

The Effect of Socio-Cultural Norms on Female Labor Force Participation in Afghanistan

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Abstract

This study based on the review of literature in general and in Afghanistan, collected quantitative data through sequentially structured questionnaires to evaluate the effect of culture on female labor force participation in Afghanistan. In this purpose, the study aims to use two types of data source of primary and secondary data, wherein the primary data were obtained from randomly selected Afghan women, and the secondary data were collected from the World Bank to determine the main research question on whether socio-cultural norms affect the employability of women by taking into consideration other related questions of: do demographic factors such as marital status affect the employability of women in Afghanistan? And does education increase the likelihood of women in the labor market, which are the cornerstones of understanding the culture of the country discussed under the determinants of Afghanistan. Despite the existing information, the research subject in this thesis is still a new research area, where there is not much data and literature information to guide the study better. However, the mixture of both primary and secondary data alongside the information gathered across Afghanistan lead the study to gain closer insights to analyze women's situation in economy. Though majority of the participants were educated but the results provide evidence following the main research questions answer based on the purpose of the study that, socio-cultural norms affect women's employability regardless of their educational level, employment status and the regions level of development.

Keywords: *FLFP, gender empowerment, patriarchy, socio-cultural and traditional norms*

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Afganistan'daki Sosyo-Kültürel Normların Kadın İstihdamı Üzerindeki Etkisi

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Öz

Bu çalışma Afganistan'daki sosyo-kültürel normların kadınların iş gücüne katılımlarına etkisini değerlendirmek amaçlı yapılmış bir çalışmadır. Veri toplamak için sıralı yapılandırılmış anket düzenlenerek uygulanmış niceler verilerle Afganistan'da yapılmış bir literatür taramasını temel almaktadır. Bu amaçla, çalışmada, 'Medeni hâl gibi demografik unsurlar Afganistan'da kadınların istihdam edilebilirliğini etkilemekte mi?' veya 'Kadınların eğitim düzeyi kadınların iş gücüne katılma oranını artırır mı?' gibi Afganistan kültürünü anlamada belirleyici olan sorular dikkate alınmıştır. Çalışmanın temel sorusu sosyokültürel normların kadınların istihdam edilebilirliğini etkileyip etkilemediğini belirlemek için, birincil ve ikincil olmak üzere iki tür veri kaynağının kullanılması amaçlanmıştır. Burada birincil veriler rastgele seçilen Afgan kadınlardan elde edilirken, ikincil veriler ise Dünya Bankası'ndan elde edilmiştir. Mevcut verilere rağmen, bu tezin araştırma konusu, çalışmayı daha iyi yönlendirebilecek az sayıda veri ve literatür bilgisi olması nedeniyle hâlâ yeni bir araştırma alanıdır. Ancak, çalışmanın konusu ile ilgili toplanılan bilgilerin yanı sıra hem birincil hem de ikincil veriler Afganistan'daki kadınların ekonomideki durumunu analiz etmek için daha yakın iç görüler elde etmeye yönlendirmektedir. Her ne kadar katılımcıların büyük çoğunluğu eğitilmiş kadınlardan oluşsa da araştırmanın temel sorusuna verilen cevaplardan hareketle sonuçlar göstermektedir ki, sosyokültürel normlar, kadınların eğitim seviyeleri, istihdam durumları ve bölgesel gelişmişlik seviyesine bakılmaksızın, kadınların tercih ve istihdam edilebilirliğini etkilemektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: kadının işgücüne katılımı, toplumsal cinsiyetin güçlendirilmesi, ataerki, sosyo-kültürel ve geleneksel normlar

Introduction

In general, the number of women participating in the labor force has increased in last decades. However besides these rising trends in FLFP rates, women's integration in the labor market varies with a noticeable difference from one country to another. Taking a global perspective into consideration, women's participation both in developed and developing countries are in a complex situation. Firstly, all countries do not experience the same level of development. Due to this reason all countries do not have a rising trend in FLFP (Blau et al. 2014). Rather, there are countries where their FLFP is constant and countries where FLFP has decreased, especially for countries of the MENA region, where their FLFP rate is the lowest in the world and there has been no increase over the last 20 years at all. At the same time, the FLFP in Eastern and Southern Asia has declined, mainly in India and China respectively (World Bank, 2013). Among these countries, Afghanistan in South Asia experienced slow growth in its FLFP over the last decades. In Southern Asia, FLFP rates ranged from 16% for Afghanistan to 80% for Nepal in 2013 (ILO, 2013). The differences in FLFP among countries of this region can often be explained from socio-economic factors which show that women in Nepal are less likely constrained by social norms. Yet, in Afghanistan women have suffered through multiple factors determining their position in the economy.

For clarity, these factors are classified under their two major sources; cultural and historical traditional norms. More than thirty years, Afghanistan has been in political turmoil¹. This brought not only serious economic, social and political challenges, but it has also weakened human capital capacities for different ethnic groups for in different regions of the country. However, while this generalization can be made for all, women have been the most affected victims who have experienced significant challenges and have been victimized by different factors and subjugation almost in all spheres of life first by Mujahideen's period² (1992-1996), recorded as one of the worst periods then by Taliban's³ regime (1996-2001). During these periods, women could not go to school, make their own decisions or work outside their homes due to Taliban's Amar Bil Maroof Wa Nahi An al-Munkar & Sharia Law⁴ in particular which controlled women's social behavior (Golechha, 2016). These laws, as a result, negatively affected women and girls. According to these laws women and girls were prohibited from leaving their homes unless covered from head to toe not to show their skin in public, couldn't be treated by male doctors, were restricted from voting and couldn't participate in politics and public execution of women accused of adultery by stoning was permitted (Luccaro & Gaston, 2014).

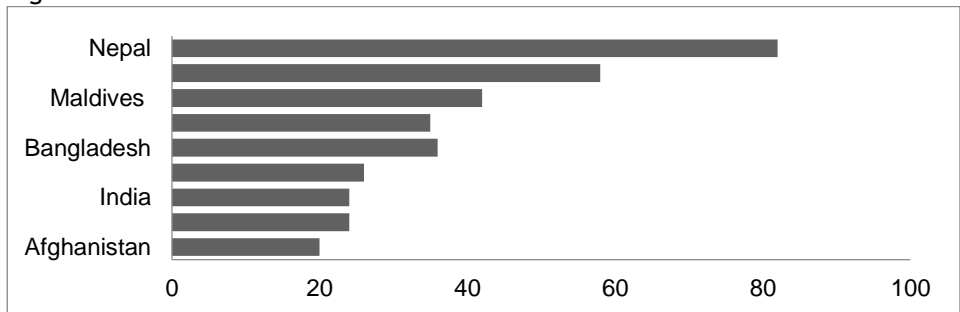
However, in 2001 the Taliban regime fell and hope for women was restored. Since 2001, women's situation has been changing considerably but still a lot is yet to be done about women's economic participation in

this country. Although FLFP records as one of the lowest among other South Asian countries, it has progressed since 2001 from 14.82%, rising to 20% by 2018 (World Bank, 2019). Despite this increase, Afghanistan continues to be one of the most culturally conservative countries. Women are not allowed to work outside their homes and this is an ongoing debate in the country. From this perspective, the purpose of this study is to evaluate whether or not cultural norms affect women's labor market participation in Afghanistan by analyzing factors such as marital status, education level and socio-cultural norms. Thus, the first section of the study covers the overview of FLFP in Afghanistan for clarity while the second section the study addresses the determinants of FLFP in Afghanistan by going through two major factors, finally we take a look at the methodology as well as data collection then results along with the conclusion and proposed recommendations.

Female Labor Force Participation in Afghanistan

Though, FLFP in Afghanistan records as one of the lowest among other South Asian countries as shown in Figure 1, it has progressively increased since 2001, from 14.82%, rising to 20% by 2018 (World Bank, 2018), Figure 2. However despite the significant increase, Afghanistan's female participation rate still varies greatly across the same region when compared to the highest 80% rate of FLFP in Nepal. The differences in FLFP among these regions can often be explained due to social and economic factors, where in Nepal women are less likely constrained by social norms.

Figure 1: FLFP Rate of South Asian Countries Women in 2018

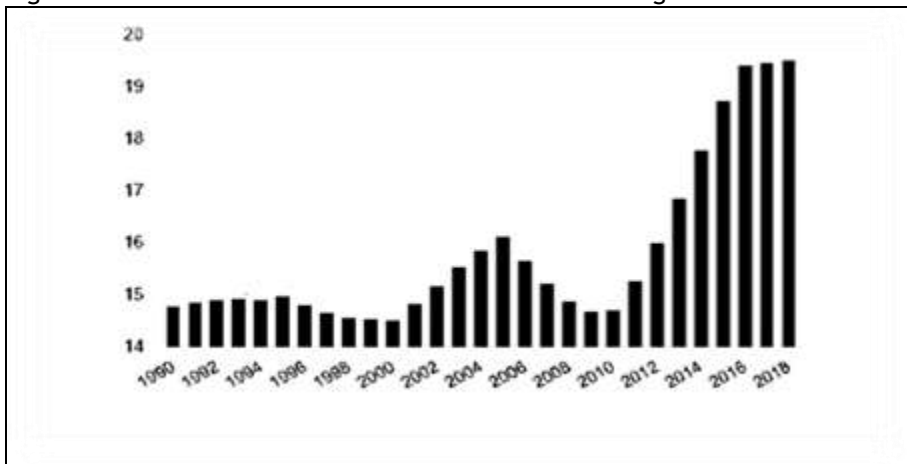


Source: World Bank 2019

While in Afghanistan as mentioned above also that, women have suffered through multiple factors of cultural, historical traditional norms that we will discuss more briefly on the determinants section. More than thirty years, Afghanistan has been suffering from armed conflicts and the ideas of suitability of work are related with security concerns. As Lili's (2016) provincial level study based on this regard finds that, FLFP in Afghanistan is negatively correlated with the incidence of violence.

However, as Ganesh (2013) states, labor force participation of women into the labor market is disorganized due to very weak analysis of women's labor force in the country. Despite some changes in overall position of women since the emergence of the new government in 2001 and all the international aid for the Afghan people, particularly for women, the question of why so few women participating in the economy persists. Although, FLFP in Afghanistan lags behind most of the countries in the world and while we can explain this from a socio-cultural perspective, another question arises on the country's economic reconstruction which is primary and is just beginning to breathe again to create employment opportunities. For this reason, the Asia Foundation survey in 2014 found that according to many respondents, unemployment was one of the main obstacles which prevented their national progress (Khaama Press, 2014). This means, that in addition to the unemployment rate of 2008 that was estimated at 35%, there is believed to be sharp rise of about 400,000 hundred thousand young people joining the labor market per year and the economy is not offering enough employment opportunities to answer this number of newcomers (Index Mundi, Afghanistan Economy profile, 2013). Thus, the scarcity of job opportunities, leads to men being employed first and women are often the ones who are left out due to the disadvantages relating to skills acquisition and education.

Figure 2: Evolution of FLFP Rate From 1990-2018 in Afghanistan



Source: World Bank 2019

Only 16% of females were employed against 80% employment for men showing that “women have fewer work opportunities than men” (Afghanistan National Youth Policy, 2014:15-85). Such statistics have proved gender to be a key factor mediating employment access in Afghanistan's labor market. Women's and girl's roles outside their home

(attending schools, training and working outside home) are limited because of conservative cultural attitudes (Afghanistan National Youth Policy, 2014). For this reason, the most common job which women hold in Afghanistan is being a school teacher (15.4%), and other unskilled home-based income generating activities particularly in rural areas like agricultural work and taking care of livestock and selling dairy products, carpet weaving, sewing, and tailoring. Though, it might be surprising, traditionally, women form 65% of agricultural workforce in Afghanistan (Simmons-Benton et.al. 2012). Poor and married women are the ones who are more commonly involved in agricultural tasks. However, women started to engage in politics and leadership as ministers in the ministry of Women Affairs, Higher education, Social Affairs, Martyrs and Disabled with the new democracy. As a result of these changes, 27.3% of the seats are allocated to women in Afghanistan's Parliament today.

Determinants of FLFP in Afghanistan

Multiple factors determining FLFP in Afghanistan's labor market but due to high causal relationship between these factors as well as related similarities, there seems to be overlapping effect from one factor to another. For clarity reasons however, these factors are classified under their two major sources; cultural, historical traditional norms and the three decades of conflicts.

The Effect of Cultural and Historical Traditional Norms

To determine the effect of cultural and historical traditional norms on women's economic participation, we need to analyze women's birthright along with other factors affecting their recognition in society with a historical perspective of Afghanistan. This perspective can provide a reasonably concrete explanation of the position of women and the determinants behind their low labor force participation in Afghanistan's economy as a whole. Though, the position of women in the Afghan society varies greatly depending on socio-cultural norms, ethnical background, and age. Traditionally women have been always treated as inferior and weaker compared to their male counterparts (Rahimi, 1991). Moreover, taking their historical perspective into consideration, Afghan women have been practically slaves to their fathers and elder brothers for the time before their marriage and eventually their husbands and father-in-law's after their marriage due to their silence and obedience in all kinds of situation. That is to say, the essence of attitude towards women's position in most Afghan families to any kind of activities was and still, is a fate sealed at birth. For instance, when a girl is born, the matter creates sadness and, most of the time blame on the wife while, birth of a boy is always a great rejoicing matter in the family. As a result of this situation, majority of

Afghan families were paying great attention on how to raise their sons compared to their daughters (Barakat and Wardell, 2001).

Taking education which is one of the fundamental rights into consideration, families spent great amounts of money on educating boys, and even they have been sent abroad for further studies. But educating girls except in rich families, was and is still not a priority among majority of people in rural areas; besides some families dismiss their girl's since they will be no longer responsible for seeing to their needs. Instead of sending them to school, families mainly encourage their daughters on how to cook, to sew and weave, to raise children, to become good listeners, be tolerant, stay at home and do the household chores. Girls from ages of 13 and 16 were married off to a very old men in exchange to what is called Toyana⁵. Girls could not question their engagement or choose their husbands. They engage and marry a man chosen by their parents. Because of early marriages, women became weak in physical and psychological ways. Many young mothers due to physiological reasons and early motherhood lost their lives during delivery. In case of need, divorce was a difficult act for women because they had no right to ask for it, however, it was easy if a man demanded it. When their economic position was taken into consideration, women were not supposed to earn a living or own more than men did.

Legally, daughters can take only half of the amount taken by sons of the family from inheritance, however more often than not, due to socio-cultural issues women would leave their share to their brothers (Rahimi, 1991). Beside inheritance, their earning a living was considered to be a reflection on the husband as the main source of women's property called Mahr⁶. A Woman claims Mahr only when she seeks divorce if her husband is proven to be impotent according to Islamic laws or he has an incurable disease (Mahbooba, 1986). Additionally, on all social, economic, and political occasions women always remained separated due to country's society being referred as one of the South and East Asian countries' as "patriarchal belt". The particular tradition of segregation, generated from patriarchy in this belt, locally known as Purdah. As Kakar (1979), also confirms that the Purdah is much more experienced in Afghanistan. Due to this reason, the daily interaction of both sexes was shaped by Purdah through behavioral rules, which includes restriction of any contact between men and women, veiling women to hide their faces from men by calling them Namahram⁷ (Kakar, 1979). This code as a result, restricts women's role to private domestic spheres and men to the public, by bringing the issue of gender roles into existence (Hamdan, 2005; Augustin et.al. 2012).

The Three Decades of Conflicts

The second other major factor that worsened Afghan women's situation both in society and economy as a whole to participate in labor force is that Afghanistan has been in political and military conflicts for more than thirty

years. This reality has not only left the country with serious economic, social and political challenges, but it has also weakened human capital capacities for different ethnic groups of men, women, the young, the old as well as different regions of the country. Moreover, years of ongoing conflicts, along with internal displacement and exile, have altered many aspects of lives both for men and women, who have all experienced and navigated many challenges and exclusions in distinctive ways. However, women are the most affected victims who have experienced significant challenges and have been victimized by different factors and subjugation almost in all spheres of life first by Mujahideen's, then by the Taliban's regime. However, worth noting is the fact that women modernization period of change was started first by the Amanullah Khan after defeating the British in 1919. He was the only king, who prioritize women's issue to liberate them from tribal cultural norms by encouraging them to get education, and fought against the veil and polygamy (Ahmed Gosh, 2003). Additionally, in his public functions, he announced that Islam does not force women to cover themselves with any special kind of veil. Queen Soraya, the king's wife as a result of his statement tore off her veil in public and the wives of other officials present at the meeting followed this example. To encourage women to participate in the outside world, Queen Soraya founded the first magazine called *Ershad-I-Niswan* (Guidance for Women). Following her example, other women from the king's family as examples publicly participated to become government officials later in that period. Women participated to get education, 15 young women as a result of these attempts had been sent to Turkey for higher education by 1928. The queen continued enforcing change for women as an example, she delivered a speech in 1926 at the 7th anniversary of Independence saying, "it's the day we have to all celebrate because men are not the only ones who serve the nation, we women need to contribute toward the development of our nation, to do so we have to gain as much knowledge as possible in order to render our services to society" (Dupree, 1986: 46). The second era of change was during Soviet era. Afghan women studied and worked as professors, engineers, doctors, and nurses in this period. This was especially true in urban Afghanistan since 1940's, however, economic as well as social freedom of women in rural areas was entirely limited due to religious and tribal leaders' vehement opposition

As of 1950s, women started to become teachers, doctors, entertainers, and government workers. In fact, through to 1990, as World Development Index also confirms, women represented 34% of the country's formal labor force participation and in 1996, 50% of the civil servants were women (Malikyar, 1998). But, the position of women changed under the Taliban's rule from 1996 until 2001. During Taliban's period girls and women were strictly curtailed of receiving education and working outside their homes (other than health sector, but could only treat female patients) due to their Sharia Law⁸. These laws negatively affected social and economic positions of women and girls

especially in areas under the Taliban full control. During this period, women were forbidden to access all other activities except their own businesses from their homes. Women could travel only when they were accompanied by a male escort. This rule put female-headed households and widows in difficult position (Barakat and Wardell, 2001). Ahmad-Gosh based on this regard states, that “It was women who suffered more than any other social group, first under Mujahedeen’s and later under the Taliban’s regime” (Ahmad-Gosh, 2003: 1).

He further points out, that the most audacious reforms and progress made on women’s political, social and economic participation were during the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan in 1979-1992. However, since the overthrow of the Taliban and the emergence of new government in 2001, women’s position has been improved. Though Afghan women had a long way to catch up and it was hard to strengthen their participation in all walks of life due to years of instability, their participation begun with thousands of young girls’ school enrolment almost in every part of the country. The literacy rate of women aged 15-24 increased to 22.2% during 2010/2011 period (Massouda Jalal, 2014). According to the 2009 Survey of the Central Statistics Organizations (CSO), women’s employment rate in the government is faster. Since then women regained their basic rights and continued to be employed in a variety of jobs, for example police and soldier, because a military training academy was established by the help of British officers to train 100 female army officers per year (CSO, 2012). Certain laws such as, The Elimination of Discrimination against Women for the first time in many years were introduced by issuing solidarity and support statement for Afghan women, to equally take part for the development and reconstruction of their country (UN, 2002). Despite all these changes, social norms and culture still prevents participation of women in all activities most importantly in economic issues.

In summary, the currently available literature has been more related to the participation of women in politics and a very few articles talked in general about women participation in the economy on a broad perspective. However, this literature does not specifically mention the effect of individual factors or individual cultural factors on the employability of women in the country. Therefore, this study attempts to bridge this gap in literature by taking into consideration specific cultural factors and assessing their effect on female labor force participation. Due to the quantitative nature of the determinants mentioned the questions presented in our questionnaires are also of quantitative nature. Thus, after analyzing the data collected from the survey we will try to see which factors from our determinants are most likely to affect the decision to enter the labor market. It’s important to note that only qualitative factors used may not be able to give the actual picture of why the FLFP is very low without taking into consideration other factors of quantitative nature. This

remains on avenue to be explore through further research in the methodology section.

Methodology

Data Collection and Sources

Types of the Data

The study, used two types of data, the first type of data (primary data) is obtained from Afghan women through a survey, and the secondary data has been collected from the World Bank metadata which is one of the most credible sources of economic data. From the existing information, the subject of this study continues to be valid for Afghanistan, due to the lack of data and literature. For this reason, the mixture of both primary and secondary data at the same time the information gathered across Afghanistan allowed us to gain closer insights for better analyzing women's situation in labor market as a whole. The secondary data sourced from the World Bank further evaluates Afghan women's participation in economy since the emergence of new government in 2001, wherein the position of women in all spheres of life has begun to improve after three decades of conflicts as mentioned in the determinants as a second major factor. Due to this reason, to analyze the position of women both in society and economy as a whole this study firstly, goes through a survey questionnaire, to which participants were Afghan women, secondly through secondary data to better have an idea of whether cultural factors prevent women in this country from participating in the world labor market.

Research Questions and Assumptions

In addition to the questions we attempt to answer, we also attempt to verify some assumptions that are generally made about the labor market position of women. The questions and assumptions answered by this research are as follows in their order of relevance to the study:

Question 1: Do socio-cultural norms affect the free participation of women in the labor market in Afghanistan?

Question 2: Do demographic factors such as marital status affect the employability of women in Afghanistan?

Question 3: Does education/qualification increase the likelihood of women in the labor market?

Assumption 1: Lack of commensurate employment opportunities is one of the main factors why women are not employed.

Assumption 2: Conservative socio-cultural attitudes affect FLFP of married women compared to single ones.

Assumption 3: Gender segregation is still very high whereby women are mostly restricted to domestic work while men are participating in the formal labor market.

Sample and Descriptive Statistics

Since this study is concerned with women, we are only interested in choices made by women to join the labor market by excluding males and their attitudes to influence FLFP. The target of our sample was 300 responses and from the 300 requests; we got 260 responses. Our method was random sampling based on social media platform being the main sharing technique. Though a larger sample was preferable for this study to give a clearer picture, due to the scope of the issue, the limitations of time and accessibility to internet to some participant in remote locations, made the data obtained herein just sufficient enough to be able to present a generalized overview of all women either employed or unemployed in Afghanistan. A larger sample and accessibility would have meant a wider range of participants from the country's 34 provinces and had there been equal representation from all these regions the data would have further given us the responses' distribution across the county to explain the changes of ideas as we move from better developed parts of the country to remote location. This area remains an unexploited dimension in the study of FLFP. Statistically oriented studies may answer this dimension. We used descriptive statistics to talk about the types of questions that we expect to get responses to form this method.

To understand better the demographics therein, firstly: we are going to check the percentage of women according to their age. Secondly, we are going to take their marital status and age into consideration to know which age range have the highest rate of married or single respondents. Thereafter, we will look whether the randomly selected educated women are all working or not and then we will look whether education level of the respondent women affects their employability by further analyzing employability and level of education relation. At the same time, we will look at the relationship between their marital status and employment status to further know whether their position of being married affects their employment status or not. Since we will know which age range has the highest number of respondents and whether their education level and marital status affects their employability or not, we will now check if they are employed and if yes in which sectors do they work and what is their type of employment. To know this, we will determine the relationship between their education level, marital status and employment sector in Table 7A. Then we will further go to check the type of employment taking their education level as well as marital status into consideration in Table 6A.

In cases where they are unemployed we need to know their period of unemployment and the reasons behind their unemployment since we are

here to explain the reason then we need to look for the overall main constraining factors that cause women not to participate in formal economic activities. We also attempt to verify whether these constraint factors are only affecting women who are married or do these factors affect single women too. To better understand this we will take a look at the relationship between age, marital status and constraint factors for further information. Once we are done with all the factors set, we now go to look to the reason for the informal work as already discussed in the literature that majority of women in Afghanistan are busy in informal work compared to their male counterparts by only looking at the frequencies in Table 8A. To further explain the survey, let us look to the Tables below:

Table 1: Age range

Age	Frequency	%	Valid %	Cumulative %
15-19	5	1.9	1.9	1.9
20-25	82	31.5	31.5	33.5
26-30	131	50.4	50.4	83.8
31-35	42	16.2	16.2	100.0
Total	260	100.0	100.0	

Sources: Author's calculations from questionnaires described in Appendix A.

The demographic findings in Table 1 represent the descriptive statistics of the survey's 260 respondents, indicating that the highest percentage of women who participated are between the ages of 26 to 30. In order to know which of the following age groups have the highest rate in terms of either being married or single respondents, Table 2 further guide us to the marital status of the following four age groups.

Table 2: Age range by Marital Status

Age range		Marital status		Total
		Married	Single	
15-19	Count	1	4	5
	% within Age range	20.0	80.0	100.0
20-25	Count	18	64	82
	% within Age range	22.0	78.0	100.0
26-30	Count	47	84	131
	% within Age range	35.9	64.1	100.0
31-35	Count	19	23	42
	% within Age range	45.2	54.8	100.0
Total	Count	85	175	260
	% within Age range	32.7	67.3	100.0

Sources: Author's calculations from questionnaires described in Appendix A.

As seen in Table 2, out of the 260 participants and from the highest respondents who were between the ages of 26 to 30, 64% of them were single at the same time the same age groups have the highest rate of married women which is 55,3% of all the married women. This means, the

majority of respondent women in this study were single and falling in the 26 to 30 age range. Since we know which age group has the highest level of respondents and how many of the above age groups are married and single, now we will go through to analyze whether single or married women are joining the labor market in Table 3.

Table 3: Employment by Marital Status

Marital status		Employment status		Total
		No	Yes	
Married	Count	54	31	85
	% within Marital status	63.5	36.5	100.0
Single	Count	8	167	175
	% within Marital status	4.6	95.4	100.0
Total	Count	62	198	260
	% within Marital status	23.8	76.2	100.0

Sources: Author's calculations from questionnaires described in Appendix A.

The findings in Table 3 show that out of 260 participants, 95.4% of the single women were working in formal private and public sectors. While 63.5% of married women are currently not working. We will further go through on the period and reason for married women's unemployment in Table 4.

Table 4: Marital status Period of Unemployment

Period of unemployment		Marital status		Total
		Married	Single	
Less than one year	Count	8	0	8
	% within Period of unemployment	100.0	0.0	100.0
1 to 2 years	Count	12	3	15
	% within Period of unemployment	80.0	20.0	100.0
More than three years	Count	32	5	37
	% within Period of unemployment	86.5	13.5	100.0
Employed	Count	33	167	200
	% within Period of unemployment	16.5	83.5	100.0
Total	Count	85	175	260
	% within Period of unemployment	32.7	67.3	100.0
Reason of unemployment		Married	Single	Total
Conservatism		12	3	15
Social norms and beliefs		32	5	37
Lack of education		8	0	8
Total		52	8	60

Sources: Author's calculations from questionnaires described in Appendix A.

Furthermore, Table 4 shows women's marital status and the relationship between their period as well as the reason behind their unemployment. From the calculation in the table below among 32.7% unemployed married women 61.5% is unemployed for more than three years, 23.1% of them are unemployed for 1 to 2 years and 15.4% of them are unemployed for less than one year. If we compare both married and single woman's period of unemployment, we can see married women lack far behind single women and the reason behind their unemployment as shown in the Table 4 are due to social norms, conservatism and lack of education/qualification. Since we know what reason do hinder the majority of women particularly married women to enter the formal labor market, we are going to analyze what are the main constraints factors which keep both single and married women away from social as well as economic activities in Table 5.

Table 5: The Main Constraint Factors

	Frequency	%	Valid %	Cumulative %
Customs and traditions	65	25.0	25.0	25.0
Lack of knowledge/skills	56	21.5	21.5	46.5
Other	40	15.4	15.4	61.9
Social norms and religion	99	38.1	38.1	100.0
Total	260	100.0	100.0	

Sources: Author's calculations from questionnaires described in Appendix A.

We can see the majority of the respondents have given social norms as well as customs and traditions as the main factors in comparison to the other two factors in Table 5. This means, women even face difficulty to get an education first due to these factors. Secondly, even when they are educated also they will face challenges to try and work outside their homes.

To summarize, the descriptive presented in the Tables above and below indicate that the respondent's highest percentage age range was between the ages of 26 to 30. When we looked at the respondents' employment, marital status and the sectors which they work more within, we can see that single women are mostly the ones who are joining the labor market. But when looked based on their education level, university graduate women between the ages of 26 to 30 were mostly employed in the industry sector. However, the higher percentage of married women are unemployed as we did find out from our data the majority of them have been unemployed more than three years due to social norms as well as conservative ideas. When the main constraint factors were taken into consideration, majority of respondents marked social as well as customs and traditional norms as some of the main determinants affecting both their social and economic activities as a whole. As discussed in the determinants also that majority of women if not in urban areas in the other parts of the country are occupied with jobs in the informal employment sector. To extend this idea, we have also looked for the reasons behind women's informal sector employment as well. The low-

wage and low-quality jobs compared to male workers were the main obstacles and lack of jobs/gender issues as the second main challenge which push women to be in informal employment.

Results

The result of the study by analyzing the questionnaire responses as well as the secondary data from the World Bank led us to the identification of important themes. The following identified themes are: barriers against women entering the job market, obstacles faced by married educated women and the reason behind their unemployment, lower wages and lower quality jobs and lack of jobs/gender issues with certain other reasons behind majority of women's participation in informal work in Afghanistan. Taking these themes as well as women's situation mentioned on the determinants into consideration the result of the study is based on the above mentioned main research and other cornerstones questions answer and assumptions. Therefore, as illustrated in the main constraint factors in Table 5, 38.1% of both single and married women believe that social norms among three more factors as one of the main challenge affects their participation. Thus, in response to our main research question "Does socio-cultural norms affect the free participation of women in the labor market in Afghanistan?" 38% of the respondents marked social norms as one of the main factor affecting their positions on and entrance to the labor market. This means our findings based on the survey conducted among both employed and unemployed educated women states that social norm among other factors mainly affects women's work and their choice to enter the labor market.

As it was mentioned in the determinants, as well as among 31% of the higher educated married respondents in the survey majority states that unemployment is another main factor that prevents particularly married women to enter the world of market. But when asked for their period of unemployment as in Table 4, majority of them were unemployed for more than three years. Social norms and beliefs is the first and conservatism is the second main reason for not to enter the job market. As the representative of the National Workers Union of Afghanistan, also confirmed that around 70% of the workforce in Afghanistan is currently unemployed. Despite some improvements in the past ten years, the unemployment situation of the country has not been reduced. As deputy chairman of NUWA in 2010 further states that "Afghanistan's labor laws do not meet international standards, and the government has been unable to begin solving the unemployment problems in the country" (State of employment in Afghanistan, 2012:27). Although unemployment is one of the main concerns of the country, 95% of the single educated respondent women who consist of the majority of the employed participants, do not see high unemployment rate as a major problem while married women do. The responses of married woman to our second question 'Do demographic

factors such as marital status affect the employability of FLFP?’ And second assumption, ‘Conservative socio-cultural attitudes affect FLFP of married women compared to single ones’, we can say that marital status of women as well as the conservative socio-cultural norms affect their employability. Lack of jobs/gender issues as marked by 26.5% of both married and single educated participants is another barrier that limits women’s participation in the job market. As stated in the FLFP in Afghanistan from an evidence in 2015 survey also that 80% of Afghan women insisted they should be allowed to work outside their home. Furthermore, the survey confirms that since 2012 women have been stated that, lack of job opportunities is a major reason preventing women to join the labor market. However, lack of job opportunities is a result of the country’s primary economic reconstruction. Unemployment has been stated as one of the main obstacle as discussed above also, while in addition to unemployment there is believed to be a sharp rise of about 400,000 youths joining the labor market per year due to this reason the scarcity of job opportunities, leads to men being employed first and women are often the ones who are left out of the labor market. Thus, we can confirm our assumption based on our findings from our survey respondents as well as the other sources that, ‘Lack of commensurate employment opportunities is one of the main factors why women are not employed’.

The confirmation of this assumption furtherly guides us to the gender segregation, one of the other main major reason marked by 33.8% both educated single and married women who select the low-wage and low-quality jobs compared to men workers as the other main barrier to enter the job market. As National Youth Policy of Afghanistan also confirms that, women have fewer work opportunities than men which is evidenced by Afghanistan’s employment ratio of 80% males to 16% females (Afghanistan National Youth Policy, 2014). This means that the scarcity of job opportunities stated above is due to economic infrastructure which leads men to be employed and women to be unemployed furthermore lead women to be in informal works. As was stated in the determinants also that women, particularly among rural married ones, are primarily involved in unskilled home-based income generating activities. Due to this reason, women in Afghanistan comprise 65% of the agricultural workforce and that majority of poorer as well as married women in rural areas tend to be more involved in these tasks (Simmons-Benton et. al., 2012). As a result, according to our finding the survey indicates that among 31% married women 17.6% of the respondents which is the highest rate are currently busy in the agriculture sector. This means that we can confirm our assumption of ‘Gender segregation is still very high whereby women are mostly restricted to informal work while men are participating in the formal labor market’. However, lack of education is one the other widespread national concern particularly for women that has been witnessed a number of ups and downs throughout the history of Afghanistan due to three decades of ongoing conflicts.

As stated in the determinants also that the position of girls and women particularly in Taliban's period, were strictly curtailed of receiving education and many other activities even accessing healthcare delivered by men was restricted due to Taliban's Sharia Law. It was during Taliban where female education fell to 0% while this rate increased with the emergence of the new government with the thousands of young girls' education almost in all over the country to 22.2% in 2010/2011 period (Massouda Jalal, 2014). Although education is one of the successful achievements of the new government as mentioned in the determinants, infrastructural development and reaching to adequate public service is in demand especially in rural areas where women still suffer from lack of education. Although the lack of education is a major concern for many Afghans, all the respondents of our survey both single and married are educated and they are working in different sectors. Particularly this case is true for single educated women where majority of them as per their answers to our survey question which is 34.9% are busy working in service sector and the second rate can be seen in agriculture which is 32.0% and the third rate among single educated women can be seen in industry sector which is 28.6%. Due to this reason, participants in this study do not see education as one of their barrier problems to enter the job market. Which these, in turn, guide us to our third question 'Does the level of education/qualification increase the likelihood of women in the labor market?'. Furtherly with our secondary data from the Global Economy as discussed in FLFP in Afghanistan topic also that FLFP of women in Afghanistan has increased since the emergence of the new government from 14.82% in 2001 to 20% in 2018 as a result of improvement in education that leads them increasingly to participate in the job market. As Dima Dabbous-Sensenig, a professor at the Lebanese American University based on this regard said that "The more women are highly educated, the more they become motivated and get good jobs especially those who are young, which they did not have this option thirty years ago" (Davies, C & CNN, 2012). Thus, as a result of both theoretical as well as undertaken practical survey participants' responses received from the overall participants with the secondary data, we can conclude that education as one of the main key factors play an important role to provide skilled qualifications and occupational goals in order to induce women to seek employment to increase their empowerment.

Conclusion

This study was mainly conducted to examine whether socio-cultural factors affect women's free employability in Afghanistan's labor market. Though there has been some improvement as mentioned above, these changes and improvements are limited to cities and most urban areas as our survey respondents also confirmed most of the rural areas lack the changes which

have been taken place lately in the country. Though the aim of this study was to cover both women living in rural and urban areas to evaluate the effect of culture on overall women in Afghanistan's labor market participation were compared to other South Asian countries have the lowest number of FLFP. But due to the constraint of access to the internet, women from urban areas, regardless their marital or education status were the main respondents to our survey thus forming an urban-centric view instead of our intended country wide scope. From the target sample of 300 we obtained a remarkable 86% response rate. These responses may be not enough to represent the position of all women either employed or unemployed in Afghanistan but it's relatively adequate to glimpse on women's situation in labor market.

Taking participants level of education into consideration we can see that the majority of them were educated and busy in sectors such as service as well as industry. However this conclusion holds true for mainly single educated women, a majority of whom were employed. The inverse is true for married women as most of them marked social norms as well as conservatism as the main obstacles to their employability in cases where the respondents have been unemployed for more than three years. This finding shows that the marital status of women to a greater extent affects women's labor market participation in Afghanistan's labor market. Our survey thus affirms the assumptions formulated based on the secondary data sourced from the World Bank, confirming that socio-cultural norms when analyzed with four main determinants do significantly affect the employability of women in Afghanistan's labor market.

We can therefore conclude that for FLFP to further increase in the country focusing on improving education facilities for women may not be enough alone especially in the short run as cultural norms aren't easy to change in short periods. Rather, more emancipation campaigns appealing to both men and women especially the young generation on the possible benefits of an increased participation of women on the labor market have to be organized. Furthermore, encouraging families, especially men, and young women to marry relatively later than the current average age of 16-18 will go a long way in increasing the FLFP well as giving the much required work experience for women who may want to work at a later stage after marrying. As has been seen in most developing countries, government legislation is a more effective tool when it comes to changing cultural norms and as such we recommend that a more active approach is required from lawmakers in Afghanistan to improve the participation of women on the labor market for example through giving quotas for women to be employed in all institutions and that too in positions of significant influence according to their qualifications. Despite all these results, it should be kept in mind that numerical data are not enough to measure the impact of cultural norms on the labor market.

Notes

- ¹ The three decades of conflict goes back to the Soviet occupation (1979-1989), tribal civil wars (1990-1996), and rule of the Taliban (1996-2001).
- ² Freedom fighters fought against the Soviet occupation. They were supported by the USA, Iran, and Pakistan.
- ³ Taliban is a group of terrorist led by Osama Bin Laden, a Saudi born militant.
- ⁴ Sharia law is the body of Islamic law, which provides the legal framework for public and private aspects of life, including politics, economics, banking, business law, contract law, security and social issues.
- ⁵ Toyana is the name given to marriage price in Afghanistan.
- ⁶ Mahr is the amount of money assigned to a wife by her husband at the time of the marriage contract.
- ⁷ Men that women are not allowed to interact with.
- ⁸ Sharia law is the body of Islamic law, which provides the legal framework for private and public rules of life, including economics, politics, banking, contract law, business law, security and social issues.

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APPENDIX A**Survey Questionnaire**

1. Which age range do you fall within?
 - 15-19
 - 20-25
 - 26-30
 - 31-35
2. What is your relationship status?
 - Married
 - Single
3. What is your level of education?
 - Secondary level
 - Vocational training
 - Graduate level
 - Graduate degree
4. Are you currently employed?
 - Yes
 - No
5. If yes, what type of employment?
 - Full time
 - Part time
6. Which sector do you work within?
 - Service sector
 - Industry sector
 - Agriculture sector
7. If no, how long have you been unemployed?
 - Less than one year
 - 1 to 2 years
 - More than three years
8. What you think constrains women from entering the labor force?
 - Social norms and beliefs
 - Conservatism
 - Lack of education
9. What are the main constraining factors affecting women's labor force participation?
 - Customs and traditions
 - Lack of knowledge/skills
 - Social norms and religion
 - Other
10. What reason do persist women to join informal work?
 - Lack of education/skills
 - Lack of jobs/gender issues
 - Low-wage and low-quality jobs compared to men
 - Three of the above

APPENDIX B: Additional Tables

Table A6: Employment by Education Level and Marital Status

Education level			Employment status		Total
			No	Yes	
Secondary level	Married	Count	4	2	6
		% within Marital status	66.7	33.3	100.0
	Single	Count	0	14	14
		% within Marital status	0.0	100.0	100.0
	Total	Count	4	16	20
		% within Marital status	20.0	80.0	100.0
Vocational training	Married	Count	14	14	28
		% within Marital status	50.0	50.0	100.0
	Single	Count	2	44	46
		% within Marital status	4.3	95.7	100.0
	Total	Count	16	58	74
		% within Marital status	21.6	78.4	100.0
University degree	Married	Count	26	7	33
		% within Marital status	78.8	21.2	100.0
	Single	Count	3	76	79
		% within Marital status	3.8	96.2	100.0
	Total	Count	29	83	112
		% within Marital status	25.9	74.1	100.0
Graduate degree	Married	Count	10	8	18
		% within Marital status	55.6	44.4%	100.0
	Single	Count	3	33	36
		% within Marital status	8.3	91.7	100.0
	Total	Count	13	41	54
		% within Marital status	24.1	75.9	100.0
Total	Married	Count	54	31	85
		% within Marital status	63.5	36.5	100.0
	Single	Count	8	167	175
		% within Marital status	4.6	95.4	100.0
	Total	Count	62	198	260
		% within Marital status	23.8	76.2	100.0

Sources: Author's calculations from questionnaires' described in Appendix A.

Table A7: Employment by Education Level and Economic Sectors

Education level		Employment by sectors				Total
		Service	Industry	Agriculture	Na	
Secondary level	Count	8	1	7	4	20
	% within Education	40.0	5.0	35.0	20.0	100.0
Vocational training	Count	24	5	30	15	74
	% within Education	32.4	6.8	40.5	20.3	100.0
University degree	Count	29	34	20	29	112
	% within Education	25.9	30.4	17.9	25.9	100.0
Graduate degree	Count	12	15	14	13	54
	% within Education	22.2	27.8	25.9	24.1	100.0
Total	Count	73	55	71	61	260
	% within Education	28.1	21.2	27.3	23.5	100.0

Sources: Author's calculations from questionnaires' described in Appendix A.

Table A8: Reason for Informal Employment

	Frequency	%	Valid %	Cumulative %
Lack of education/skills	50	19.2	19.2	19.2
Lack of jobs/gender issues	69	26.5	26.5	45.8
Low-wage and low-quality jobs compared to men	88	33.8	33.8	79.6
Three of the above	53	20.4	20.4	100.0

Sources: Author's calculations from questionnaires' described in Appendix A.