway in Afghanistan and its impact is clear on society... you can see that here in the U.S. where the education system is strong and it supports the entire function of the state..."*

Whereas in the U.S., Khadijah has witnessed the functionality of the educational system and its direct impact and influence on the administration and execution of national and domestic governmental policies. Thereby, Khadijah vehemently questions the current policies being implanted by the Taliban Government in Afghanistan.

*"When your policies become alien to Islam and our tribal cultures and history then you are imposing something upon us which is not from us..."*

A reoccurring point of contention and debate, Khadijah notes that the current attitude, practice and formation of educational policies in Afghanistan are contradictory to the Islamic essence, ethos and commandments. Furthermore, even tribal Afghan culture does not support these approaches, therefore, what has transpired in the country is incompatible and antithetical to both the lived and faith traditions of the people.

*"I would say that they have forced us out of Afghanistan rather than we migrated or left... what were we to do there... educated women will breed children who will become educated ... uneducated ignorant mothers will just breed and raise ignorant uneducated children who will become terrorists, labourers and desperate migrants sinking in criminal run ships in Europe because they have no hope at home..."*

### **Reflections on Findings**

The dialogical data set deciphered through the Interpretative-Narrative framework unveiled a disconsolate and despairing portrait of the factors determining the emigration of female Afghan academics from Afghanistan. Although these factors are directly related to the prohibition and embargo on further and higher

education for females, they also relate to genuine academic and scholarly concerns, which impact both genders and have left all academics dejected. Identifying and classifying this condition to be a form of societal oppression, the female study participants felt compelled to leave the country under duress. These academics with extensive professional experience in both Afghanistan and their respective adopted nations reflected upon the emergence of an oppressive socio-cultural framework, which was both incongruous with Islamic and tribal customs and responsible for effectuating the extant attitudes towards women. The impact of these practices, which have been accentuated with the ban on women's education after the ages of twelve uncovered three emergent themes leading to a single major finding.

The emergent themes derived from the analysis of the narrative data entailed the loss of individual liberty, the paucity in criticality in academic thought-practice (praxis), and lack of belonging both within academia and society. The single major finding identifies the notion of 'disengagement' as a major factor, which encapsulates and delineates the emergent themes as causes for the migration of these female academics from Afghanistan.

Although the notion of 'disengagement' is a broad term within academic discourse as it has been utilised within studies on ageing, human resource management and organisational psychology amongst others, the specific reference to it in this study is informed by an educational perspective from which this analysis garners its definitional and functional application. However, most of this literature is concentrated upon strategies for engagement as opposed to the causes of disengagement. Early sociological studies suggested that disengagement, defined as "*the action or process of withdrawing from involvement in a particular activity, situation, or group*" (OD), was related to the notion of the roles people occupy in life. The concepts of 'role sending and 'receiving (Katz & Kahn, 1978), 'role sets' (Merton, 1957), 'role taking' and 'socialisation' (Van Maanen, 1976), and the influence of roles on individuals and groups suggest that the roles individuals play is extremely important both to them and society. Denying individuals the opportunities to fulfil their roles, can lead to mental health issues (Chua, 2024) and their eventual withdrawal from society (Gallup, 2017). Alternatively, there is also the possibility of individuals descending into Bandura's (2015) notion of 'moral disengagement', whereby they decouple their moral norms from their actions to endorse unethical conduct without remorse as a consequence of being disengaged. However, the condition of the study participants whilst being described within the notion of 'disengagement' cannot be identified as being morally disengaged within Bandura's aforementioned framework. The disengagement experienced by the female Afghan academics has been imposed upon them, whereby the emergent themes explicate an aspect of this disengagement and delineate the process leading to their decisions to emigrate.

Therefore, the major finding as derived from the emergent themes relate to the notion of an 'enforced disengagement' by the government, which according to Aisha entailed the loss or diminution of their liberty in both a personal and academic sense.

*"We have lost our liberty, our freedom to simply exist... we have no participation in society even though as I have explained that most of our very close male relatives like our fathers, brothers, husbands, sons, uncles and cousins support the education of women... their working and participation in society... even male ministers of the Taliban Government have been very vocal about their overwhelming support for female education... yet there is this ban and generally an attitude about women which means they should be hidden away as if they are sub-human... this is a huge contradiction against our Islamic and tribal customs and actually at this time no one in Afghanistan supports this..."*

Khadijah's attributes the causal pretexts for this diminution of liberty for women on the paucity or absence of criticality in academic thought-practice (praxis)

*"As I explained, our freedom cannot be attained simply by shouting slogans and appealing to western countries... the west was here for 20 years and what did they do...? Our real problems are internally made and must be addressed with that in mind... we have no ability to think about things and question the reality of what we are being presented with through a logical and rational manner... we have no endurance to tolerate the opinion of others and let others have their own views... so basically what is happening is that women are being shut out but if you are educate and have a brain to think then you will question ... but from my experience this will only get you labelled as being corrupt or whatever because they can't just dominate and control you..."*

Ruqaiyyah, in support of Khadijah's assertions, argues that female academics who question or seek answers from officials are effectively ostracised. This has led to the alienation, estrangement and isolation of female academics, who experience a lack of belonging both within academia and society.

*"It began to not only feel but was clear that we just didn't belong anymore to our own society... especially as female university academics and scholars there was no more function for us, we lost our space and ultimately our future... so I felt a massive shift where I began to see the role of the women under the current government as being there only to serve men... becoming just a tool for the home to provide domestic care, requirements, service and sensual pleasures... is that the role Islam has ascribed for women...? Because when I read the Quran, Seera of the Prophet (s) and Hadith, I don't see the prophet or his sahaba treated their women like this... just look at how for example Umm Khadijah and Aisha were warriors, scholars and traders... we are not even allowed to attend college..."*

Zaynab concurs, as she relays similar sentiments to Ruqaiyyah with regards to the spurious translation and practice of Islamic ideals. She argues that the current policies were directly responsible for her losing her role, function, purpose, space and identity within Afghanistan. Thereby she despondently concedes the position and status of women in Afghan society to a marginalised periphery.

*"I was desperate to leave Afghanistan not because I hate it or something ... I love Afghanistan... I love my people, and I don't even hate the Taliban... I know lots of people who are related that are in the Taliban and most of them don't even agree with the current policy on female education, but at the end I couldn't see any future... I didn't have any goals and dreams left... I had nowhere to go and I didn't think I had any purpose to my life other than to get married have children and die... which is of course part of life but that's not all of life... they have literally erased the women from public life and so what you have is a case where the men growing up don't and won't be able to appreciate or understand the role of women in society and so will not respect their mothers, sisters, wives and daughters because they have no idea of how to respect the women, behave with her, talk to her... they just see women now as a piece of the furniture in the house... I couldn't live like that and so I had to move or I would have become ill... depressed and probably become bigger burden on my family..."*

Zaynab effectively captures the overarching sentiments shared by all of the participants and laments on being forced to emigrate as opposed to a desire or longing to leave her mother nation. Hafsa concludes the discussion with a summation of the underlying factor of 'disengagement' which have forced their destiny to the detriment of the nation.

*"I had no hope left anymore... I know that in Islamic thinking we can never lose hope because Allah sbt always looks out for us and helps us in our lives but I got so weak, so scared and so depressed that I couldn't think of anything and was in shock when I first heard the news of the ban... because I was in Germany and this basically meant that I couldn't go back home if I wanted to become something and help my nation... I cried for days but the support of my family and especially my father, brother and uncles gave me some hope that in the future we can make the change and people like me... who have opportunity to study and work abroad will be able to go back home and bring our society up to match at least the countries in our region if not the world..."*

The reflections on the findings of the discussion reveal that the major factor motivating the emigration of female academics from Afghanistan is 'disengagement'. This factor is comprised of three emergent themes: the loss of individual liberty; the paucity in criticality in academic thought-practice (praxis); and lack of

belonging both within academia and society. Which have instigated the notion of disengagement and thereby departure of these female academics from the country

### **Limitations of Study**

The study was conducted within the ethos of a 'self-reflective' dialogue that sought to garner the experiences of female Afghan academics that have migrated abroad. However, the study was conducted over an extremely short period of time and was impacted by several factors. This included the challenges of conducting telephonic interviews over vast distances and time differences, with some gaps amounting to thirteen hours. Moreover, the data collection relied on a small sample population thus impacting generalisation. Further still, the greatest encountered challenge concerned the sample population and the agreement of female Afghan academics to participate in the study, as many feared reprisals and cited general safety and security concerns to themselves and their families.

### **Conclusion**

This exploratory interpretative-narrative case study investigating the factors responsible for the emigration of female Afghan academics and scholars, uncovered three emergent themes leading to the identification of a single major factor influencing their decision. Although the study offers a generalised consensus of perspectives from a small sample population, the contributing participants were highly qualified, educated and professional Afghan women. Thereby, the interview schedule, as an ensuing narrative, uncovered the loss of individual liberty; the paucity in criticality in academic thought-practice (praxis) and the 'lack of belonging both within academia and society' as underlying factors, which the study classifies as emergent themes to formulate and identify the driving force and motivation for emigration, the notion of an 'enforced disengagement'.

This implies firstly, that the lived experience of female students and academics in formulating their perspectives was impacted by a solely behaviourist approach to their received learning and role development as scholars. The overarching model of teaching as experienced and practiced by the study participants was conducted through the aegis of a traditional teacher-centred pedagogy. This negated the utilisation of narrative or dialogical approaches, which are requisite methods in formulating relationships between the learner, learned and knowledge base (Suddahazai, 2024). The consequences of this exclusively authoritarian approach were the induction of passivity and disengagement in the learners and scholars, whom were unable to engage with and in meaningful dialogue as the "*existential development and agency of learners*" (Freire, 1973), their higher cognitive processes in terms of Maslow's hierarchy of needs (actualisation) or Bloom's Taxonomy (evaluation) had not been developed. It is argued that "... learners in such instrumental learning

milieus are treated as objects of functional literacy rather than subjects, who could speak and reason through dialogue" (Suddahazai, 2023); thus exemplifying the "banking concept of education" (Freire, 1970) or the 'Mug and Jug approach' (Bowles & Gintis, 1976), whereby the learner is perceived as an empty vessel or a passive receptacle, the 'Mug' to be filled by the depositor, or the proverbial 'Jug', the teacher, with their knowledge and content.

Secondly, the notion of disengagement speaks to and questions the role and function of women in contemporary Afghanistan. The study participants share their heart wrenching stories on the impact of their enforced migrations, due to being instantaneously and unceremoniously dispossessed of their intellectual, social and economic standing. Furthermore, the systematic marginalisation has reached such a point, that the involvement of females in the educational system has been criminalised. The study participants perceive this policy to be lucid evidence of the government's absolute disengagement with the female population of the country.

Therefore, they argue the case that their emigrations are 'enforced emigrations', due to a suppression of their rights, roles, functions and duties as academics, scholars, teachers and subsequently their presence within the educational context. Thus, becoming insignificant and voiceless, within the systematic, legally sanctioned discrimination against them. Their ineligibility to participate in the decision making and governance processes implies that they are unable to contribute to civic, public and academic life. Thereby, they question their very presence in contemporary Afghan society other than to become tools and instruments of domestication. Therefore, all of the study participants cited the Qur'anic notion of 'Jahiliyyah' to describe the current situation in Afghanistan. However, this term does not simply describe the pre-Islamic period of ignorance but rather addresses the personality traits and characteristics of individuals and nations. This implies that those responsible for sanctioning, legislating and implementing policies which are contrary to the Sharia possess a certain hubris, which "*...entails an unbridled form of pride and haughtiness alongside unbounded self-assurance and independence in their supremacy, which leads to a state of unwavering belief in their own authority and rectitude*" (Suddahazai, 2024). However, as the study participants observe, the consequences of such an attitude to the detriment of Afghanistan, is the exodus of valuable human resources and the future leaders and mothers of the nation. Rather they argue, the governmental policy makers should embrace all of their citizenry to rebuild the nation after decades of conflict and war. For "*...presumably, the more people draw on their selves to perform their roles within those boundaries, the more stirring are their performances and the more content they are with the costumes they don...*" (Kahn, 1990)

In concluding, the study presents a recommendation, which was derived from the interview schedule undertaken with the study participants. This entails the formation of a working group or committee of select

female Afghan academics, acting within the capacity of a delegation to begin discussions on the extant policies with regards to women's education and the steps required to move forward by uncovering a point of initiation through respectful mutual dialogue with the representatives of the Taliban Government.

However, as Zaynab advises,

*"There is no need to be dramatically over ambitious, each step one at a time. It took Muhammad (s) 13 years of struggle before he had to emigrate to begin a fresh. Our journeys can be seen within that framework that's why Prophets are role models because aspects of their lives provide a verifiable solution to each Muslim. That's why the Quran and Sunna speak to us as Muslims and our own unique individual situations and circumstances. And to us it speaks of patience and struggle..."*

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