

The Challenges of Undergraduate Married Female Students in Higher Education: A case study of Takhar University

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ABSTRACT

The study aimed at investigating the challenges of undergraduate married female students in higher education of Afghanistan. It also explored whether the participants' demographic variables such as class, age and residential areas had any effect on their responses. The study employed a quantitative research design. A survey questionnaire with 29 items was used to collect the data from 100 purposefully selected respondents at Takhar University. The population of the study was undergraduate married female students who were majoring in different fields at Takhar University. 117 copies of questionnaires were administered to the respondents and only 100 useable ones were returned to the researchers. Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS version 25.0) was used in analyzing the data. The study found that Afghan married female students faced different problems during their studies at the university and the challenges had a significant effect on them. It also revealed that there were statistically significant differences in the responses of the students by their class, age and residential areas. The study suggests that educational leaders should develop counselling programs at the universities to tackle the challenges of married female students and involve various stakeholders to improve their achievement.

1. Introduction

The term marriage is used when two people live with each other and have a legal-emotional relationship to form a family. In other words, marriage is a kind of relationship between two individuals who make a commitment to live together (Kefalas et al., 2011). Marriage is an integral part of human necessities for fulfilling the biological, social, sexual and psychological needs of couples (Eskridge, 2014). In Islam, the reasonable need of humans is satisfied when marriage happens at the right time and nurtures men's and women's personal development and peace of mind (Ansari, 2012). According to Islam, marriage is the most important event in the life of every human being which builds an identity and functions as a moral safeguard (Tizro, 2013; Adebayo, 2006). Marriage in Afghanistan follows Islamic traditions and allows couples to live together when they have the requirements.

Students who pursue their higher education face many problems (Zusman, 2005). Many people marry their daughters during their education in developing countries (Bowen, 2005; McQuilan, 2008). In Afghanistan, some of the students are already married before they are admitted to the universities, which creates problems for them and their families because married female students have to have several responsibilities. Married Female students in Afghanistan have to follow their university lectures, attend classes, give seminars, take part in class projects, prepare for the exams, cook at home, take care of their children and the family, do the chores and work to support their life. They are expected to achieve the same grade as unmarried students at Afghan universities and there is no special consideration for them as mothers (Burrige et al., 2016). In most cases, they bear babies during their university time and maintain their responsibilities at home, which affect their achievement at the university.

Unfortunately, poverty and a low level of literacy in society created challenges for female students in Afghanistan. Many Afghan families marry their daughters under the age of 18. According to a 2006 report by the United Nations, an estimated 57% of girls

in Afghanistan were married before the age of 16 which affected their life and created problems for them (Raj et al., 2014). In addition, Afghan girls and women continue to struggle with different discriminations and gender inequalities.

Afghan women experienced a severe situation during the Soviet Union in which millions of them remained uneducated or faced female harassment (Stabile & Kumar, 2005). During the Taliban regime, schools and universities were closed, War and instabilities damaged the education system and infrastructure and education was forbidden for women in Afghanistan (Schulz & Schulz, 1999; Orfan, 2021a). Taliban forced the women to remain at home and precluded them from the public service. They were only allowed to go out of home if they were wearing burqa (Chadori) and their husbands or mahram were accompanying them (Ahmed-Ghosh, 2003). It is very difficult to find reliable statics of women's status during the Taliban regime. According to a report by the UN Refugee Agency, Taliban closed schools and educational institutions for girls and women became the victims of instabilities in Afghanistan. Orfan (2020a) and Orfan et al. (2021) argued that English education was banned during the Taliban and girls were not allowed to go schools.

Since the collapse of Taliban in 2001, Afghanistan has experienced significant progress in terms of gender equality and education. For example, only 5% of the women were reported to be literate (Afghanistan, 2001), while the level of female literacy was reported to be nearly 30% in 2019 (UIL 2020). After the new government, different international and national NGOs have been working to improve education and encourage families to send their children to school. According to UNICEF (2013), children enrolment has increased from one million to 9 million since 2001 39% of which are girls. UNFPA (2012) reported that the overall literacy level of women was only 12% in 2011 and it greatly varies from region to region. The Ministry of Education (2013) reported that 40% of enrolled children in education were girls. However, Shir Mohammad (2018) argued that moving from primary to tertiary level, female enrolment was decreasing because boundaries like early marriage, restricted mobility and family problems hindered them from enrollment to higher education. Roof (2015) stated that one of the core progress after the Taliban is women participation in higher education. Hayward and Karim (2019) studied the challenges and achievements of gender equality in Afghanistan and found that higher education has improved from no women to 28% female enrolment and 14% faculty members in 2017. Even though many efforts were made, gender inequality was not promoted enough and women participation in education, economy and politics is very low (Shayan, 2015; Orfan, 2021b). For instance, 21% of servants are female and only 16% of women are in senior positions (Akseer and Swift, 2020). According to the UNDP Gender Inequality Index, Afghanistan is ranked 169 out of 189 in the world (Conceição, 2020). According to Gray et al. (2021) early 54% of girls were married before the age of 18.

Numerous studies have investigated the challenges faced by married female students. Amos and Manieson (2015) studied issues and challenges of married female students in tertiary education. Through qualitative research, they interviewed 30 married students at the Education University of Winneba and found that the students faced different problems combining home responsibilities with their education. Their study found that the students faced problems in nurturing their children, lack of time for taking care of their families, having financial problems and achieving low grades at the university. In addition, Lasode and Awote (2014) studied the challenges of undergraduate married female students in Nigeria. They purposely selected 150 married female students at 6 universities and collected the data through a survey questionnaire. They used the Statistical Package for Social Sciences in analyzing the data and found that the majority of the respondents were stressful because they combined family responsibilities with their education. They also indicated that many of the students did not have time to do their class projects and got low grades at the university. Their research showed that these challenges affected their integration on campus and learning outcome. Choy (2002) also argued that married female students could not manage to do their homework, and therefore, they got low grades at the university.

Behlol et al. (2016) investigated the problems of married women in higher education in Pakistan and found that Pakistani women faced discrimination with regards to their education and they were not allowed to pursue their education because social, religious, economic and cultural factors changed the beliefs of their families. This research also revealed that financial constraint was the major challenge to female's education and most of conservative families invested on the education of their male children. Khazaei et al. (2011) found that married female students faced different problems in Nigeria such as being late to the classes, lack of encouragement, social pressure and poor academic achievement. Hamdan (2005) conducted a study on the challenges and achievements of female students in Saudi Arabia and found that the academic achievement of married female students was lower than their unmarried counterparts.

Ali (2011) studied the problems of women in career development and found that most of the women were not satisfied in their workplace because family responsibilities hindered them from achieving their working targets. Cherlin (2004) stated that married female students have faced challenges to manage several tasks at a time and they felt that education was stressful for them. Yaacob et al. (2015) studied the problems of married international students in Malaysia and found that financial issues and social support were the utmost challenges faced by married international students in Malaysia. This research also found that students' nationality had an impact on their responses. Students who came from the Middle East had more difficulties than those from South Asia and Africa.

Ngonyani (2020) studied the causing factors of low achieving female students in Tanzania and found that the female students faced several problems during their study at the university such as limited access to electricity, early marriage, instructors' negative perceptions about female students and handling both home and university activities. As a result, these problems have negatively affected their achievement at the university. Plageman and Sabina (2010) also argued that support from family, instructors, colleges and peers is very important for female adult students because it fosters confidence and positivity to overcome college challenges. They also found that the challenges negatively affect students' life and engagement at the college. Tennant et al. (2013) studied the challenges of United Arab Emirates female students from family, college and social aspects. They found that the students had difficulty to manage their family and university tasks which isolated them from the community. Studies carried out by Sharma (2012), Lin (2016), Abitew (2019) and Wa-Mbaleka (2015) found that married female students faced several challenges during their time at the college. They had difficulty in managing both family and university responsibilities, which devastatingly affected their life and academic achievement.

No published study was found to explore the challenges of female married students in Afghanistan. Some studies documented the problems of international female students, the challenges coupled married students and the factors affecting female students' academic performance at the university level and limited studies addressed the challenges of undergraduate married female students. Except the studies by Behlol et al. (2016) and Adebayeo (2006), most of the studies were conducted in countries where they have better resources and the women participation in education is high. However, in the Afghan context, the resources are very limited and female participation in education is low (Noori et al., 2020, Orfan, 2021a), this limitation is understandable because the prolonged war and instabilities, high level of ethnic polarization and gender issues created challenges for female students in Afghanistan (Aturupane, 2013 ; Roof, 2015; Kuek et al., 2014). Even though some efforts were made to improve gender equality and education in Afghanistan, the country still remained as one of the least developed countries in the world and female enrolment in education is not comparable to neighboring countries (Crane & Rerras, 2009). Therefore, this study will fill the gap by investigating the challenges of undergraduate married female students in Afghanistan.

2. Research Methodology

2.1 Research Design

The researchers have used a quantitative research design in carrying out the study. A questionnaire with a 5 points Likert scale was used to collect the data from 100 purposefully selected respondents. Data were analyzed with the aid of Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS, Version 25.0).

2.2 Participants

The population of the study were undergraduate married female students who were pursuing their studies at Takhar University, Afghanistan. The researchers have purposefully chosen 130 married female students in Takhar University to fill out a questionnaire. Only 100 useable copies were returned to the researchers. As Table 1.0 Shows, 17% of the respondents were first year students, 10% of them were second year students, 18% of them were third year and the majority of them (55%) were fourth year students. In addition, they were in different age ranges, 33% of them aged between 18-21, the majority of them (65%) aged between 22-25 years and only 2% of them aged 26 and above years. A large number of the participants (50%) lived in their own houses, 35% of them were living in the university's dormitory and only 15% of them were living in their relative's house.

Table 1.0 Demographic profile of the respondents

Demographic Information		Frequency	Percentage
Year of Study	Freshman	17	17
	Sophomore	10	10
	Junior	18	18
	Senior	55	55
	Total	100	100
Age	18-21	33	33
	22-25	65	65
	26 and above	2	2
	Total	100	100
Place of Residence	Own Home	50	50
	Dormitory	35	35
	Relative's House	15	15
	Total	100	100

2.3 Instrumentation

The researchers have thoroughly reviewed the literature to identify the items of the questionnaire. A survey questionnaire was adapted from Lasode and Awote (2014). The researchers amended the questionnaire to make it applicable in the Afghan context. The instrument consisted of 3 main sections. The first section contained 3 items which sought the respondents’ demographic information, the second section with 19 items aimed to explore the challenges of married female students in higher education in Afghanistan which were divided into three sub sections, i.e., the academic challenges, the social challenges and the familial challenges. The last part of the questionnaire with 10 items addressed the impact of the challenges on undergraduate married female students.

2.4 Validity and reliability

The questionnaire was given to three lecturers in Takhar University for revision and improvement. They reviewed the questionnaire and commented to improve some of the items. The researchers identified the problematic items and modified them accordingly. Since English is taught and spoken as a foreign language in Afghanistan and many of the respondents had difficulty knowing English (Orfan, 2020b; Orfan & Noori, 2021), the researchers translated the questionnaire to Persian (the lingua franca) and asked 2 experts in English –Persian translation to check its accuracy. In terms of reliability, the researchers conducted a pilot study and 20 students were asked to fill out the questionnaire. Cronbach’s Alpha test of reliability was employed to measure the reliability value. The results (Table2.0) showed that all the items had an overall value of 0.89 which indicated high internal reliability of the questionnaire.

Table 2.0 Cronbach's Alpha Reliability Test

Reliability Statistics	
Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
0.89	29

2.5 Data Collection

The researchers gathered data from married female students in Takhar University. They met with the students and asked about their voluntary participation in the study. After their confirmation, a consent form was signed by each respondent. The researchers distributed 117 copies of the questionnaire to the respondents and only 100 useable ones were returned. The researchers entered the data in Ms. Excel and then conducted the analysis using SPSS version 25.0

2.5 Data Analysis

The data were sorted and organized in Ms. Excel 2013, coded and imported to Statistical Package for Social Sciences for analysis. The researchers conducted descriptive and inferential statistical analyses. Mean, frequency and percentage were used descriptively. Kruskal Wallis Tests were conducted to find out the mean differences in the participants responses by their demographic variables, i.e., class, age and place of residence and Ordinal Regression analysis was used to explore the effects of the challenges on undergraduate married female students.

3. Findings

3.1 Challenges of married female students

The authors divided married female students’ challenges into three categories.

3.1.1 Academic Challenges

The first seven items of the questionnaire sought the participants’ response about their academic challenges. As Table 3.0 shows, the majority of the students had various academic challenges. 55% of them accepted that they could not achieve good grades like other students. Around 96% of them declared that they faced poor study skills. 86% of them strongly agreed and agreed that they experienced a high load of academic work. 94% of them believed that they had little time to study at home. 98% of them indicated that they were late to classes. 84% of them stated that they did not experience any special consideration for married female students and 90% of them strongly agreed and agreed that they spent time out of home due to their academic affairs.

Table 3.0 Academic challenges of married female students at the university

Statements	Strongly Agree and Agree	Mean
Cannot achieve good grades like other students	55%	3.16
Facing poor study skills.	96%	4.35
High loaded academic work to complete on time	86%	4.33
No or little time to study at home	94%	4.39

Being late to lectures and classes	98%	4.66
No special consideration to married students by university	84%	4.13
Spending my time out of home due to academic work	90%	4.35
Overall Mean		4.19

3.1.2 Social Challenges

The second five items of the questionnaire elicited the participants' response about their social challenges. As Table 4.0 Shows, the majority of the students experienced various social challenges. 51% of them strongly agreed and agreed that they were unable to integrate with other students on campus. 93% of them accepted that they did not have enough time for their personal activities at home. 73% of them stated that they were managing multiple tasks at a time. 89% of them declared that they were concerned about their house during the lectures and only 21% of them believed that their marital duties were often neglected.

Table 4.0 Social challenges of married female students

Statements	Strongly Agreed and Agreed	Mean
Unable to integrate easily with other students on campus.	51%	3.2
No sufficient time for my personal activities at home	93%	4.18
Managing multiple tasks at a time.	73%	4.04
Being concerned about my house during class	89%	4.19
Marital duties are often neglected	21%	2.08
Overall Mean		3.53

3.1.3 Familial Challenges

The third seven items of the questionnaire examined the familial challenges of Afghan married female undergraduate students. As Table 5.0 shows, the majority of the students experienced different familial challenges. 21% of them strongly agreed and agreed that they faced inadequate financial support. 32% of them accepted that they experienced insufficient support from their families. 58% of them stated that they were unable to cook at home. 48% of them indicated that they were unable to do washing at home. 57% of them declared that they did not have enough time to nurture their children. 81% of them accepted that they had the responsibility of child bearing and only 21% of them believed that they experienced no support from their in-laws.

Table 5.0 Familial challenges of married female students at the university

Statements	Strongly agreed and agreed	Mean
Lack of adequate financial support from my husband	21%	2.08
Insufficient support from family	32%	2.49
Unable to cook in my house	58%	3.4
Unable to do washing and cleaning in my house	48%	3.29
Lack of time to nurture my children	57%	3.39
Childbearing responsibilities	81%	4.36
Lack of support from my in-laws	21%	2.08
Overall Mean		3.03

3.2 The effects of the challenges on Afghan married female students

The last part of the questionnaire sought the effects of the challenges on married female students at the university. Table 6.0 shows that the challenges led to significant impacts on students. The majority of the respondents strongly agreed and agreed that they faced financial and time limitations. Around 90% of them believed that they had irregular classes and low concentration during the lectures. The vast majority of them stated that they had poor academic achievement and low quality of work in both university and house. Nearly 78% of them indicated that they felt guilty for not having enough time for their children and had stress due to academic and home responsibility minority of them declared that they received no support from their husband and felt inferior to other students.

Table 6.0 The impact of challenges on students

Statements	Strongly agree & agree	Mean
Low quality of work in university and house.	95%	4.53
Financial constraints.	61%	3.17
Lack of support from my husband.	14%	1.82
Poor academic achievement.	73%	3.79
Feeling guilty about not having adequate time for my children.	79%	4.05
Having little or no free time.	97%	4.38
Feeling inferior to other students.	31%	2.69
Stress due to university and house responsibilities.	77%	4.03
Irregular attendance to the class.	85%	4.15
Low concentration during lectures.	90%	4.33
Overall Mean		4.43

3.3 Regression analysis on the effect of challenges on students

Table 7.0 shows the result of inferential statistical analysis (Ordinal Regression analysis) to measure the effects of challenges on students. The results of the analysis showed that the (Alpha value) is (P=0.001), which is less than the significance level (0.05). Therefore, it is concluded that there is statistically a significant effect of challenges on students.

Table 7.0 Inferential statistical analysis (Ordinal regression analysis)

Model Fitting Information

Model	-2 Log Likelihood	Chi-Square	df	Sig.
Intercept Only	253.104			
Final	.000	253.104	46	.000

Link function: Logit.

3.4 Demographic analysis of the respondents

Table 8.0 shows the result of inferential statistical analysis (Kruskal Wallis Tests) to compare the mean differences in the responses of participants' demographic analysis, i.e., class, age and residential areas. The results showed that the Alpha value for all variables is (P=0.001), which is less than the significance level (0.05). Therefore, it is concluded that there are statistically significant differences in the responses of the participants by their demographic variables, i.e., class, age and residential areas. Table 8.0 also shows that senior students experienced more challenges than the others. Furthermore, it shows that students with older ages experienced more challenges than the younger ones and students who were living in their relative's house experienced more challenges than the others.

Table 8.0 Analysis based on participants' demographic variable

Test Statistics ^{a,b}					
Variables		N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Asymp. Sig. (P Value)
Class	Freshman	17	2.09	0.50	0.00
	Sophomore	10	2.87	0.06	
	Junior	18	3.23	0.17	
	Senior	55	4.34	0.38	
Age	18-21 Years	33	2.50	0.56	0.00
	22-25 Years	65	4.13	0.51	
	26 and above Years	2	5.00	0.00	

Residential area	Own Home	50	2.82	0.64	0.00
	Dormitory	35	4.22	0.20	
	Relative's House	15	4.85	0.11	

- a. Kruskal Wallis Test
- b. Grouping Variable: Age, Class & Year of Study

4. Discussion

This study aimed to investigate the perception of Afghan undergraduate married female students about their challenges in Afghanistan higher education. It also explored the difference in the perceptions of the students by their class, age and residential areas. The findings showed that the Afghan married female students were facing different challenges during their studies at the university. The vast majority of married female students had poor study skills, experienced a high load of academic work and achieved low academic grades. It is aligned with the earlier studies by Lasode and Awote (2014) and Amos and Manieson (2015), who found that the married students achieved lower grades and had difficulties in managing their academic activities because they had to handle both home and academic activities at a time. However, it contradicts the finding of the study by Hamdan (2005) who studied the challenges and achievements of women in higher education in Saudi Arabia. He found out that female married students could achieve the same grades as their male partners, even in some cases, they were able to achieve higher than their male classmates.

Furthermore, the results showed that the married female students were late to classes, spent time out of home due to their academic responsibilities and did not experience any special consideration from the university's side. This study supports the finding of the study by Brown and Watson (2010) who examined the experiences of female doctoral students and found that being a mother and a student had serious implications for them because they had difficulty balancing their time to attend the activities and were stressed to meet the university's requirement. They also argued that even though the doctoral students were satisfied with their male supervisors, but no special consideration was paid to married female students by the university.

The study found that the vast majority of the respondents were unable to integrate with other students on campus, had difficulty managing different task at a time and were concerned about their activities at home. This finding of the current study is consistent with the result of research by Ciciolla and Luthar (2019) who found that most of the women were responsible for household chores and had difficulties to manage household routines and other tasks. Moreover, the study found that the majority of the respondents faced financial and other limitations during their studies at the university, which caused stress and anxiety for them. It is in line with the finding of the studies by Kerkmann et al. (2000), Amos and Manieson (2015), Yaacob et al. (2015), Tennant et al. (2013), Adebayo (2006) and ADEBOLA (2012), and Wa-Mbaleka et al. (2015) and Stringer et al. (2019) who reported that married female students faced several challenges like, time and financial constraints and felt stressed handling academic and house tasks during their studies at the university. Likewise, the findings showed that married female students faced more academic challenges than social and familial ones.

This study also found that the challenges of married female students impacted their life. As a result, the challenges led to their poor academic achievement, financial constraints, stress, irregular class attendance and feeling guilty about not having enough time for their children. Furthermore, they believed that the challenges caused them to experience low concentration, feel inferior to other students and deal with financial and time limitations. The finding is on a par with the result of research conducted by Egan (2004), Amos and Manieson (2015) and Lasode et al. (2019) who reported that the challenges of married female students led to some effects like poor academic performance, stress, time and financial limitations and role contagion on students. The results also showed that the married female students' class, age and residential areas before admission to university had a statistically significant impact on their responses. They also revealed that senior students, students with older ages and those who lived in their relative's houses experienced more challenges than the others.

5. Conclusion

This study investigated the challenges of undergraduate married female students in higher education. The findings showed that the Afghan undergraduate married female students were experiencing various challenges during their study at the university. They had to combine home and academic activities which led to stress and anxiety among the students. These challenges had a bad effect on students who could not achieve good academic grades. This study also found that there were statistically significant differences in the perception of the students by their class, age and residential areas. This study will add to the body of knowledge and academic literature by investigating the challenges faced by married female undergraduate students in higher education in Afghanistan. It may contribute to the development of strategies and policies on gender inequality and higher education.

This study has some practical and theoretical implications. Educational managers and higher education leaders should hold counselling programs and advise married female students to manage their time wisely and make a proper plan for their activities. As a result, these measures by the educational institutions will improve students' achievement and learning outcome. Managing to find the participants of the study to fill out the survey questionnaire was a challenge for the researchers because cultural values and misunderstanding in Afghanistan made it difficult to talk to female students at the university; therefore, the researchers needed to ask male students about the marital status of their female classmates and then choose them as the participants of the study after identification.

The researchers faced time limitation and availability of female respondents. Further research may explore the challenges of married female students in different regions and provinces by employing a mix method study.

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