DOI: 10.28934/jwee18.12.pp40-53

ORIGINAL SCIENTIFIC PAPER

Female Students: Afghanistan's New Entrepreneurs?

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A B S T R A C T

We have conducted the first-ever study of female and male Afghan university students about entrepreneurship and entrepreneurship education.

Ninety-four business students at a new 4-year university in Afghanistan provided data on their intentions, entrepreneurial disposition, perceptions about the university role, and their beliefs about barriers and motives to

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entrepreneurship. We used Likert-scale questions and conducted t-tests to explore difference between the female and male groups.

On the one hand, we find significant differences between women and men in disposition and intentions, with women having lower levels of disposition and intentions. On the other hand, the two groups display remarkably similar views of the importance of numerous entrepreneurship motives and barriers. They also feel the same about the positive university support of their entrepreneurship interests.

In other words, although young Afghan women and men appear to feel different about themselves and their plans, they hold relatively similar views on the reasons for entrepreneurship, the impediments to entrepreneurship, and the potential of university education and support to foster entrepreneurship in both sexes.

KEY WORDS*: Afghanistan, students, women, culture, entrepreneurship education, intentions, motives, barriers*

Introduction

Entrepreneurship research regarding women as the central or an integral topic continues to grow (Radović-Marković, 2013).

Women-oriented entrepreneurship research seems to flow from two distinct settings. The first is research on women and entrepreneurship in countries which may be further along the path of economic development (for example, Hoelscher, 2012; Humbert and Drew, 2010; Jose and Orazio, 2012; Katz, 2003; Kickul, Wilson, Marlino and Barbosa, 2008; Kirkwood, 2009; Klyver and Grant, 2010; Langowitz and Minniti, 2007; Lo, Sun, and Law, 2012; Minniti and Nardone, 2007; Wu and Wu, 2008, Yordanova and Tarrazon, 2010).

The second setting is a significant and growing stream of work related to the relationship between women and entrepreneurship in less developed countries (for example, Agrawal, 2017; Avolio, 2012; Dhaliwal, 2010; Khadija, Usman and Mohson, 2012; Robichaud, McGraw, Cachon, Bolton, Codina, Eccius-Wellmann, and Walsh, 2013; Sanchez and Licciardello, 2012; Sandhu, Sidique and Riaz, 2011).

Overview of the Research Setting: Afghanistan

Many countries could be called unique, but Afghanistan is a clear outlier, not only in its violent history and political instability, but in its

economic and geographical isolation and its cultural distinctiveness. Studying the entrepreneurial attitudes of Afghan students is particularly timely, since the prospects of social, political, and economic stability for the country will depend largely on the country's youth: the country's population is around 34 million people, but more than 60% of them are less than 25 years old (CIA World Factbook, 2017).

Physically isolated but strategically located, Afghanistan evolved as a set of regions and factions subject to periodic invasion. By the 18th century it became more or less unified as a country. Starting in the 1830s, Great Britain began on a series of wars in attempts to colonize the country. Those periodic wars ended nearly 85 years later, in 1921, with the end of the third British-Afghan war. From the early 1920s, Afghanistan began to modernize—adopting new technologies, developing widespread education, expanding trade with foreign nations, institutionalizing governmental processes, and blending conservative Islam religion with a modern, secular socio-economic system.

In the twentieth century, Afghanistan was influenced by its border neighbor the Soviet Union. The Afghan system thus became increasingly communist in nature, partly through political pressure, partly through economic and technical aid. Military coups in 1973 and 1978 led to decades of violence. Involvement (both open and subversive) in local politics by the United States and the Soviet Union led to a Soviet invasion, civil war, a series of short-lived governments, and the departure of roughly 5 million Afghans by the mid-1990s. A conservative faction, the Taliban, rose to power. They brought a semblance of peace to the country, but with an austere and brutal moral code, and a highly-developed mistrust of outsiders.

In 2001, it was the United States' turn to invade and occupy. In the seventeen years since then, the country has alternated between periods of mild stability and on-going provincial/regional/civil war.

Why Study Afghan Students

One of the consequences of the American occupation was enormous spending, including a portion intended to rebuild Afghanistan's educational system. The students in this survey are part of that process, since they attend a relatively new four-year university build on Western educational models and processes, with administrators and faculty from a variety of countries. However, conditions are not what most educators would consider normal. For example, it is not uncommon for university faculty to live, commute,

dine, and shop in groups, with armed guards at home, school, and on excursions. The road from the international airport into the capital city has been called the most dangerous road in the country.

Students in the university generally could be called the children of the Afghan elite. They come from various cities across the country, but have solid educational backgrounds, speak at least one foreign language (English), are technologically and economically literate, and largely come from prosperous families. By no means are they typical young Afghans. However, even if they are not typical young Afghans, they are likely to play a large role in the country's future. Previous research shows that the children of whatever socio-economic elite segment exists in a relatively poor are the people most likely to become the future economic, social, and political leaders of that country (Rarick et al., 2013; Rarick et al., 2014).

Thus, these Afghan students are an especially interesting group to study, and the results of their survey are revealing. Studying their views on entrepreneurship is particularly important. Like many countries which are less developed economically or which are politically unstable, Afghanistan has a substantial informal economy. However, that economy is fractured, poor, unstable, and subject to a violent, corrupt, and relatively incompetent government and economic system. The informal economy, although it is populated with countless skilled entrepreneurs, is unlikely to generate substantial stability or progress for the country as a whole. Competent management will be needed, combined with intelligent investment, stronger regulatory frameworks and political processes, and an increasingly stable environment with opportunities and support for significant-scale entrepreneurial activity. Thus, it seems important to study the beliefs of the young people who will shape that system.

Entrepreneurship and Gender

We also extend previous gender-based entrepreneurship research. Previous researchers have concluded that women students often show significantly less in entrepreneurship, whether due to different motives, inherent differences, culture, learned fear, or other factors (e.g., Farashah, 2013; Kourilsky and Walstad, 1998; Robichaud et al., 2013; Shay and Terjensen, 2005; Şeşen and Pruett, 2014; Wilson, Marlino & Kickul, 2004). In our study, the overall sample is small, as a result of the newness of the educational institution, so the number of female respondents is accordingly small as well. Nonetheless, we will show some interesting observations.

Methodology

We surveyed business students at a new 4-year private university in Kabul, Afghanistan. Due to the small size of the school, the sample consists of 94 respondents.

The survey questionnaire is derived from prior literature (including Genesca and Veciana, 1984; Pruett and Şeşen, 2017; Veciana, Aponte & Urbano, 2005). It explores students' perspectives on university environment/curriculum, aspirations, intentions, entrepreneurial disposition, and entrepreneurship motives and barriers. The survey used Likert scales and a number of categorical variables. Likert scales were used to measure student perceptions about twenty barriers and sixteen motives. When conducting t-tests to assess differences in means between men and women, we used Levene's test to look for variance differences between the two groups. If we found such differences, we did not assume equal variances in the t-tests that were subsequently performed.

Demographics

Of the 94 students who completed the survey, 19 were female and 77 were male. About three-fourths were business majors, with the rest divided between other areas like computer science, political science, and liberal arts. Slightly more than half were from the capital of Kabul, with the rest coming from other significant cities like Jalalabad and Kandahar. They were distributed across the program from freshmen to seniors.

Results

Students' Entrepreneurial Disposition and Intentions

Disposition and intentions provide significant contrasts between male and female university students.

The students were asked to rank themselves in terms of entrepreneurial disposition on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from "not entrepreneurial at all" to "very entrepreneurial". The self-reported disposition scores for men yielded a mean of 5.18, with s.d. 1.52. The disposition scores for women yielded a mean of 3.64, with s.d. 1.91. The difference between men and women was statistically significant (p .025). Thus, women see themselves as significantly less entrepreneurial then men see themselves.

A similar pattern held for entrepreneurial intentions. Scale answers for the entrepreneurial intentions question ranged from 1 (no, never) to 4 (yes, I have a definite plan to start my own business). The typical male response was that they had been thinking about it somewhat (mean 1.90, s.d.0.852), while the response of most female examinees was no (mean 1.00, s.d. 0.953). The difference was statistically significant (p .008).

Curriculum Content and University Stimulation

As discussed above, female and male students differ significantly in their reported entrepreneurial disposition and intentions.

However, they do not differ significantly in their views about the curriculum and university regarding entrepreneurship.

We assessed student perceptions as to: (a) the degree to which their field of study offered information on starting their own business and (b) the degree to which the university stimulated students to start their own business. Both questions were measured on a 4-point Likert scale ranging from a lot/greatly to none/none at all.

Students felt that entrepreneurial skills were a substantial part of their curriculum (men, mean = 2.91, s.d. = .692; women, mean 2.92, s.d. 0.669). The difference between men and women was statistically insignificant (p .972). Men and women felt that the university also stimulated students to start their own business (men, mean 2.14, s.d. 0.969; women, mean 2.50, s.d. 0.905). Again, the difference between male and female students was statistically insignificant (p .227).

Perceptions of Entrepreneurship Motives

Although women and men report significant differences in terms of entrepreneurial disposition and entrepreneurial intentions, they differ much less in their perception of motives for entrepreneurship.

In fact, women differ from men in only one out of sixteen different motives: women place significantly less emphasis on making more money through entrepreneurship than they would by working for someone else. Besides that one motive, there are no significant differences in the relative importance they attach to all the other reasons listed for entrepreneurship.

The most striking conclusion is how similar young Afghan women and men are regarding their motives for entrepreneurship (see Table 1). Women and men provided highly consistent rank orders in the full set of motives,

with only few exceptions, and generally agreed on the relative significance of motives.

As shown in Table 1, motives for starting business are ranked in the order that women students provided as the most important, going from 1 to 20. Male rankings are also provided, along with the means for both sexes. The t-tests can be interpreted as measuring whether there is any significant score difference between women and men for a particular motive.

Table 1: Motivations for business ownership

Motives ranked in order of importance	**Afghan women**	**Afghan men**	**Women mean**	**Men mean**	**t-test sig.**
Create jobs	1	2	4.50	4.42	.772
Chance for financial independence	2	3	4.50	4.41	.709
Create my own thing	3	4	4.50	4.40	.660
Improve life quality	4	1	4.25	4.42	.549
Gain high social status	5	10	4.25	4.03	.370
Manage people	6	5	4.17	4.26	.773
Use my own ideas	7	7	4.17	4.19	.928
Personal independence	8	9	4.08	4.14	.885
Run an organization	9	11	4.08	3.92	.614
Receive fair pay	10	12	4.00	3.89	.778
Build personal wealth	11	6	3.92	4.21	.273
Make more money than wage work	**12**	**8**	**3.58**	**4.16**	**.020***
Have more free time	13	13	3.55	3.19	.326
Professional/job dissatisfaction	14	14	3.33	3.18	.709
Hard to find right job	15	15	3.17	3.13	.916
Family tradition	16	16	3.00	3.01	.973

Source: Survey data

** The means of women and men are significantly different at the .05 level*

Given the economic and political situation in Afghanistan, it perhaps is no surprise that young women are focused on creating their own things and improving life quality just as much as men are. The top four motives for both sexes refer to creating jobs, financial independence, creating something of their own, and improving quality of life. Women and men included only

one specifically money-related motive in their top five motives, i.e., the opportunity to be financially independent.

Perceptions of Entrepreneurship Barriers

The survey also assessed students' perceptions of the relative importance of barriers to entrepreneurship. Again we assessed mean differences between Afghan women and men (see Table 2). The two groups show more variety in the weights they assign to barriers than to motives.

As shown in Table 2, perceptions of business start-up barriers are ranked in the order provided by Afghan women as the most important, ranging from 1 to 20. The corresponding male rankings are provided, along with the means for both sexes. The t-tests are interpreted as measuring whether there is any significant score difference between women and men for a particular motive, regardless of the motive's overall ranking.

For example, the top three ranked barriers for women are lack of capital, the current economic situation, and the lack of high level of entrepreneurial competence. In contrast, the top three ranked barriers for men are lack of capital, assisting organizations, and knowledge. Issues such as risk and the current economic situation receive less weight from men. As shown in the table, women and men agree less on the relative weights they assign to each barrier.

However, women and men do not differ significantly in their assessment of the importance of individual barriers to starting a business. There is only one exception. The other disagreements are not statistically significant. The potential for problems with employees is the issue over which Afghan women and men disagree. Women see it as a big potential problem, while male students do not see it as a problem. This is not surprising given the traditional male-dominated nature of Afghan culture. The results show that women may be concerned about their ability to manage employees if they become entrepreneurs because of the male-oriented national culture.

Interestingly, the issue of human resources/personnel in companies run by women entrepreneurs remains a timely issue in advanced countries as well (see, for example, Cvetić, Momčilović, Živković, and Prljić, 2017).

Table 2: Perceptions of business start-up barriers

Barriers ranked in order of importance	**Women**	**Men**	**Women mean**	**Men mean**	**t-test sig.**
Lack of initial capital	1	1	4.08	3.99	.720
Economic situation	2	5	4.08	3.76	.227
Lack of competence	3	6	3.75	3.72	.960
Employee problems	**4**	**19**	**3.75**	**3.01**	**.009****
Lack of knowledge	5	3	3.67	3.81	.676
Excessively risky	6	8	3.58	3.66	.793
Irregular income	7	13	3.58	3.45	.601
Lack of formal help	8	10	3.55	3.59	.273
Start up bureaucracy	9	17	3.55	3.18	.380
Have to work too much	10	16	3.50	3.20	.324
Lack of management +	11	4	3.50	3.77	.526
Lack of business ideas	12	11	3.50	3.48	.951
Lack of help to assess	13	14	3.50	3.35	.638
Lack of organizations to	14	2	3.45	3.84	.898
Fear of failure	15	15	3.45	3.23	.430
Lack of legal help	16	7	3.36	3.71	.320
Lack of knowledge of	17	9	3.40	3.59	.673
Family/friends don't	18	12	3.36	3.47	.699
Doubt my own abilities	19	18	3.18	3.07	.803
Taxes, legal fees	20	20	3.08	2.97	.646

Source: Survey data

*** The means of men and women are significantly different at the .01 level*

Study Limitations

The most important limitation is that our study is based on a rather small sample. In future research, a larger sample, perhaps longitudinal, will be more informative. Nonetheless, we are sampling from what is inherently a rather small population—highly educated young Afghan women and men.

Discussion and Implications

This paper reports the results of survey data from a study of a group of university students in Afghanistan. That young, highly educated, socio-

economic elite group may have a substantial impact on the progress of their country over the next decade. Further empirical research certainly is warranted.

In summary, there are significant differences in entrepreneurial disposition and intentions—young Afghan men are more likely to pursue it than Afghan women. However, in terms of how the two sexes see entrepreneurship barriers and motives, there are scarcely any differences. Afghan women and men may have distinct views about themselves and their plans, but they hold highly similar views on reasons for entrepreneurship and the barriers they will face.

Even though there were relatively few women in our sample, women now form more than one-third of the university's entire student population. This suggests that the socio-economic elite of Afghanistan will face a situation in which a substantial portion of women are highly educated, which will no doubt create challenges for traditional Afghan social norms. In order for women's education to truly succeed in Afghanistan, educational programs will have to find ways to address these cultural issues. Otherwise, it is likely the country will develop a group of educated women who are dissatisfied with cultural norms and push for change. Alternatively, if they are sufficiently dissatisfied but see little chance for advancement, some of them may simply leave. Any potential future female "brain-drain" of educated women leaving Afghanistan certainly would not improve the country's future prospects. In particular, the potentially very large number of *uneducated* female entrepreneurs could be adversely affected if educated women are not available to help them (see, for example, Agrawal, 2017). It also is possible that changes in other conservative male-dominated cultures may be instructive in the development of Afghan female entrepreneurship.

We find it extremely interesting that the perceptual differences of women and men are so minor in this study, especially given that Afghanistan has such diverse role expectations and social norms for women and men. That may strongly suggest the commonalities shared by this student population. It may also suggest a broader global shift, in which younger women and men are sharing increasingly common views of entrepreneurship and in which taboos against women in business are changing, as in Bahrain and Oman (Dechant and Al-Lamky, 2005) or the especially interesting case of budding female entrepreneurship in Saudi Arabia (Khan and Sharpe, 2017).

However, we still can see that there are significant differences in how women and men see themselves, and how they imagine their future Is that a question of culture and socialization?, political and economic realities?, Or physiological and neurological differences? These are topics that we believe merit discussion and further research. It will help not only in scholarly work, but in practical aspects as well. We encourage other researchers to pursue such topics, not only to contribute to the body of entrepreneurship literature, but to contribute to the future of Afghanistan, a country which has endured the destruction caused by decades of endless war.

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Article history: Received: 18 January, 2018

Accepted: 17 June, 2018