

Paths to Resilience and Success: The Role of Male Support in the Professional Growth of Female Teachers in Afghanistan

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Sadiyah Ehsan Fjellrik*

University of Oslo, Norway

Marte Blikstad-Balas

University of Oslo, Norway

Abstract

Education remains a powerful force for societal transformation and Afghanistan provides a complex context in which to examine its impact—particularly through the experiences of female teachers. This study explores the narratives of twelve Afghan women educators from urban and suburban areas in a western province, focusing on the year following the Taliban’s return to power in 2021. Employing a critical narrative inquiry approach, the research sheds light on the often-overlooked role of male family members in supporting women’s educational and professional lives. Grounded in Freire’s critical pedagogy, hooks’s theories of becoming and self-actualization, and Bourdieu’s concept of social capital, the study identifies four key themes: (1) the role of male support in the professional development of female teachers; (2) advocacy beyond the classroom; (3) deep cultural and religious grounding; and (4) resistance and resilience. Central to the study is the nuanced concept of male support, which participants defined as engaging in meaningful dialogue, affirming women’s choices, encouraging their societal contributions, or simply listening openly. Participants—ranging in age from their mid-20s to late 60s—described how male relatives challenged social expectations to protect and promote their educational and professional goals. While these men often acted as allies, the study also critically examines how such support may inadvertently reinforce patriarchal norms. These findings

* Corresponding author:

Dr. Sadiyah Ehsan Fjellrik

Guest Researcher, Faculty of Educational Sciences, University of Oslo, Norway

Email: sadiyah.e.fjellrik@outlook.com, ss2872@nau.edu ; Phone: +47 40479969

Address: Arråsvingen 9, 404, 2007 Kjeller, Norway

contribute to the growing body of scholarship on education in conflict zones and offer important implications for gender-sensitive education policy, teacher training, and advocacy efforts in Afghanistan and similar contexts.

Keywords

Afghan women, female teachers, social capital theory, male allies, critical narrative inquiry, self-actualization, critical consciousness

Introduction

On August 15, 2021, the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan—supported for two decades by the international community—fell to the Taliban, reversing significant societal progress, particularly for women. Under the newly established Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, women were once again barred from education, employment, and leadership roles, mirroring the Taliban’s previous regime (1996–2001), during which women were virtually erased from public life. Despite initial promises that women’s rights would be respected under Sharia law, three years later, girls and women remain excluded from secondary schools and universities and are largely prohibited from professional and leadership roles. Only a limited group of women—primarily primary school teachers, healthcare workers, and airport staff—are permitted to continue working.

The women of Afghanistan are currently facing severe restrictions imposed by the Taliban government, a regime intent on systematically erasing their presence from the social sphere. Under the oppressive rule of the Taliban, Afghan women are subjected to profound sociopolitical and psychological pressures that aim to strip them of their rights, autonomy, and identity. Activists and international observers have increasingly labelled this state of affairs *gender apartheid*, underscoring the deliberate and institutionalized nature of the discrimination and oppression that Afghan women endure daily. It is important to acknowledge that the plight of Afghan women is not new. Historically, regardless of the governing authority, Afghan women have been subjected to entrenched injustices and

systemic oppression, perpetuated by a deeply patriarchal society that has consistently undermined their roles and contributions (Fjellrik 2023). Patriarchy has long been a dominant force in Afghan society, relegating women to subordinate positions and restricting their access to education, employment, and political participation.

The two decades prior to the Taliban's return saw meaningful gains. Afghan women made significant strides in empowerment and societal participation. With increased access to education, leadership roles, and public life, many women began to claim spaces that had long been denied to them. Female teachers, activists, politicians, and entrepreneurs emerged as key contributors to Afghanistan's social and economic development. However, this hard-won progress is now being systematically dismantled under the Taliban regime, which seeks to push women back to the margins of society and silence the voices and contributions of half the population. In light of these developments, it is crucial to document and examine the roles and lived experiences of female teachers within the current Afghan context. The stories of Afghan women—particularly the educators in this study—centre not solely on oppression, but on resilience, negotiation, and transformation.

While the dominant narrative—rightfully so—highlights Afghan men as key enforcers of patriarchal oppression, it is equally important to examine the role of male allies who have supported and empowered women within these constraints. Focusing solely on oppression risks overlooking the complexities of gender dynamics and the nuanced ways in which some men act as enablers of women's growth. In deeply patriarchal societies like Afghanistan, where male authority dictates social norms, the support of fathers, brothers, and husbands can be a crucial factor in a woman's access to education, employment, and personal agency (Fjellrik 2023). Recognizing these men's roles does not diminish the reality of systemic gender-based discrimination, but rather adds depth to the discussion, shedding light on the potential for change from within these structures.

By highlighting male advocacy, this research challenges a monolithic portrayal of Afghan men and acknowledges the existence of internal resistance to oppressive norms. It also provides insight into how women navigate restrictive environments by leveraging familial relationships to create opportunities for themselves. In many cases, male support does not equate to complete liberation, but rather negotiated agency within existing constraints. Understanding this dynamic is essential to shaping policies and interventions that engage male allies as partners in the fight for gender equality, rather than positioning them solely as obstacles.

Furthermore, documenting the role of supportive male figures provides a more comprehensive view of how social change occurs, even under the most repressive regimes. While legal and institutional barriers may restrict women's rights, individual and familial support can serve as an essential counterforce, fostering resilience and long-term transformation. By bringing these narratives to light, this study contributes to a more holistic understanding of gender relations in Afghanistan and offers a foundation for future efforts to strengthen solidarity between men and women in the pursuit of educational and professional equity.

This paper explores the significance of male support in the narratives of twelve female teachers in one Afghan province who navigated personal and professional growth during the Republic and now face new challenges under the Taliban. Central to these stories is the role of supportive male figures—fathers, husbands, brothers, and mentors—who, through acts of solidarity, helped these women strive toward their aspirations.

This study examines the complex and often-overlooked role of male family support in the personal and professional trajectories of Afghan women, specifically female teachers. By exploring their narratives, the research aims to highlight how male relatives and allies have contributed to women's success, while also interrogating the extent to which such support may simultaneously reinforce traditional gender norms. The study is guided by the following

research questions: 1) What roles do male family and community members play in supporting the self-actualization and professional growth of Afghan female teachers? and 2) How do Afghan female teachers define and interpret male family support in the context of their personal and professional lives?

To frame these narratives, this study draws on bell hooks (1999)'s concept of *becoming*, which captures the ongoing processes of self-actualization amid marginalization; Pierre Bourdieu (1986)'s social capital theory, which underscores the importance of networks and relationships in achieving individual and collective goals; and Paulo Freire (1970)'s critical consciousness, which entails questioning the status quo and unjust power dynamics for social transformation. By examining the interplay between these frameworks, the study reveals how male support served as a form of social capital that facilitated these women's pursuit of education and professional success while contributing to the perpetuation of gender norms.

Studies on Male Allyship and Gender Dynamics in Women's Educational Careers in Afghanistan and Beyond

Afghanistan's educational landscape for women has been shaped by decades of socio-political upheaval, entrenched patriarchal norms, and intermittent foreign intervention (Baiza 2013). Female teachers, in particular, face not only systemic barriers within the education sector but also limitations arising from societal expectations and institutional restrictions (Kirk 2008; Samady 2001). Scholars have documented how the intersection of patriarchy and insecurity creates a deeply gendered professional environment in which women often rely on male gatekeepers—whether family members or institutional authorities—for career advancement (Human Rights Watch 2017; Jackson 2011). While global attention has largely focused on structural oppression, there is limited research examining the nuanced and potentially transformative role of Afghan men as supporters of women's professional trajectories, particularly in the teaching profession.

Evidence from broader South Asian and Middle Eastern contexts suggests that male involvement in gender equity initiatives can either reinforce patriarchal control or contribute to progressive social change, depending on intent and execution (Cornwall 2000; Levtoev et al. 2014). In Bangladesh, for example, gender-transformative initiatives such as World Vision's *MenCare* project demonstrate that men, when positioned as allies rather than saviours, can contribute to women's autonomy, reduce domestic violence, and support shared caregiving responsibilities (World Vision 2023). Similarly, the *MenEngage Alliance* across South Asia—including Pakistan, India, and Nepal—promotes feminist-oriented masculinities through advocacy and educational programs (MenEngage Alliance 2022).

Findings from the International Men and Gender Equality Survey (IMAGES 2017) in the Middle East and North Africa, including Egypt, Lebanon, Morocco, and Palestine, reveal that while patriarchal attitudes remain widespread, a notable minority of men support women's social and economic equality—especially when shaped by equitable caregiving experiences or exposure to progressive male role models (UN Women and Promundo 2017). However, other studies caution that male involvement, if not grounded in critical reflection, may inadvertently reproduce existing gender hierarchies. Schuler et al. (2017) report that while some Bangladeshi men become supportive of women's mobility through NGO engagement or education, others resist due to fears of losing male dominance.

Emerging research from Afghanistan underscores the complexity of male allyship in highly patriarchal and volatile contexts. Yousaf and Peacock (2023) highlight how male activists who advocate for women's rights—especially within Islamic frameworks—often face resistance, threats, and even violence from their communities. Nevertheless, those who engage religious leaders and reference Quranic principles have seen gradual shifts in community attitudes, enabling greater acceptance of women's education and professional roles. These findings point to the importance of culturally resonant messaging and relational trust in promoting change.

Critically, male engagement must not be seen as a substitute for women's agency but as part of a shared process of transformation grounded in mutual respect. In both Pakistan and Bangladesh, interventions that frame men as empathetic allies rather than authoritative figures have shown promise in reducing resistance to women's mobility and employment. In Afghanistan—where women's participation in public life is often contingent on male approval (Kabeer 2005)—such insights are particularly salient. Access to teaching positions, professional development, and promotions is frequently mediated by male relatives or supervisors (Kirk, 2008), illustrating both the limitations and potential leverage points within gendered power structures.

Yet, the reliance on male endorsement to access opportunities reveals a deeper tension. Kandiyoti's (1988) concept of "bargaining with patriarchy" illustrates how women in restrictive environments must strategically align with dominant power structures to achieve limited autonomy. While this may yield short-term gains, it rarely disrupts the underlying system. As Abu-Lughod (2002) warns, narratives that position men as liberators risk oversimplifying complex local negotiations and undermining women's lived agency. Within this framework, the support of Afghan men should not be interpreted as liberation itself, but as one mechanism within a contested and evolving landscape of power, resistance, and relational agency.

This study builds on and extends prior research by shifting the analytical focus from structural constraints to relational dynamics—specifically, the roles Afghan men play in enabling or constraining the growth of female teachers. Unlike much of the existing literature, which centres on international development programs or on women's resistance in isolation, this paper explores how male support—when grounded in care, critical pedagogy, and relational ethics—may open alternative pathways for empowerment within patriarchal institutions. In doing so, it contributes to the underexplored intersection of gender, education, and allyship in Afghanistan and comparable sociocultural settings.

Method

This study employed a qualitative, interpretive approach to explore the lived experiences of Afghan female teachers and the role of male family support in their personal and professional development. Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews, which allowed participants to reflect on and share detailed narratives of their career trajectories, challenges, and opportunities. This approach emphasized the richness of individual experiences and their interaction with broader structural, social, and cultural factors.

The research was grounded in an interpretivist paradigm, which seeks to understand meaning-making within specific historical and cultural contexts (Crotty 1998). Unlike positivist approaches that assume an objective reality, interpretivism adopts a relativist ontology and an emic epistemology, acknowledging multiple realities and the researcher's embedded role in knowledge construction (Killam 2013). Accordingly, the researcher embraced a subjectivist stance, recognizing that knowledge is co-constructed through dialogue with participants.

Data Collection

Participants were selected through purposive and snowball sampling. Following Patton's (2014) guidelines for purposive sampling, twelve Afghan women high school teachers from public and private institutions—with a minimum of five years' teaching experience—were recruited. Snowball sampling (Coleman 1958; Goodman 1961) enabled the expansion of the participant pool through referrals from initial contacts, ensuring participants met criteria related to age (25+), teaching tenure, and geographic location within Afghanistan.

Given the challenges of accessing women participants in Afghanistan, especially under Taliban rule, the researcher relied on established personal connections with university peers who had become teachers during the Republic era. Following approval from the Institutional Review Board at Northern Arizona University, initial outreach was conducted via secure messaging platforms

(WhatsApp, Telegram, and Viber). All participants were assured confidentiality and anonymity, with pseudonyms used in reporting (see Table 1). Interview data were stored on a password-protected device and deleted following transcription and analysis to ensure participant safety.

Table 1. The Participants' Demographics

Pseudonyms	Age	Work Experience	Subject	Non-Teaching Work Experience
Amina	Mid-30s	12 years	English and computers	Yes
Neela	35	7 years	English and computers	Yes
Lala	Mid-40s	12 years	English and computers	Yes
Romina	41	12 years	English and computers	Yes
Meher	Late 60s	40 years	Chemistry	No
Wazhma	Early 50s	21 years	Religious studies	No
Fatemah	Early 40s	15 years	Social sciences, Quran	No
Azra	Late 50s	21 years	Religious studies	No
Mariam	Early 30s	5 years	Biology, chemistry	Yes
Husna	25	5 years	English	No
Freshta	Early 30s	6 years	Social sciences	No
Mina	Early 30s	7 years	Social Sciences	No

Interviews were conducted online, with participants choosing their preferred platform—most selected WhatsApp. Due to security concerns, verbal consent was obtained at the start of each session in lieu of written consent, which was deemed both impractical and ethically unsafe under current conditions.

Each participant engaged in at least two interview sessions, with the initial discussion guiding subsequent conversations. Interviews were semi-structured (Brinkmann and Kvale 2014), allowing for flexibility while maintaining thematic consistency. Sessions were recorded, transcribed verbatim, and supplemented with researcher notes to enhance contextual interpretation.

Interview questions focused on participants' personal and professional journeys, their motivations for entering the teaching profession, and their perceptions of their societal roles. Topics included their teaching philosophies, the influence of key individuals (particularly male family members), external challenges, and the evolving impact of political events such as the Taliban's return to power. Participants also shared their perspectives on the current state of education, the restrictions imposed on women, and their aspirations for the future.

Data Analysis

The data for this article are drawn from the first author's doctoral dissertation, which examined the broader experiences of Afghan female teachers. A recurring theme across interviews was the significance of male support in their professional development—a topic that remains underexplored in current scholarship. Thematic analysis was conducted on the interview transcripts to identify common patterns and recurring motifs, particularly concerning the role of male family members as enablers or barriers to women's empowerment.

This article focuses specifically on this theme, exploring how male support functions both as a facilitator of women's professional advancement and, at times, as a mechanism that reinforces patriarchal dependencies. The analysis critically examines the dual nature of male advocacy—its potential to foster empowerment within restrictive systems, and its limitations in challenging those systems' structural foundations.

Afghan Women: A Brief History of Progress and Setbacks

The history of women in Afghanistan is marked by cycles of progress and regression, shaped by shifting political regimes, cultural norms, and interpretations of religion. Efforts to empower women began in earnest during the reign of King Amanullah (1919–1929), who was heavily influenced by Turkey’s Atatürk (Baiza 2013). Amanullah introduced constitutional reforms, expanded access to women’s education, and championed gender equality. His wife, Queen Soraya, became a symbol of these reforms—publicly unveiling, founding Afghanistan’s first women’s magazine, and advocating for modern women’s attire. However, these rapid changes triggered a strong backlash from conservative tribal leaders, ultimately leading to Amanullah’s exile in 1929 and a rollback of progressive policies.

A gradual revival of women’s rights emerged during the mid-20th century, particularly under King Zahir Shah (1933–1973). Women increasingly accessed education and entered the workforce, especially in urban centres. Soviet development aid helped support this transformation, enabling women to work in fields such as healthcare and teaching (Emadi 2002). The 1964 constitution marked a further step forward, granting women the right to vote and run for office. Still, deep-seated patriarchal attitudes persisted, especially in rural regions where traditional gender roles remained dominant (Ghobar 2001).

Another significant wave of reform occurred under the Soviet-backed government after 1978. Scholars such as Sokhanwar et al. (2018) argue that this era, following Amanullah’s reforms, was the second most pivotal for Afghan women. During this period, women made up 70% of teachers, 40% of doctors, and 50% of students in the country’s major universities (Baiza 2013). Some historians suggest that women even outnumbered men in certain professional and academic sectors, in part because many men had joined anti-communist militias or were engaged in combat against Soviet forces. However, these dramatic shifts sparked strong resistance from conservative factions, contributing to the rise of the Mujahideen.

When the Mujahideen seized power in 1992, women's rights once again deteriorated.

The situation worsened drastically under the Taliban regime (1996–2001), which imposed one of the most repressive systems for women in modern history. Women were entirely removed from public life—barred from attending school, working, or even leaving their homes without a male escort. They were forced to wear the burqa and prohibited from speaking in public. Any infractions were met with harsh punishments, reflecting the Taliban's strict and punitive interpretation of Sharia law.

After the U.S.-led invasion in 2001 toppled the Taliban, Afghan women—especially those in urban areas—experienced notable progress. Over the next two decades, access to education and employment improved, and women began to re-enter political, social, and economic spheres. By 2019, women held 27% of seats in the Afghan parliament and occupied key leadership positions across various sectors (Allen and Felbab-Brown 2020). Nonetheless, this progress was uneven and often failed to reach rural areas, where traditional gender norms continued to dominate daily life.

Taliban's rapid return to power in August 2021 marked a profound regression in women's rights. Despite initial promises to respect women's rights within an Islamic framework, the regime quickly imposed restrictions: girls' secondary schools were shut down, women were banned from most forms of employment, and their presence in public life was severely curtailed. These measures reversed two decades of hard-won gains and further entrenched gender-based exclusion. While Afghanistan has long been a patriarchal society, the Taliban's rule has intensified the systemic marginalization of women.

Yet, the story of Afghan women is not solely one of oppression—it is also one of resilience, courage, and agency. Despite severe restrictions, many women continue to find ways to resist and adapt, drawing strength from networks of support within their families and communities. Their persistence underscores a deep-rooted desire for

dignity, education, and freedom that has endured through decades of upheaval.

Stories of Male Support in Afghan Women's Educational and Professional Journeys

In-depth interviews with twelve Afghan female teachers revealed narratives of perseverance, resilience, and deep dedication to education despite persistent societal and personal obstacles. A central and recurring theme across their stories was the pivotal role played by supportive male figures—fathers, brothers, husbands, and uncles—whose encouragement, protection, and practical help significantly shaped their educational and professional paths.

For many participants, these male allies were foundational to their success. Supportive fathers and husbands provided emotional reassurance, logistical help, and a sense of safety that enabled the women to pursue their goals confidently. These men created enabling environments where women could thrive—balancing domestic responsibilities and careers, often against the tide of conservative social expectations.

Conversely, in cases where this support was absent—due to death, indifference, or opposition—the women faced greater challenges. They shouldered disproportionate responsibilities, navigated hostile environments alone, and contended with the risk of social stigma or family conflict. Yet, even in these situations, many displayed extraordinary resilience, learning to advocate for themselves and, in some instances, eventually transforming the attitudes of unsupportive male family members.

Mariam, a teacher, recalled the irreplaceable support of her late father:

When I had my father, I was walking on clouds...I knew that if I fall, he will help me stand back on my feet. I knew that I would succeed no matter what I do because he is there with me. I remember he even filled my water bottle every morning and

put it in my backpack before he dropped me off at school... After I lost him, it occurred to me that I am completely alone now, that if I fall, I have to pick myself up, and I have to learn to stand up for myself and persevere regardless of the challenges and hardships of life. That is exactly what I did. I fell, I picked myself up, I failed, and I tried harder the next time. There came a time when I did not have notebooks to write in, and I did not ask my brothers because I feared they will say not to go to school, so I managed somehow by recycling the old notebooks I had. I stayed awake till the early morning hours and studied without any support or motivation from anyone in my family...I also had responsibilities at home, I cooked, cleaned, and washed clothes... Eventually, I even won my brother's approval, who became a major supporter after seeing me succeed despite the odds.

This experience highlights Mariam's resilience and determination in the face of adversity. Despite lacking financial and emotional support, she found ways to continue her education, demonstrating self-reliance and perseverance. Her reluctance to ask her brothers for help reflects the societal barriers that often discourage women's education. However, through hard work and persistence, she not only overcame these challenges but also changed perceptions within her own family. Her success ultimately earned her brother's support, illustrating how individual perseverance can gradually shift societal norms and challenge traditional gender roles.

Mina and Husna were two of the teachers interviewed for this study who had lost their fathers while they were still in school. Although their mothers became their main sources of support — something they both acknowledged wholeheartedly — they did not deny that life had become more difficult without the presence of a male father figure. Husna explained that when her father was alive, she had no worries, and her focus was entirely on her studies and friends. However, after he passed away, she suddenly had to grow up

quickly to support her mother and siblings. Similarly, Mina shared that she began working alongside her mother to help provide for the family. She said: “I think if my father were alive, I would have studied more; I would have pursued a master’s degree in my field. However, I had to start working multiple jobs to support my mother financially.”

Romina, another teacher and co-founder of a women’s non-profit organization, attributed all her success to her husband. She stated: “I was still in high school when I got married, and since we live in a small village outside Herat City, my husband had to drop me off at school every single day and pick me up in the afternoon... After I got admitted to a university, he did the same for four additional years without complaining once. He has always been there for me, and I could not have done anything without him. It is quite hard in our society to be able to do anything without the support of a male figure.”

In the interview, Lala—another co-founder of the same non-profit as Romina—shared that her father, a judge and professor of economics and law at a public university, made education a non-negotiable priority in their household. She explained that everyone in the family was expected to study and read extensively. During the first Taliban regime in the 1990s, her father even hired a tutor to ensure their education continued at home. After marriage, Lala said her husband supported her decision to work. While she occasionally had to persuade him on certain issues, she emphasized that he never imposed his decisions on her.

Meher—a chemistry teacher with over four decades of experience under various Afghan regimes—recalled her school years as a time filled with love, care, and encouragement from both parents. However, she emphasized the pivotal role her father played in motivating and supporting her to pursue education and a career. After his passing, Meher said her brothers continued to stand by her choices, including her decision to remain unmarried. Today, she

continues to teach and lives with her nephews, who, she noted, treat her like their own mother.

Fatemah shared how her eldest brother—who later passed away in Iran—had been her strongest advocate, often clashing with other family members to defend her right to study and work. “He was my only support system,” she said, “and the only one who always listened to me and fought for me.”

Similarly, Mariam described how her brothers, who had initially opposed her education, eventually became her greatest supporters after witnessing her graduate at the top of her high school class. Reflecting on this shift, she said: “Today, my brother is a role model for me because he changed his mindset. When others tried to create problems for me, he stood by my side and told me to keep going and never care about what others say.”

During the interview, Azra shared that she was married at the age of 13. Her in-laws opposed her education and even began to threaten her, leading to two miscarriages within a year. Despite the immense challenges, her husband stood by her side and supported her decisions. With his unwavering encouragement, Azra was able to complete school and pursue a college degree in education. She expressed that everything she has achieved in her life is because of her husband’s support.

Amina also reflected on her journey, explaining that she was one of the first girls among her relatives and friends whose family allowed her to attend college. Although her father and brothers were initially hesitant, they eventually decided to place their trust in her and supported her ambitions. Amina attributes much of her success to them, as well as to one of her maternal uncles, whom she considers her role model due to his constant encouragement and belief in her potential. She said:

My uncle is my role model and someone whose advice I seek even more than my own father. He is an avid supporter of girls’ and women’s active participation in society. Even

though his own daughter struggled in school growing up, he supported and motivated her so much that she graduated with honors in economics. Today, she works for a very reputable organization.

Amina went on to recall one of the most memorable days of her life—the day she took the national university entrance exam. It was a freezing, snow-covered day, and she struggled to find transportation to the examination centre. With no other options, she called her uncle. Despite the harsh weather, he arrived with his old bike and made sure she reached her destination safely. She remains deeply grateful for his kindness and sacrifice on that pivotal day and often reflects on how she would not have the career she has today without his support.

The teachers' stories highlight the dual realities of Afghan women navigating conservative societal structures: on one hand, the empowering force of male family support, and on the other, the burdensome weight of its absence. These male allies—fathers, brothers, husbands, and uncles—served as bridges to opportunity, defenders of dreams, and, in some cases, catalysts for broader cultural shifts. Yet, where support was missing, Afghan women demonstrated remarkable self-reliance, often forging new paths alone and ultimately reshaping the narratives of what women can achieve in Afghan society.

A Theoretical Analysis of Male Support in Afghan Women's Lives

This section provides a critical theoretical analysis of male support in the lives of Afghan female teachers, drawing on the frameworks of Pierre Bourdieu, bell hooks, and Paulo Freire. Bourdieu's concept of social capital illuminates how male relatives can serve as gatekeepers to resources, opportunities, and social legitimacy. bell hooks conceptualizes male support as part of a collective journey toward self-actualization and mutual transformation. Meanwhile, Freire's

emphasis on dialogue and the co-creation of critical consciousness highlights the relational and emancipatory potential of supportive male engagement. Taken together, these perspectives underscore the multifaceted and transformative role of male support—operating simultaneously within structures of empowerment and constraint.

Bourdieu: Men as Social Capital

Bourdieu's concept of social capital highlights the significance of networks and relationships in shaping individual opportunities and pathways to social mobility. In the Afghan context, where patriarchal structures remain deeply entrenched, men frequently control access to key forms of capital—economic, social, and cultural. From Bourdieu's perspective, men, as gatekeepers of these resources, can either reinforce the status quo or serve as allies in advancing women's empowerment. While most of the men in this study played a significant role in the personal and professional success of the twelve female teachers, only some acted as genuine allies who actively facilitated their empowerment.

Amina's story offers a clear example of male allyship. Although she did not need her uncle's permission to attend university or study alongside male classmates, she did require the approval of her parents. Her uncle intervened on her behalf, negotiating with her parents to allow her to pursue higher education. In contrast, several participants depended on their husbands' or brothers' consent to continue their education or enter the workforce. These women consistently expressed deep gratitude to the men who eventually granted their approval.

However, this gratitude often obscures a more troubling reality: the persistence of a power structure in which women must seek male permission to make decisions about their own lives. While the participants felt fortunate to receive support that many others lacked, they frequently overlooked the systemic inequality that makes such permission necessary in the first place.

Bourdieu (1986, 248) defines social capital as “the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition”. For Afghan women, such networks often depend on male relatives or community leaders who can mediate their access to education, employment, and public life. This dynamic emerged clearly in the narratives of the female teachers, who repeatedly emphasized the necessity of male approval at nearly every stage of their professional journey. Whether attending school, pursuing a career, or simply participating in social gatherings, each step involved a process of dialogue, negotiation, and ultimately, the need to obtain permission from a male family member.

Notably, in many cases, the women received the approval they sought. Yet, the necessity of undergoing this process underscored the persistence of gender norms that regulate women’s autonomy. Even when approval was likely or predictable, the requirement to ask reaffirmed the underlying power imbalance by positioning women as dependent on male sanction. While male relatives can use their social capital to challenge restrictive norms and expand women’s opportunities, Bourdieu would remind us that such changes must go beyond individual acts of support. They must confront the deeper symbolic power embedded in patriarchal systems in order to bring about lasting and meaningful transformation.

bell hooks: Men as Partners in Journey Toward Becoming

The concepts of *becoming* and *self-actualization* refer to the continuous process of realizing one’s potential, forming a coherent sense of self, and striving for personal fulfilment (Maslow 1943). For Afghan female teachers, this journey has been marked not only by resilience and determination but also by the pervasive influence of gendered power structures. In many of their households, life decisions—whether related to education, employment, or even social engagement—have been, and often still are, heavily shaped or controlled by male relatives.

Yet, despite these constraints, the teachers exemplify the process of becoming. Each effort to pursue education, build a career, or nurture the next generation represents a meaningful act of self-actualization—even when these achievements occur within the limitations imposed by family or societal expectations. Their ability to move forward, often quietly but persistently, reflects a subtle yet powerful resistance to a system that seeks to curtail their agency.

The process of becoming for Afghan female teachers is fraught with challenges. Constantly having to negotiate decisions can delay or dilute their aspirations, tying their identities and achievements to the approval of others. This highlights the tension between personal potential and the collective norms they must navigate.

Yet, even within these constraints, many find ways to assert a sense of self. Their roles as educators offer not only financial independence but also the power to influence and inspire. By teaching, they challenge societal perceptions of women's capabilities and gradually expand the boundaries of female autonomy. In a context dominated by male decision-making, self-actualization becomes both an act of resistance and a reflection of their inner strength. Their journeys are marked by compromise and courage, as they strive to reconcile personal dreams with societal expectations. As bell hooks (2000) reminds us, becoming is not always about escaping limitations—it is often about growing and thriving in spite of them.

bell hooks emphasizes the importance of involving men in feminist struggles, arguing that dismantling patriarchy benefits everyone. She writes: “The first act of violence that patriarchy demands of males is not violence toward women. Instead, patriarchy demands of all males that they engage in acts of psychic self-mutilation” (hooks 2004, 66). In the Afghan context, this suggests that men who support women's growth are also freeing themselves from the rigid expectations of masculinity imposed by patriarchy.

hooks's concept of love as a transformative force is especially relevant. She defines love as a commitment to nurturing growth and creating spaces rooted in mutual respect and care (hooks 2000).

Afghan men who challenge societal norms by supporting women's education and professional goals embody this ethic of care. By acting as partners rather than oppressors, they help create environments where women can flourish—while also redefining their own roles in society. However, hooks reminds us that men must do this work not as saviours, but as allies who see their liberation as intertwined with that of women.

Freire: Men as Co-creators of Critical Consciousness

Paulo Freire's concept of *conscientização* (critical consciousness) underscores the role of education and dialogue in achieving liberation. For Freire (1970), oppression is sustained by a "culture of silence" that prevents marginalized groups from recognizing and challenging their conditions. Empowering Afghan women, therefore, requires more than access to resources—it demands the development of critical awareness about their rights, roles, and potential. Men, as influential figures in many women's lives, can play a pivotal role in fostering this consciousness.

Freire emphasizes dialogue as a transformative process—one that must be horizontal, grounded in mutual respect, and cantered on the co-creation of knowledge. In the Afghan context, men who engage in genuine dialogue with women—whether as fathers, brothers, teachers, or colleagues—can help dismantle oppressive norms and cultivate critical thinking. Freire (1970, 79) writes: "Liberation is a praxis: the action and reflection of men and women upon their world to transform it". When men reflect on their roles and act as allies in challenging patriarchy, they participate in a collective journey toward emancipation.

The Convergence

The ideas of Bourdieu, bell hooks, and Freire converge in emphasizing that men's support for women's empowerment must go beyond symbolic gestures. Structural change (Bourdieu),

relational transformation (hooks), and critical pedagogy (Freire) are interdependent and mutually reinforcing. In Afghanistan, where tradition and patriarchy shape daily life, meaningful male involvement requires navigating both institutional barriers and personal relationships.

From Bourdieu's perspective, men can leverage their social capital to challenge symbolic violence and promote equitable policies. hooks calls on men to embrace feminist values and recognize that dismantling patriarchy also liberates them. Freire encourages men to engage as co-learners and co-educators, fostering critical consciousness and reimagining gender roles through dialogue and reflection.

Male Allyship and Female Teachers' Agency

The central themes that emerged from this study is the importance of male support within the family. Every teacher interviewed identified a male relative—whether a father, husband, or brother—who played a pivotal role in their journey, often providing essential support when others were resistant to their choices. For some, this support was given unconditionally; for others, it was the result of persistent advocacy and negotiation.

For instance, the four teachers who co-founded the women's non-profit faced initial opposition from their families, especially concerning their work with a non-governmental organization (NGO). Neela's husband, while supportive of her teaching career, objected to her involvement with the NGO. "In our society, especially in Herat, working at an NGO is not considered a dignified job for a woman because it involves working with men," she explained. This illustrates the constraints imposed by traditional gender norms. However, through ongoing dialogue, Neela convinced her husband to support her. Today, she describes him as her strongest ally: "No matter what decisions I take, I know he is there standing next to me."

Similarly, Romina, Amina, and Lala gradually gained their families' support through sustained conversations. Their efforts exemplify Bourdieu's concept of social capital—networks and relationships that provide resources and enable action (Bourdieu 1986). In these cases, the approval of male relatives functioned as critical social capital that allowed the women to pursue their goals despite societal and familial constraints.

Moreover, the teachers' journeys align with hooks's reflections on becoming, which highlight the transformative power of dialogue and agency. hooks (1994) argues that "transformation requires an engagement with self and community," underscoring the importance of challenging oppressive structures through active communication and relational dynamics. The teachers' persistent dialogues with their families allowed them to reshape traditional narratives, demonstrating the integral role of communication in achieving liberation and transformation. Through these experiences, it becomes evident that dialogue and relational negotiation are critical to navigating the intersection of personal agency and structural limitations. As Freire (1978) asserts, engaging in meaningful dialogue where all perspectives are valued and understood is essential for fostering positive change and achieving liberation from oppression. Freire emphasizes that true transformation requires not only the liberation of the oppressed but also the liberation of the oppressors from their entrenched ideologies and oppressive mindsets. This dual liberation ensures that change is sustainable and impactful.

Amina's story illustrates how dialogue can transform relationships. Although her family initially allowed her to join the NGO with reluctance, their views shifted as they witnessed the impact of her work. Over time, she earned their full trust and support through persistent communication. Similarly, Romina shared that her husband, once sceptical, eventually recognized the value of the NGO's projects. As he came to understand the importance of her work, his attitude changed—he not only supported her but also expressed pride in her contributions and their broader social impact.

These experiences reflect Freire's view of dialogue as a path to mutual understanding and transformation. Through open communication, both the oppressed and the oppressors can awaken to the values of justice and equality. This growth also aligns with bell hooks's concept of *becoming*, which emphasizes the ongoing, relational process of personal and social transformation. As hooks (1994) notes, "liberation is a continuous process" that requires active engagement with oneself, others, and existing power structures.

Bourdieu's notion of social capital further illuminates these stories. The trust and support Amina and Romina built within their families functioned as a form of social capital, enabling them to overcome resistance and pursue their goals (Bourdieu 1986). Their persistence in fostering understanding within their personal networks underscores the vital role of relational negotiation in enabling both individual and collective change.

These narratives reveal how trust, dialogue, and shifting perspectives can catalyze transformation. They show that change often begins within personal relationships and can ripple outward to challenge and reshape broader societal norms.

These findings carry several implications for policy and practice in conflict-affected contexts like Afghanistan. First, engaging male family members as potential allies—while continuing to centre women's voices—is essential for the success of education and empowerment programs. Second, teacher training initiatives must account for the social and familial negotiations women face outside the classroom, which directly shape their professional lives. Finally, interventions must move beyond simplistic binaries of oppression versus resistance, recognizing instead the complex, relational dynamics of agency in patriarchal settings. By acknowledging the everyday acts of negotiation, resistance, and support described by these women, future policies and programs can more effectively align with lived realities and foster sustainable, community-based empowerment.

Conclusion

The experiences of the twelve Afghan female teachers in this study reveal the intricate relationship between personal agency, familial dynamics, and structural limitations in contexts marked by systemic oppression. A key element in their journeys was the often-overlooked support of male family members, whose roles evolved through ongoing dialogue, the building of trust, and sustained relational negotiation. These men became pivotal enablers of the women's educational and professional pursuits, challenging the conventional framing of male figures solely as barriers within patriarchal systems.

Drawing on Freire's notion of dialogic liberation, hooks's concept of becoming, and Bourdieu's theory of social capital, the study illustrates how transformative change often originates within the private sphere of the family. Through persistent engagement and communication, the women were able to influence male relatives and subtly reshape gender norms from within. These findings contest reductive narratives about Afghan gender relations and highlight the importance of relational agency in highly restrictive environments. While male allyship served as a vital support mechanism, the broader aspiration remains the cultivation of a society where women's empowerment arises from structural equity rather than conditional permission. This research contributes to feminist discourse on education in conflict zones and underscores the need to further explore how gendered agency is co-constructed within families navigating political repression.

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