

Afghan Girls' Agency in the Context of Family and Kinship Dynamics

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Abstract

This paper seeks to explore gender identities and power relations in an Afghan refugee community living in the slum areas of Islamabad. Particular attention is paid to culture, domination, and subordination of females, especially young females in paid employment in the informal economy. In order to gain data in studying this under-researched community in urban Pakistan, Afghan girls aged between 5 to 12, working as rag pickers were studied in a collaborative ethnographic research project for seven months. In this article, Meyers' (2001) gender identity concept provides a heuristic framework with which to analyze the daily lives of the young Afghan rag pickers. In particular the paper uses the framework to explore how gender roles and norms are defined since such norms and processes play a big role in formulating gender identities for girls. I conclude by showing that these young girls live a life which is heavily dominated by male family members so that the girls have very few opportunities to make decisions on their own. I also emphasize that there is a need to change the social structures and processes in the families so that the girls might begin to have access to basic human rights such as education and health.

Key words: Pakistan, gender power relations, cultural norms, Afghan rag pickers, refugee status, gender identity

1. Introduction

The infamous incident of Malala Yousafzai, an advocate for education for girls clearly indicates that girls' education is still much devalued in the broader community (Tolentino et al., 2015). This was heavily underlined in the more recent, July 2016 'honour killing' of Qandeel Baloch -internet sensation and a model of Pakistan. These and many other similar incidents highlight the living and working situation of many girls and women in Pakistan (Qami, 2016). On the other hand, it is also evident that many women contribute brilliantly in different fields nationally and internationally. This raises the question of gender identity and questions such as the following, "To what extent do girls and women have the right to live and work, where and how they want? Is it possible for girls and women to form their own identities without any fear of blames, attack and killing?"

This paper seeks to explore these questions not looking at society as a whole, but rather with regard to a minority group in Pakistan society. In this article, I focus on the gender identities of Afghan girls who work as rag pickers on the streets of Islamabad, the capital city of Pakistan. My research for this paper draws on interviews and other ethnographic research with this group, eight in total, aged between eight to twelve. These girls live with their impoverished families and live in conformity to their own cultural norms and traditions; these norms and traditions bear some similarities to broader social norms and mores in Pakistan. The focus of this article is on the formation of gender identities of the Afghan girls, considering the question of the extent to which social institutions (families in this case), and cultural traditions instill gender in their cognitive, emotional and motivational aspects which are exhibited in the daily lives of the young Afghan girls (Meyers, 2001, p. 36).

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Moreover, this article, seeks ways in which these Afghan girls are tangled in hierarchical power relationships and how these impact on the formation of gender identities, and to what extent regulatory experiences and external events and practices determine identities (Butler, 2006, p. 23).

2. Outline of the Paper

In the first section, I will explore the theoretical underpinning of this research. This research is inspired by the work of Meyers (2001). In the second section of the literature review, attributes of Afghan refugees in Pakistan will be discussed. This will allow us to understand the complexities of families' and communities' lives from which the studied group for this paper was drawn. After some brief discussion of the research processes for this paper, the major aspects of the research findings will be first described and then analysed drawing on Meyers' framework in the discussion section.

3. Literature Review

3.1. Theoretical Background

For this article, the feminist approach of Meyers (2001) 'social groups and individual identities – individuality, agency and theory' offers an apt heuristic framework to analyse the daily lives of Afghan rag picker girls. In her exploration of women's gender identities, Meyers argues that "gender and race are thrust on us, and it is not within our power as individuals to expel race or gender from our lives (p. 35)." She further argues that it is not controversial that access to social, economic and political opportunities as well as to other goods differs depending on race and gender. According to Meyers, gender marks an individual's identity (either woman or man) and it is not her/his own choice but gender makes the identity in such a way that we are not conscious about it and we may not be able to change it, irrespective of our efforts. At this point, Meyers' work is useful because it provides a frame for questioning how gender internalization among the Afghan community is expressed and insisted upon. In so doing, gender internalisation is shown to shape the roles and lives of young girls then become an integral part of their emergent identities (Meyers, 2001, p. 36). On the other hand, Meyers believes that individual can exert a good deal of control over their group-based identities (p.37). Individuals can become estranged from the features of their identity. On this point, I disagree with Meyers by giving the examples of Afghan rag pickers' lives and the cultural values and norms in which they live, where it is not possible for them to transgress even a little.

Taking the points of view of Meyers (2001), discussed above, I was able to understand the power of social structures and power differentials which defines the world of Afghan young rag pickers and so forms their the identity. Such exploration reveals stereotypical roles and notions which systematically block the way of young girls to access their basic rights such as education and health. It is also noteworthy that the experience of the girls who are in Islamabad is qualitatively different from those of Afghan girls and women, living in Afghanistan in a war zone area under the Taliban. The imperatives and needs in that situation mean gender identity is formed in quite different ways beyond the scope of this paper as is evident in Rostami-Povey (2007). This paper also covers different experiences from other research done in other countries where Afghan girls and women's identities are built and maintained just as Akseer (2001) shows well. What distinguishes the studied group of girls who are rag pickers in Islamabad, Pakistan reflects its cultural, religious and geo-political situation of the country. Their lived experiences are different due to their ethnicity, class, geographical location, socio-cultural milieu and economics of their households which deny girls' and women's agency in their daily lives (Ali, Ahmad & Batool, 2016). This exploration is a contribution to the existing literature of Afghan gender identity formation, the factors contribute towards their gender identity, while living in slum areas of Islamabad as migrants. There is another contribution that policy makers need to work with families who are patriarchal in nature and the strongest determination of gender identity formation.

3.2. Afghan Refugees in Pakistan

Afghan refugees in Pakistan are those who have fled as a result of wars in Afghanistan with the first wave of Afghan migration having begun as a consequence of the 1980s Soviet war in Afghanistan (Gul, 2015). By December, 2012, approximately 1.7 million Afghan nationals were reported to be living in Pakistan (Gul, 2015) and this number has moved only slightly since then. Afghan nationals represent only part of the complexity of long term refugees in Pakistan. Nationality is defined as that quality or character which arises from the fact of a person's belonging to a nation or state. Nationality determines the political status of the individual, especially with reference to allegiance; while domicile, the place where she or he lives determines their civil status. Nationality arises either by birth or by naturalization (The Law Dictionary, 2014).

In this research, all Afghan refugees and their descendants living in Pakistan are considered as Afghan nationals, even though many have been born in Pakistan. Pakistani laws do not allow for citizenship by birth or naturalization for refugees (IRIN, 2013). According to Solutions Strategy for Afghan Refugees (SSAR) and Tripartite agreement between Afghanistan, Pakistan and United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the Afghan nationals need to register with National Database and Registration Authority (NADRA) (UNHCR, 2015). According to the Government of Pakistan, those 1.6 million Afghan refugees who have Proof of Registration (PoR) with NADRA are still Afghan citizens. They will thus be required to return to Afghanistan (IRIN, 2013). According to SSAR, Afghan nationals will be repatriated to Afghanistan on voluntary basis, despite the difficulties and continuing problems with extending PoRs.

As compared to nationality, the terms ethnic group or ethnicity are applied to cultural characteristics of people who may be living in the same country or nation, or across national borders. People who identify with one another on the basis of common ancestry and cultural heritage see themselves as belong to the same ethnic group. . Their sense of belonging may centre on their nation of origin, or on attributes such as language, religion, distinctive foods, clothing, music or family names and relationships (Henslin, Possamai & Possamai-Inesedy, 2014). The Afghan families in this research are mostly from an ethnic group of Pathans or Pushtuns - also variously spelled Pushtun, Pakhtun, Pashtoon, Pathan. They are people who now mostly live in south-eastern Afghanistan and KPK province (North-West province in the map) in Pakistan. The terms Pashtun and Pakhtun are variations of the same name which are different because of the varying pronunciation in two different dialects of their language. The term Pathan is a corruption of the name Pakhtun. It was popularized in the Indian subcontinent by the British colonialists, with possible derogatory connotations in usage in its origin ethnicity (this section has drawn on personal communication with Professor Nazif Shahrani, Indiana University, Bloomington Indiana USA on 23 July, 2014). Pushtuns are one of the largest ethnic groups in Afghanistan (Abraham, 2013). According to a reliable estimate, 81% of the Afghan refugees living in Pakistan are Pushtuns/Pathan, with much smaller percentages of other ethnic groups (Margesson, 2007).

4. Methodology

This ethnographic research was done in Islamabad city in Pakistan over seven months. There are many Afghan nationals who live in UNHCR camps in Islamabad and in the slum areas of Islamabad. These families belong to poor income stratum with household income rarely exceeding \$3 to \$4 per day. Usually, males of all ages are involved in income generating activities, but because of the paucity of adult wages, girls (such as those in the study group in this paper) and women (to an even more limited extent) can also be found in economic activity - informal economy. Frequently the work is undertaken in fruit, vegetable and other kinds of markets, on the streets, or in small hotels or local workshops or factories (for daily life of an Afghan woman, see Qayyum, 2016).

The city of Islamabad, developed as modern city, is the hub of politics, administration and government (Qadeer, 2006, p. 83). While calculating population in a fluid environment is challenging, the city had a population of 1.15 million in 2007 and perhaps a twenty per cent increase by 2015. According to a report, Islamabad has twenty four slum areas (katchiabadis) with almost 80,000 individuals are living in them. Of those 24 defined slum areas, seven are named as 'Afghan Basti' where it seems likely the city's Afghan communities are to be found (Hussain, 2014).

4.1. Key Informants

The eight Afghan girls selected for this research were between eight and twelve at the time of the field research, and all were involved in rag picking. It would have been unlikely to see any girls older than twelve picking the rags from the garbage piles. This is due to their gender identities, because gender norms in the Pashtun communities require that at puberty girls must discontinue their public sphere presence. Rather they are expected to stay within their homes. While a large number of families were contacted for this research, these eight girls with whom I worked with over seven months were those whose parents gave permission for me to research with the girls and their families. Just as many other scholars have found, when seeking deep understanding of cultural norms and more, an ethnographic research approach is most effective because of the rich insights that can be gained (see Wolcott, 2008; Van Maanen, 1979). I worked extensively and closely with the girls and their families. In this ethnographic research, most information came from sixteen (in total) semi-structured interviews with girls and their parents. As well non-participant observation was done at their workplaces and in their homes.

In addition to this, we all enjoyed a shared visit to a park which further built trust and rapport and gained in-depth understanding of issues facing the girls and their families. My ability to gain trust and rapport of the girls and their families through these methods was augmented by the fact that I am a Pakistani national. It became evident during the fieldwork that my nationality and my status as a teacher enhanced my capacity for building and gaining trust of the girls and their families as teaching is a noble profession practised by trustworthy people. As well, the girls' parents asked very personal questions to me as well. This proved to be useful in the process of gaining consent and building trust not only with the girls but also their parents who asserted their responsibilities for their daughters and sisters.

All of the girls were bilingual. While they spoke the language of their ethnic group in their homes, they were all also able to converse in Urdu which is the national language of Pakistan. The clarity of their responses to interview questions attested to their familiarity with the researcher's language. As well as interview transcripts, the data generated during the fieldwork also included field notes, written observation and self-reflective memos. Payment to the girls for their time for this research was made in a variety of ways at the suggestion of key informants themselves. For example, the girls were taken by taxi to the park, and entertained by the researcher at the park, including payment for the swings and food as a 'payment'. In this respect, it is important to note that the girls' parents had no difficulties with this style of payment.

4.2. Research Ethics

Since this was a research project under the auspices of an Australian University, I was constrained by requirements of that university's Research Ethics Committee in order to obtain ethics clearance and so recruit key informants and gain access to them. However, while there were many difficulties faced at the field level, due to cultural differences and understanding, mentioned elsewhere (see Khalid, 2014), the fieldwork practices and data gathering all fulfilled the ethics requirements specified (see Morrow, 2008 for further details). These included an approved information sheet about the broader research aims which was shared with the girls and their parents. The time and other commitments which were required from girls and parents in this research were also shared with them in the first face-to-face sessions with the families when I was in the process of obtaining consent. The parents and girls were frequently and clearly reassured that their participation in this research was wholly voluntary. In addition to this, the girls and their parents were assured that the data of this research would only be accessed by the researcher and if they agreed, excerpts of what they say would be used in research reports and papers. Girls chose pseudonyms to maintain their confidentiality.

5. Findings

5.1 Family, Girls and Construction of Gender Identities

The Afghan community in Islamabad lives within the code of Pakhtoonwali which contains their unwritten guiding principles of life (Nocker&Junaid, 2011, p. 39). This code includes notions of honor and shame, dignity, courage and bravery within families, and there is also usually a great deal of mutual support and people will go out of their way to help each other (Badshah et al., 2012). Islam is the main religion within the Afghan community, but in practice, the cultural traditions, practices and norms are more powerful than religious beliefs and concepts. It is the cultural norms not the religious ones, that generate negative attitudes towards the rights of girls to be educated or to gain access to health facilities. Similarly, cultural mores determine perspectives on women's access to formal and informal employment and their rights to inheritance (Kargar, 2011, pp. 174-185). Thus there is strict segregation of sexes in the Afghan community studies in this research. Since Pakhtun/Pushtun women have largely been a closed subject with Pakhtun men, there have been very few opportunities to examine the real life of Pakhtun women. As Spain (1972) noted much earlier, the Pathan people speak very little about women. Rather, women are part of the background only. To outside observers the women are virtually invisible (see also Raza, 2014).

This is because the girls and women are the 'honour' of the family – and this honour is essential for them to keep with them throughout their lives. Similarly all decisions about their lives are made by their parents, and then later, their husbands. Nevertheless, as Connell (2009, p. 79) has noted, the family is a core institution in defining sex categorization across the world. It is this primary role of families which in turn activates gender, and in the case of the girls in this research, sets severe limitations on their opportunities. The fieldwork for this research demonstrated how the Afghan girls live in extended families where their elders play a dominant role in their daily lives.

The families' structures, traditions, norms and overall dynamics were all found to be core determinants shaping the status, the degree of freedom of choice, opportunities and rights of girls and women in the home (Kargar, 2011) as will be discussed below. It is also to note here that often girls and women are unaware of their rights and where they do know that wrong is being done to them, they feel it is useless to speak against men (Sohail, 2014). The very first discrimination accorded to an Afghan girl is at birth when a son is overtly preferred over a daughter (Kargar, 2011, p. 37). The studied girls confirmed this was the case for them but they accepted it as an inalterable fact with seemingly little awareness of how it was affecting their lives. On the other hand, it is worth noting this is not limited to Pathan families but rather is a common phenomenon across Asia including the broader society in Pakistan. As Nayar (2011) and Croll (2000) have noted such preferences rooted in cultural values and well as being a mainstay, of masculinist conservatism where rules, behaviours and attitudes are defined by the men of the family.

A second custom within the Pathan families which determines the identity and diminishes the rights of girls and women is to be found in the common practice of early and arranged marriages. In line with cultural traditions, the girl's interests or consent were usually wholly ignored by her parents (see also Critelli, 2012, p. 4). In choosing partners for their daughters, parents said they believed that they knew the best interests of the girls. This is perhaps not surprising given that the parents and older family members believed girls to be unwise, ignorant and unable to think rationally or wisely and so incapable of making decisions.

Again it is important to note that such assumptions evident in the Pathan families studied here come from cultural traditions and not religious dictates. Girls' right to give consent and participate in decision-making is clearly explicated in the Quran (chapter 4: verse 21, Rehman, 2014). These rights are also reinforced by different international Conventions such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination (CEDAW) and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (Critelli, 2012, p. 4). However, with regards to marriage decisions, the opposite prevails. Indeed, it is a matter of shame to the family if girls indicate or choose a life partner rather than respecting tradition and unquestioningly accepting the decision of their elders. As Kargar (2011, pp. 53-65) has also shown, the decision of a girl to choose her own life partner would be interpreted by families and the community as a matter of high indecency and well beyond a girl's defined boundaries.

The data analysis from the field research with the Afghan community also revealed another important aspect of girls' lower social status in the home. This was related to what Connell (2009, p. 79) called the economics of the household. It is only the men who are deemed fit to control income and expenditure for the family. This assumption again privileges the males and further reinforces the unequal gender roles in the family. In this situation, the status of girls and women was thus not appreciated in their homes, even if they were contributing to family income through their work in the informal economy. Even when they were earning incomes, they would not receive the same respect as the boys or men of the household precisely because of their biological and social status difference, as Croll (2000, p. 130) has argued. Not surprisingly some of the girls had become ruefully aware of their lowly status. As they expressed in research interviews: No matter what we do or whatever is allowed for us to do to support our families financially, we cannot get equal respect and treatment such as our family male members get in the household.

We cannot get an equal status to men even to our younger brothers. Our income is used in the household's expenditures but it is not considered important (recorded interview with rag pickers on 20 February, 2012). Finally, it is noteworthy that girls and women are generally required to observe and work in purdah in this community. Purdah is a social institution which is extremely important in cultural traditions. Purdah is the requirement to cover the hair, arms, legs and private parts of the body. The Afghan girls particularly observe strict purdah (with burqa and niqab-veil) when stepping out of their homes. Even girls as young as four or five start to take shawls, called dopattas, to cover themselves as part of their tradition and norms. Many families in the Afghan community use purdah to segregate girls and women from stranger males.

The formal justification for purdah is to maintain females' chastity and purity (Harrison, 2010, p. 151). However, Purdah is also a way to confine girls and women to the private sphere and ensure their continuing invisibility.

5.2 A Small Case Study: Afghan Rag Pickers and their Experiences

The occupation of rag-picking requires searching through the cities' dump sites, shops and houses to find recyclable items by sorting and sifting through plastic material, glass, bread, iron and steel.

The girls work in hazardous working environments such as in garbage piles with bare hands, without covered shoes, and frequently inhaling smoke while working on the streets or other public areas. While watching them working in such situations, I asked the girls and their parents if I could buy rubber shoes and gloves for them as payment for their time, but they rejected the idea. According to them, shoes and gloves would be troublesome for them because they would have to take care of them. Moreover, they asserted, such protective equipment would not help them in their work of collecting and sorting through garbage. Yet, it was apparent that they were prone to injuries such as cuts, or illnesses such as skin infections, colds, coughs or fever. Despite such problems, the girls were reluctant to take precautionary measures (field observation). They all responded that precautionary measures were unnecessary and that they believed they were effective without them. The girls worked five to eight hours each day, but unlike boys from the same families, they usually returned to the safety of their homes for their rest periods.

The rag pickers studied in this research said that when they first began working, they did not like the environment of the garbage piles or the process of sifting through looking for re-saleable items. With a few years' experience they felt more familiar with and less daunted by, rag-picking. When questioned more closely about the health risks and hazards, the girls reasserted that they were not concerned about any serious risks or hazards. On the other hand, all the girls were emphatic that their worst experiences related to public acceptance. They all complained about the bad attitude and the evident lack of respect of general public towards them because of their work. One of the girls, Zarina (pseudonym) explained that 'people think that we are wanderers, and that are trying to steal things from shops and houses. They say bad words to us and do not respect us at all.' The girls felt such attitudes were exacerbated by the recognition that their work environment required them to be on the streets where they were more vulnerable to harassment.

In some cases, street harassment can lead to sexual harassment (Kearl, 2010). One example from the fieldwork portrays a lucky escape from this situation. On a quiet street two girls encountered a man standing with his car who asked them for their help. The girls stopped to see what he needed. He asked them to sit inside the car to help him while he checked the engine. They refused to sit inside the car but he insisted they sit in the car and forced them not to move from the street where they were standing. The girls become very frightened and did not know what to do. They wanted to scream out but they could not do so due to fear. They looked around for help but there was no one to help them. They said that this situation lasted for twenty minutes until they saw a man coming along the street. They screamed for help and then ran away (interview with rag pickers on 22 January, 2012). To avoid such situations, many parents require their children and especially girls who are working on the streets, only to operate in groups, of two or three or more as one means to prevent or minimize such harassment and abuse.

The work as rag pickers depended wholly on parents' decisions and the girls knew they could be forced to stop work at any time. This is related to their physical appearance, rather than their age. If a girl is tall and healthy, even at the age of seven or eight, she will be forced to stop rag picking as she is growing 'older', that is deemed to be looking more 'womanly' (Rostami-Povey, 2007). By contrast, if a girl aged twelve or thirteen appears thin and acceptably 'girlish' or 'childish' to her parents, she is allowed to continue to work on the street picking rags. This confused set of standards appeared strange for some of girls. As noted above, they had little understanding of their bodies or development, so they could not understand their parents' view of 'womanliness' or 'girlishness'. Although the family still needed the extra money gained from the girls' income, most parents tended to respond to social pressure and cultural traditions and norms. Thus, when the girls appeared to their parents to be maturing, they would insist their daughters stop working and confine them to the four walls of their home

6. Discussion

Meyers' gender identity approach can guide to understand the defined roles and responsibilities of Afghan rag pickers to which they are already predisposed, where their self is neglected and they are treated as Others (2001). These girls are treated as non-persons who have no agency and indeed should not ever have agency. To their families and to themselves they are little more than mere bodies which are defined and controlled by the family male members. In this whole article, it has been argued that the girls are not allowed to access to basic rights such as education and health services. Moreover, they also lack opportunities or choices because there is no space to transgress. The relationship between the girls and their families is wholly unequal. At the same time the girls are dependent on this relationship which may further increase chances of abuse of power. Here it is to disagree with Meyers (2001, p. 37) that the young girls could not exert a good deal of control over their gender identities. This lack of control can be seen vividly in the daily lives of young Afghan rag pickers.

The data analysis of this research revealed that all of the studied young rag pickers accepted and obeyed all the demands made of them in the process of conforming to the traditions and norms of the Afghan community. None of the studied girls had ever enrolled in a formal education system. They started paid employment at the age of five as their families required. Later when they reached a certain age limit, they were forced to give up employment and always remain inside their houses. Their families not only shaped the girls' interpretations of the world and of the families themselves, but they also shaped how the girls perceived themselves. The girls had a limited and foreshortened view of themselves and their rights even to basic education and health services.

In such situations, it might be argued that Afghan rag pickers should raise their voices and challenge their subordinate gender identities while conforming to the cultural norms and authoritative institutions including families. However, this is an immensely complex question which deserves further investigation and analysis. I would argue here that from a feminist's point of view the answer would be a resounding yes. But it would also be hollow. From a cultural perspective, taking account of how these girls' lives and work, the answer would be an equally resounding no. Here is the main clash of ideas. On the one hand, the girls belong to their culture and intrinsic to that are firstly, the conformity to cultural norms and traditions and secondly the individual girls' understanding of rights and individual identity. But again this would raise the question of knowing rights and individual identity. Consider the questions-what if the authoritative institutions (families in this case) did not allow one to exercise one's rights and fight for the individual identity? What if young Afghan girls faced serious repercussions for their behaviours and actions, if they sought to exercise some of their basic rights such as accessing schools and health institutions? What if there were no legal and social protection for them in the society? What if they chose to take bold steps, what would be their options? For example, if an Afghan rag picker wanted to go to school, she would be dependent on her family for this decision. The conflict between her wish for education and her wish to be a proper daughter and sister would be immense. It is not enough to say that access to basic education is her basic right, even though some of the girls indeed had some inkling of such rights. But despite having some ideas of the potential and worth of education, she would have had adequate experience of independent decision-making to make decisions. Logically, and just as the girls discussed in informal communications in the fieldwork, such decisions would depend on supporting mentors within her house to obtain an access to a school.

To find a solution to these kinds of problems of individuality, gender identities and power forces and structures, Eveline and Bacchi (2010) suggest that changes in gender relations and power structures can only be possible when the dominant groups, the boys and men of the families, are fully involved in the change process (see Connell 2009, pp. 28-30). This is a transformative process in which male norms are interrogated. The participation of the men of the household in the change process would give them understanding of individual identities. Thoroughly framed and taking account of concerns about cultural traditions such processes could make them realize that they could play an important role in improving the status of girls and women in the society. It is the intention of such efforts at empowerment through male participation is not aimed at creating a clash or rift in the Afghan community by creating awareness among young girls and women about their rights and getting freedom for moral development. Rather, the arguments would be framed through potential benefits. The lives of young rag pickers could take a positive turn if there were a substantive shift in the attitude and perception of family male members and some movement towards supporting improved status and rights of girls and women.

Such major change in cultural norms would of course need effective leadership and combined participation of government and non-governmental organizations. They could run campaigns and work closely with boys and men to evaluate their thinking and behavioral patterns towards girls and women. In this connection, experiences from the world can be shared but not imposed just as Connell (2009, pp. 28-30) has shown. In these kinds of ways participative activities and consciousness raising could be adapted according to the local living and working environment of the Afghan community in urban Pakistan.

7. Conclusion

Throughout this article, I have argued that the gender identities of Afghan young rag pickers are formed according to the cultural traditions and norms of Afghan community. It has also been argued that decision-making by male family members has continued in part because such processes support their own interests in line with the classical model of male dominant structures. The binary division of male and female, and hierarchical unequal relationship ultimately creates major restrictions preventing girls and women from accessing different opportunities.

The paper showed how the prevailing structures of the households including home economics and the politics of dominance, explicitly assign and define clear roles for men and women in the households which in turn are mediated through the families and conserve and reproduce the cultural practices and mores of the Afghan community. Thus it was shown that even from the very first, the 'son preference' undermines the status of girls and women, firstly in the households, and then ultimately in the society, overall. This situation thus ensures the gender identities to which young female rag pickers are expected to belong.

It has been questioned in this article, whether it is possible for girls to form their identities in the Afghan cultural context. I argued that it is not a feasible solution to rebel against the cultural norms and traditions per se. Instead, there is an urgent need to involve boys and men of the families to shift their understanding so that they might begin accepting girls and women, not just as important members of family and household communities but also, in various ways as responsible contributors to wider society. Further research is needed to identify ways to convince boys and men to realize that they could play life-changing roles in the daily lives of young girls and women.

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