



المركز العربي للأبحاث ودراسة السياسات  
Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies

Case Analysis | 20 October 2024

# Role of Education and Employment in Afghan Women's Empowerment in Iran

Zahra Kamali Dehghan

# Role of Education and Employment in Afghan Women's Empowerment in Iran

Series: **Case Analysis**

20 October 2024

Copyright © 2024 Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies. All Rights Reserved.

The Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies is an independent research institute and think tank for the study of history and social sciences, with particular emphasis on the applied social sciences.

Zahra Kamali Dehghan

social researcher focusing on women, family, and immigration in Iran. She also serves as a board member of the Mehrassa NGO, which works on issues related to Afghan refugees.

The Center's paramount concern is the advancement of Arab societies and states, their cooperation with one another and issues concerning the Arab nation in general. To that end, it seeks to examine and diagnose the situation in the Arab world - states and communities- to analyze social, economic and cultural policies and to provide political analysis, from an Arab perspective.

The Center publishes in both Arabic and English in order to make its work accessible to both Arab and non-Arab researchers.

The Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies

Al-Tarfa Street, Wadi Al Banat

Al-Dayaen, Qatar

PO Box 10277, Doha

+974 4035 4111

[www.dohainstitute.org](http://www.dohainstitute.org)

In recent years, international migration has emerged as a significant factor shaping economic, cultural, and social landscapes. However, this movement of people poses disruptions and challenges for both origin and destination countries. Iran is one of the most important destinations for a significant number of Afghan residents, immigrants, and undocumented individuals. Many Afghans have lived in Iran for over four decades. This migration can be traced back to several key events: the Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979, the outbreak of civil war and the Taliban's rule of Afghanistan (1996–2001), the US invasion of the country in October 2001, the collapse of the national unity government, and the re-establishment of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan by the Taliban in August 2021. Over these periods, approximately 3.6 million people migrated to Iran from Afghanistan, and this trend continues today. Some 36 per cent of this population, equivalent to 1.3 million individuals, are girls and women.<sup>1</sup>

The education and training of Afghan women in Iran is a complex issue shaped by the Iranian government's macro policies concerning non-Iranians. Since the early 1990s, following the shifts in Iran's open-door policy toward Afghan refugees and the emergence of economic and social problems in Iran, the government has sought to reduce the number of refugees, control and prevent new migration, and direct refugees to return to Afghanistan. Consequently, various restrictions were imposed on the education of Afghan women in order to make the refugees feel less than welcomed. Some of these restrictions included assigning them areas for residence that were geographically remote; banning them from studying certain subjects in schools and universities; and restricting their enrolment in public schools and their access to textbooks. These restrictions have had a detrimental effect on the education of Afghan girls and women.<sup>2</sup>

Afghan immigrant girls face significant educational challenges, with dropout rates of 58 per cent in primary schools, 17 per cent in lower secondary schools, and 25 per cent in upper secondary schools. Such high dropout rates are due to a variety of reasons, some of the most important of which include the following:

- absence of a clear educational policy for immigrants;
- undefined educational rights;
- constant changes in educational laws and regulations;
- inconsistent implementation of immigrant admissions;
- the high costs associated with tuition fees; and,
- complex bureaucratic policies related to political and security authorities.

---

<sup>1</sup> Mansour Anbarmoo, "Investigating the Challenges and Educational Opportunities of Afghan Women in Iran," in *Afghan Women and Education*, ed. Behnaz Hosseini (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2024).

<sup>2</sup> Ibid

Moreover, Afghan families often face precarious economic conditions, which diminishes the priority of girls' education. Other factors, such as seasonal parental occupation, constant movement around Iran, early marriage of girls, and patriarchal attitudes in some Afghan families that prioritize men's education in the family pose further challenges to Afghan girls' education.<sup>3</sup>

Over the last few decades, feminist studies have focused on gender as an independent unit of analysis and have emphasized "gender equality" for a balanced society. Gender equality is believed to manifest in the freedom of all individuals, irrespective of gender or other markers of discrimination.<sup>4</sup> Gender equality goes beyond the mere equal distribution of resources among men and women. It requires dismantling deeply embedded structures of power, including "discriminatory laws, customs, practices, and institutional processes which could undermine opportunities and outcomes in education".<sup>5</sup> Empowerment as a term has emerged to explain unequal power relations in society.

Women's empowerment in development is a way of defining, challenging, and overcoming barriers in their lives, through which they increase their ability to shape their lives. The process of empowerment not only enables women to improve their skills and access to productive resources, but also enhance their quality of life, dignity, and social status. The effect of women's empowerment extends to influencing norms, values, and eventually, the laws that govern these communities.<sup>6</sup> Empowerment includes cognitive and psychological elements, such as a woman's understanding of her condition of subordination and the causes of such conditions. This requires understanding the self and cultural and social expectations, possibly through education. Many studies consider formal education and organizational work as effective solutions to women's empowerment. When women have access to formal education and engage in part-time or full-time jobs within organizations, they gain greater autonomy. Studies show that in developing countries, education and employment enhance women's position in society, amplifying their authority and power.<sup>7</sup> Women's empowerment is essential for the development of society, defined as individuals acquiring the power to think and act freely, make choices, and realize their full potential as equal members of society.

The focus of this discussion is on the possibility and capacity of individuals, regardless of their social class, gender, or race, to participate in public and social decision-making, and play an active role. According to Amartya Sen's theory of "empowerment," as individuals enter the public sphere, all matters related to human life, including cultural, social, political, and economic issues, should be taken into account, and the possibility of awareness and freedom along with action should be made possible for them in the public sphere.

---

3 Ibid

4 Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999); Sheila Aikman and Elaine Unterhalter, eds., *Beyond Access: Transforming Policy and Practice for Gender Equality in Education* (Oxford: Oxfam, 2005).

5 Aikman and Unterhalter, *Beyond Access*.

6 Nanette Page and Cheryl E. Czuba, "Empowerment: What Is It?," *Journal of Extension*, Vol. 37, No. 5 (1999).

7 S. Philip Morgan et al., "Muslim and Non-Muslim Differences in Female Autonomy and Fertility: Evidence from Four Asian Countries," *Population and Development Review*, Vol. 28, No. 3 (2002), pp. 515 - 537.

Empowering women encompasses three fundamental dimensions, namely resources, agency, and “functioning.” As far as *resources* are concerned, they can be categorized into material, social, and human capital. Material resources include tangible assets such as income, property, and technology. Social resources encompass the networks, relationships, and support systems that individuals can leverage to enhance their life opportunities. Human capital refers to the knowledge, skills, and creativity that individuals possess.

Mere access to resources does not, in itself, translate into empowerment. Rather, access to resources serves as a prerequisite for achieving empowerment. Resources are distributed through various institutions and processes, and prevailing social norms, rules, and procedures determine the extent of access. These regulations and norms empower certain actors to dictate the level and scope of access for others. In the context of women, this role is often played by men, particularly household heads.

In this regard, mere access to resources is insufficient; agency is an equally crucial factor. The most important aspect of agency is control, implying that women must possess the ability to utilize available resources effectively. Therefore, the focus should not be solely on the legal right to access resources but also on the practical ability to control and utilize them. Norms may sometimes grant women access to resources without the corresponding right to control them or without holding a position of authority within the household. In such instances, the true beneficiaries of women's empowerment are men.<sup>8</sup>

*Agency* serves as the primary indicator of empowerment. It encompasses the ability to define personal goals and act upon them, including a broad spectrum of purposeful actions, such as negotiation, intervention, bargaining, resistance, protest, and more complex processes of reflective and analytical cognition. In this context, two forms of power are particularly relevant:

- Power to: The ability of individuals to define and determine their life choices and pursue their goals, even in the face of opposition from others.
- Power within: Self-confidence, self-awareness, and self-belief.

Combining resources and agency is termed capability, meaning individuals' potential to achieve the life they desire or to access valuable ways of being and acting.<sup>9</sup>

In Amartya Sen's theory, *functionings* are the doings and beings that constitute a person's life. They represent the actual achievements of a person's life, like being healthy, being well-nourished, having strong social relationships, or engaging in creative activities. They are like the “what” –what a person is able to achieve and experience. On the other hand, Capability refers to the real freedom a person

---

<sup>8</sup> Arin Qolipour, Ashraf Rahimiyan, and Azam Mirzamani, “The Role of Formal Education and Organizational Employment in Women's Empowerment in Tehran,” *Journal of Women's Studies*, Vol. 6, No. 3 (2008), pp. 113 - 132.

<sup>9</sup> Shafei MohammadHasan, “Gender identity authentication and empowerment”, collection of articles of the first conference “Women, social harms and ways to prevent them” Tarbiat Debir Shahid Rajaei University,( 2010), p. 65.

has to choose and achieve different combinations of functionings. It is the potential to be and do different things. Capability reflects the range of lives a person can potentially live. It's like the "why" and "how" – why a person might choose a particular functioning and how their circumstances allow them to achieve it. Functionings focus on *outcomes* (what is achieved), while capabilities focus on *opportunities* (what can be achieved).

These functionings are the results and outcomes of the empowerment process (results of choice or agency) and these can be categorized into two types:

- Functionings that provide women with new resources: These functionings indirectly impact women's agency and, consequently, their empowerment. Examples include acquiring education, employment, and access to financial resources.
- Functionings that alter the conditions of choice: These functionings directly contribute to women's empowerment. Examples include gaining greater control over household decisions, challenging gender stereotypes, and participating in political processes.

When empowerment is achieved, the following outcomes ensue: a sense of impact (self-determination), a sense of meaningfulness, a sense of professional growth, a sense of competence and self-belief, and a sense of trustworthiness.<sup>10</sup>

Human beings' capability, agency, and functioning are central concepts in Sen's capability approach to justice. Sen argues that the foundation of justice theory should be based on the lived experiences of individuals. Equality should be based on individuals' ability to fulfill valuable roles and pursue goals that they have set for themselves. This point is particularly significant in the context of gender justice. In his articulation of the concept of justice, Sen employs the notion of capability, defined as a set of diverse functionings that an individual finds valuable and has the freedom to choose from.<sup>11</sup> Sen's elaboration of capability hinges on two fundamental concepts: freedom and functioning. Freedom, in this context, refers to the ability to select functionings that an individual deems valuable and has reason to pursue.

These functionings can range from basic necessities such as adequate nutrition and freedom from illness to more complex aspects such as self-esteem. Capability, on the other hand, encompasses the set of functionings that an individual can realistically attain in their actual circumstances. In this sense, capability can be viewed as a form of freedom – the freedom to pursue a diverse range of functionings.

The migration journey often takes a heavy toll on Afghan children, exposing them to psychological trauma and depriving them of access to education. This can lead to a range of challenges, including:

---

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Sen, *Development as Freedom*, p. 109.



- *Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)*: Witnessing violence, displacement, and loss can leave lasting psychological scars.
- *Anxiety and depression*: The uncertainty and instability of their new environment can contribute to mental health issues.
- *Language barriers*: Struggling to communicate in the host country can hinder their ability to integrate and access opportunities.
- *Educational setbacks*: Missing out on schooling can put them at a significant academical and social disadvantage .

Numerous NGOs have emerged to assist these displaced individuals. Mehraasa is an NGO that addresses these challenges head-on by providing comprehensive support to Afghan children and their families. Mehraasa stands out among these organizations, specifically focusing on educating of Afghan children who have fallen behind in their schooling.

Through a combination of educational and non-educational classes, Mehraasa aims to empower these children and their families to adapt to life in their host country. The organization's efforts encompass a holistic approach, recognizing the multifaceted needs of young Afghan refugees. The organization's efforts contribute to improved academic performance (children who receive Mehraasa's support often show significant progress in their studies), enhanced mental well-being (access to psychosocial support helps them manage trauma and build resilience), stronger family bonds (workshops and activities strengthen relationships within families, providing a supportive network), and, successful integration (children and families gain the skills and confidence to navigate life in their host country).

Based on over four years of experience working with Afghan women and girls at Mehraasa, I understand that Afghan children face numerous challenges adapting to their new life in the host country. To address these issues, we have implemented various classes designed to enhance their capabilities and decision-making skills. With every skill Afghan girls acquire, they create new possibilities for themselves, enhancing their individual capabilities. For instance, while a woman with no formal education might not even consider the possibility of employment, most Afghan girls view education as a pathway to better marriage prospects, understanding that their spouses will be responsible for their expenses. However, after a period of education and acquiring non-academic skills, the idea of employment and being responsible for their own lives emerges. Essentially, the potential for freedom becomes the groundwork for capability. Power takes on meaning here, fostering agency.

In societies where individuals have more opportunities and face few limitations, agency quickly materializes. However, in traditional societies, individuals enter social, political, and economic spaces to assert their agency. The subsequent achievements they gain (which can be psychological or even material) empower them because these achievements can strengthen various aspects of agency.

For example, acquiring a skill can increase one's possibility of finding employment and generating income to continue education. Human freedom is based on capabilities attainable to them and the functionalities individuals adopt in life. In essence, capabilities afford individuals the ability to choose desirable lifestyles and introduce a form of freedom that expands their scope of choices. Empowerment is not merely about literacy; it is about creating new opportunities for women and enhancing their ability to choose and assert agency in social life.

## Conclusion

The education of Afghan refugees in Iran presents a complex challenge that requires a nuanced understanding. The complex interplay of factors such as forced migration, restrictive government policies, and socio-cultural norms has significantly impeded the educational progress of Afghan women and girls in Iran. Restrictive government policies, economic hardships, and cultural norms converge to limit their ability to convert potential capabilities into actual achievements.

Amartya Sen's capability approach provides a valuable lens to analyse this issue. By focusing on the capabilities of Afghan women and girls, rather than simply their outcomes, we can better appreciate the barriers they face in accessing and benefiting from education.

The capability approach in Amartya Sen's theory is rooted in the philosophy of human development. According to him, development means expanding real freedoms and requires overcoming oppression and addressing issues such as poverty, tyranny, and social deprivation. Agency means being active and participating in political, social, and economic actions, and everyone should be able to take action and have the power to assess the value of things to make choices.

Initially, when individuals acquire more capabilities, they have numerous opportunities ahead of them, enabling them to achieve their goals. This, in turn, grants them the power to evaluate and make choices. In the second step, striving to obtain this power becomes meaningful. At this stage, empowerment holds great significance. Traditional societies are not willing to provide the necessary facilities for this group of individuals in society, hence, action for agency occurs. While a lack of limitations can quickly transform capabilities and functioning into individual agency, in more traditional societies, this process occurs slowly. Consequently, individuals enter the social, economic, political, and cultural spheres to reclaim their agency.

Enhancing the educational opportunities for Afghan refugees expands their capabilities. This entails increasing access to schools and addressing underlying factors such as poverty, language barriers, and gender inequality. Empowerment is not only increasing literacy but also creating opportunities to cultivate critical thinking and empowering them to make informed choices so that they can access equal resources and functions to enter the social, cultural, social, and economic discourse in the public arena.