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Coeducation in Higher Education of Afghanistan: Students' Perspective

Sayeed Naqibullah Orfan and Ebtisam Niazi

Abstract

The study investigated Afghan undergraduate students' perceptions of positive and negative effects of coeducation. It also examined the impact of students' gender and ethnicity on their perceptions. A survey questionnaire was used to collect data from 230 randomly selected students from Takhar University. The authors utilized descriptive and inferential statistics to analyze the data. The results showed that students had positive attitudes towards coeducation. They believed that coeducation had both personal and social effects such as improving students' academic confidence, communication skills, preparing them for real life, promoting gender equality and reducing gender biases and stereotypes. However, less than half of students believed that coeducation had negative effects, e.g., distracting students and male students' domination of class activities. Moreover, the findings revealed that students' gender had a significant impact on their responses; female students' attitude towards coeducation was stronger than that of male students. However, students' ethnicity did not significantly impact their responses.

Keywords: Coeducation, gender equality, effects, attitudes, learning environment

1. Introduction

Coeducation (also known as mixed-gender or mixed-sex education) is a system of education that allows both girls and boys to study together in the same setting under the same conditions and equally share resources, facilities and experiences of a school [1–4]. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, many coeducational schools were established in North America, Russia and some European countries such as Germany and Britain [5–7]. Since then, the concept of coeducation has traveled around the world and the vast majority of schools and universities are mixed-gender [8, 9]. Knight [10] asserts that many educational institutions around the world adopted coeducation because of the public pressure and advocates of equal rights of girls to education. There were oppositions against coeducation in some Latin American and many Islamic countries, but soon they gave way to coeducation. There are still conservative and traditional communities in countries that oppose coeducation, which mainly roots from their traditional beliefs and cultural norms [11, 12]. For instance, coeducation is completely banned in North West of Pakistan where women have no social status and political power [11, 13, 14].

Implementation of coeducation in Afghanistan has been heavily dependent on political situation and ruling faction. Coeducation in Afghanistan dates back to the 1920s during which Amanullah Khan was ruling the country, and he is thought to have relentlessly attempted to modernize the country and promote gender equality in the country. During his reign in 1928, the first co-educational classes were introduced at Amaniyya High School for grades one and two [15]. Coeducation was introduced at the university level in the late 1970s during which People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA), a Soviet-backed party rose to power. PDPA implemented rapid social and economic changes and introduced mass literacy for women and men of all ages. They reformed the education system and stressed education for both women and men. Numerous decrees aimed to ensure equal rights for women were issued. A large percentage of women obtained their higher education and worked as doctors, faculty members and MPs [16, 17].

However, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 and civil wars destroyed the education system. Women's access to higher education was severely curtailed following the collapse of the communist regime and rise of the Mujahedeen to power in 1992. During their era (1992–1996), women's movement was restricted and access to higher education became limited particularly for women [18]. The situation became worse under the Taliban Regime (1996–2001). They outlawed coeducation in the country [16]. They barred girls from going to school let alone attending universities and studying along with boys under a roof [19–21].

Following the US attack to Afghanistan and the collapse of Taliban Regime in 2001, public universities reopened their doors for girls and boys and new public and private higher education institutions were established. Girls and women were encouraged to matriculate at these universities through konkor exams (national entrance exams) [18]. Since 2001, the country has made significant progress with respect to gender equality particularly women's education [22]. The classes in public and private higher education institutions are coeducational with the exception of schools of Sharia at the universities in which female and male classes are separated. Furthermore, female and male classes are separated particularly in remote provinces by a few departments of some faculties when there is enough number of girls to offer female-exclusive class. Some public schools particularly primary ones are coeducational in various parts of the country. Moreover, some private schools especially the ones based in big cities (e.g., Kabul) offer coeducational classes at high school level. Teacher training colleges, community colleges and vocational institutes also offer coeducational classes. Many foreign language centers in particular English language centers offer coeducational classes even the ones based in remote cities (e.g., Talian City). However, all female and male classes in madrassas (religious schools) are separated.

Scholars are of various views with respect to coeducation and its effects on students. According to Evans [23], coeducation is more conducive to gender equality; it results in undermining gender stereotypes as girls reveal equal competences in mixed-gender classes. Coeducation is believed to play a vital role in the social development of girls and boys. They gain social maturity through interaction with each other and sharing personal experiences [11]. Mixed-gender education provides girls and boys with the opportunity to see each other as partners in learning. It offers a wide variety of learning experiences and role models, and it promotes equality and diversity. As girls and boys study and work together in the same environment under the same conditions, they improve their social and emotional understanding. In a coed setting, they learn to treat each other with respect and reject the gender stereotypes associated with a particular gender [24]. Schmuck [25] states

that mixed-gender education helps boys and girls to develop effective interpersonal skills, which are essential for their social life and success in their workplace.

On the other hand, other scholars have disfavored coeducation. Bosire et al. [26] assert that female students' academic performance is negatively affected in a coed setting since they may be exposed to subtle discriminatory pedagogical practices, and in some cases they experience verbal and sexual harassment by male students. According to Signorella et al. [27], in coed classes, male students receive more attention than girls because they behave disruptively in the class compared to female students who are considered quieter and well-behaved. In coeducation, female students are likely to worry that their being assertive in the classroom or outside make them feel less attractive [28]. Francis [29] argues that male students dominate interaction in coed classrooms and hands-on activities in the learning process. According to O'Reilly and Mottet [30], cases of indiscipline such as bullying, stealing, absenteeism, sneaking and defiance of authority are more widespread in coeducational environment compared to single-sex education. Some scholars [31–33] have argued that that coeducation is risky for girls since they are marginalized and belittled in coed classes. Some researchers [34–37] concluded that girls studying in single-sex schools were more successful than those studying in coeducational schools.

A very small number of studies investigated students' perception of coeducation particularly that of the undergraduate students. Kachero [24] investigated students' and teachers' perceptions about effects of coeducation on academic performance in secondary schools in Kenya. The author concluded that students and teachers had negative attitudes towards coeducation. High level of indiscipline, male students' uncivil behaviors, teachers' preference of male students to female students' and encouragement of girl-boy relationship accounted for students' and teachers' ones negative attitudes. Payne & Newton [38] investigated teachers' and students' perceptions of mixed-gender secondary schooling. The findings showed that both teachers and students perceived coeducation to be most advantageous for students when it came to preparing them for future occupational and interpersonal roles. Rennie and Parker [39] studied students' and teachers' perceptions of single sex and mixed-sex mathematics classes. The participants believed that single-sex classes provided a more supportive environment for girls but a less supported environment for boys. Khalil et al. [40] concluded that female students in mixed-sex institutions had higher self-esteem than those in single-sex education. However, some studies [41–43] comparing the effects of single-sex and mixed-sex education concluded that there were statistically significant differences between them when it came to their effects on students. Alanazy [44] found that Saudi students, who were studying in the USA, had positive attitudes towards learning in coeducational environment while Alsaif [45] concluded that Saudi students, who were studying in the west at the time of the study, preferred single-sex education. Alsiaf also found out that female students were more receptive to coeducation than male students.

Afghanistan is one of the poorest countries in the world and traditional and cultural values and norms especially with respect to women are still prevalent in many of its parts. Interaction between women and men is considered a taboo particularly in remote areas. As far as the authors are concerned, no studies have been conducted to investigate the status of coeducation, students', instructors' and the general public views about coeducation at school and higher education levels. The current study is an attempt to investigate Afghan undergraduate students' perceptions of coeducation. It explores students' attitudes towards coeducation and their views about positive and negative effects of coeducation. Furthermore, it examines the impact of students' gender and ethnicity on their responses.

2. Methods

2.1 Participants

The participants of the study were 230 undergraduate students who were majoring in different fields at Takhar University located in Takhar, a northeastern province of Afghanistan. They were between 18 and 26 years old at the time of the study. Around 36% (82) of the participants were female while 64% (148) were male. Most of the participants (67%) of the participants were Tajik followed by Uzbek participants (21%). Pashtuns formed around 10% of the participants while a small percentage (3%) of the participants were Hazara.

2.2 Instrument

The authors used a survey questionnaire to collect data for the study. The questionnaire was developed after conducting focus group discussions and literature review. The researchers conducted focus group discussions with 10 students to identify questionnaire items. They discussed the positive and negative effects of coeducation and made a list of them. The authors developed 15 items of the questionnaire from the focus group discussions. They adapted 9 items from other studies [24, 39, 46, 47]. The questionnaire consisted of three sections. The first part sought the respondents' demographic information, i.e., gender, age, and ethnicity. The second part consisted of 14 items that aimed to elicit the participants' response about their attitudes towards coeducation and its positive effects. The third part with 10 items inquired the participants' views about negative effects of mixed-sex education. They were required to respond to the questionnaire items on a four Point-Likert scale (Strongly disagree = 1, Disagree = 2, Agree = 3, Strongly agree = 4).

The authors conducted a pilot test with 10 purposely selected students with English proficiency from Takhar University to measure the reliability of the questionnaire items and ensure their consistency. They were required to respond to 24 items on a 4-point Likert Scale. The reliability analysis was carried out on SPSS version 26.0. The results demonstrated that the value of Cronbach's alpha is over 0.85 coefficient for each section (**Table 1**), which indicates high internal consistency of the items in each section. Thus, the items were considered appropriate for the study. The questionnaire was translated into Dari (the lingua franca of Afghanistan) since English is a foreign language and many people cannot speak English in Afghanistan [48, 49]. The Dari questionnaire was given to three faculty members in the Dari Department for improvement and the problematic items were identified and revised based on their comments.

2.3 Procedure and analysis

The authors collected data from 230 randomly selected students who were majoring in different fields at seven faculties at Takhar University. They wrote the names of classes in each faculty and picked two classes from a bowl. Using each class's attendance sheet, the authors selected 18 students; they selected every other

Category	Number of Items	Cronbach's alpha
Positive effects	14	0.868
Negative effects	10	0.855

Table 1.
Reliability value of questionnaire items.

student. They explained the study and its purposes to the participants in seven sessions in prearranged times and places. They were required to read and sign a consent letter, which aimed to ensure them that their participation was voluntary and their responses were confidential. They were requested to read the instruction for each section and respond to the items accordingly. The authors encouraged them to inquire about any unclear items in the questionnaire.

The authors closely examined the questionnaires to ensure that the participants completed them appropriately. They discarded 20 questionnaires since they were completed inappropriately. They numerically coded the data in an excel spread sheet and imported them to SPSS version 26.0 for analysis. The authors used descriptive statistics to determine the frequency, mean and stand deviation of the data. Furthermore, they used inferential statistics such as Independent Samples *T*-test and One-Way ANOVA test to examine the differences between participants' responses by their gender and ethnicity.

3. Results

3.1 Overall attitude

The authors conducted descriptive statistics to determine the overall attitude of students towards coeducation. The overall mean score of students' attitude is around 3, which means that they have a positive attitude towards coeducation. The authors divided views of students about the effects of coeducation into two categories.

3.1.1 Personal effects of coeducation

The participants stated that coeducation had positive impact on students. Over 84% believed that coeducation improved female and male students' academic confidence, communication skills, and motivation for study (**Table 2**). Moreover, over 83% agreed and strongly agreed that coeducation would improve students' confidence to speak in the presence of the opposite sex, help them do away with their shyness and prepare them for real life situations. Around 76% and 77% stated that coeducation exposed students to various viewpoints and facilitated positive competition between female and male students.

No	Statement	Mean	% of A & SA
1	It Improves academic confidence of female and male students.	3.11	83.5
2	It improves students' communication skills.	3.11	84.8
3	It Improves students' confidence to express their views in the presence of the opposite sex.	3.23	86.1
4	It helps students get rid of their shyness.	3.22	83.9
5	it increases students' motivation for more efforts in their study.	3.29	86.5
6	It prepares students for real world.	3.14	83.5
7	It facilitates positive competition between female and male students.	2.91	77.4
8	Students are exposed to different viewpoints.	2.91	75.7

A = agree, SA = strongly agree.

Table 2.
Students' view of personal effects of coeducation.

3.1.2 Social effects of coeducation

The participants believed that coeducation had positive social effects. As **Table 3** shows, over 83% agreed and strongly agreed that coeducation promoted girls' and boys' socialization and promoted mutual respect between them. Around 74% and 79% stated that coeducation would help reduce gender biases and improve girls' and boys' understanding of each other, respectively. Furthermore, most of the participants believed that coeducation promoted gender equality (61%) and reduced education cost (55%).

3.2 Negative effects of coeducation

The authors utilized descriptive statistics to determine the participants' views about negative effects of coeducation. As **Table 4** shows, 43% stated that coeducation would result in students' distraction and they would not feel comfortable sharing their ideas in front of the opposite sex. Similarly, 42% of the participants stated that coeducation would not meet students' various needs. 40% believed that students would not ask questions openly in front of the opposite sex and boys always dominate the activities in the class. More than a quarter of the respondents

No	Statement	Mean	% of A & SA
9	It promotes girls' and boys' socialization.	3.16	86.5
10	It promotes a mutual respect between girls and boys.	3.14	83.5
11	It helps reduce gender biases and stereotypes.	2.9	73.5
12	It improves girls' and boys' understanding of each other.	2.96	78.7
13	It promotes gender equality.	2.62	61.3
14	It reduces education cost.	2.55	54.8

Table 3.
Students' view of social effects of coeducation.

No	Statement	Mean	% A & SA
1	It results in students' distraction.	2.38	43.2
2	Students do not feel comfortable with sharing their ideas in the presence of the opposite sex.	2.31	43
3	It will not meet the various needs of girls and boys since they are different.	2.3	42.2
4	Students cannot ask their questions openly in presence of the opposite sex.	2.3	40.4
5	Boys dominate the class activities.	2.32	39.6
6	It leads to illegal relationships between girls and boys.	2.2	36.1
7	Students do not work well in mixed gender groups.	2.12	33
8	Students will not be active in the learning process since girls and boys are not willing to interact with each other.	2.12	29.6
9	It results in poor academic performance of students.	1.98	23.9
10	Girls demonstrate a lack of self-esteem and self-confidence.	1.83	20

Table 4.
Students' views of negative effects of coeducation.

(36%) believed that coeducation would lead to illegal relationships between girls and boys. Around 30% and 33% agreed and strongly agreed that students would not be active in the learning process and work well in mixed-sex groups, respectively. A small percentage of the respondents stated that coeducation would result in poor academic performance (24%) and girls' lack of self-esteem and confidence (20%).

3.3 Participants' demographic profile

The authors utilized Independent Samples *T*-test to examine the differences between participants' responses by their gender. As **Table 5** shows, the p-value (0.000) for gender is less than the alpha level (0.05), which indicates that the participants' gender had a significant impact on their responses. That is, female students ($M = 3.17$) had a stronger positive attitude than male students ($M = 2.85$) towards coeducation. Compared to male students, they believed that coeducation was more advantageous. Furthermore, One-Way ANOVA test was run to determine the differences between participants' responses by their ethnicity. The p-value (0.423) for ethnicity is greater than the alpha level (0.05). Therefore, it is concluded that the participants' ethnicity did not have a significant impact on their responses.

In addition, Independent Sample *T*-test and One-Way ANOVA test were used to examine the differences between the participants' views of negative effects of coeducation. The high mean indicates that the participants believe that coeducation has more negative effects. As **Table 6** shows, the p-value (0.000) for gender is less than the alpha level (0.05), which indicates significant difference. Compared to male students ($M = 2.35$), female students ($M = 1.9$) believed that coeducation had little or no negative effects. The p-value for ethnicity is 0.338, which is greater than the alpha level (0.05). Thus, it is concluded that the participants of different ethnicities have similar views about negative effects of coeducation.

Category		N	Mean	SD	P-value
Gender	Female	82	3.17	0.4015	0.000
	Male	148	2.85	0.59961	
Ethnicity	Hazara	5	3.13	0.73955	0.423
	Pashtun	20	2.94	0.64859	
	Tajik	153	2.96	0.53907	
	Uzbek	44	2.93	0.56272	

Table 5.
 Positive effects of coeducation by gender and ethnicity.

Category		N	Mean	SD	P-value
Gender	Female	82	1.9	0.46001	0.000
	Male	148	2.35	0.65314	
Ethnicity	Hazara	5	1.78	0.40866	0.338
	Pashtun	20	2.245	0.75217	
	Tajik	153	2.1837	0.61905	
	Uzbek	44	2.2023	0.63922	

Table 6.
 Negative effects of coeducation by gender and ethnicity.

4. Discussion

The study investigated Afghan undergraduate students' perceptions of coeducation. The findings showed that students had positive attitudes towards coeducation. It can be accounted for by the fact that coeducational classes are almost the only place where Afghan girls and boys have the opportunity to interact with one another and exchange ideas. The vast majority of students experience their first interaction with their female and male peers in coeducational classes. It corroborates the finding of the studies by Payne & Newton [38] and Alanazy [44] who reported that students held positive attitudes towards coeducation. It also supported the findings of the study by Hong et al. [50] who reported that students in coeducational classes had more positive attitudes and higher interests than those in single-sex classes. However, it contradicts those of the studies by Kachero [24] and Rennie and Parker [39] who found out that both teachers and students had negative attitudes towards coeducation and they preferred single-sex classes.

The vast majority of students believed that coeducation had a variety of personal effects. They stated that coeducation would improve students' academic confidence, communication skills, confidence to speak in the presence of the opposite sex, and enhance their motivation for further study. They also believed that coeducation would reduce students' shyness, expose them to different ideas, facilitate positive competition between them and prepare them for real-life. Similarly, they believed that coeducation would bring about social effects such as promoting mutual respect between women and men and gender equality, reducing education cost, facilitating girls' and boys' socialization, boosting girls' and boys' understanding of each other and reducing gender biases and stereotypes. The fact that Afghan girls and boys meet and talk with one another in coeducational classes and learn to treat one another as unique individuals can be the major reason why they believe that coeducation is of a wide variety of positive effects.

However, less than half of the participants believed that coeducation had negative effects. They believed that coeducation would distract students, would not meet their various needs, result in students' poor academic performance and male students' domination of class activities. This finding corroborates that of the study by McKenzie et al. [51] who reported that male students' interruption of female students in coeducational classes affected their learning and performance. Furthermore, they stated that coeducation paved the way for illegal relationship between girls and boys. It is on a par with the study by Achoka [52] who concluded that early relationship and marriage increased in coeducational environment. The participants also believed that students did not feel comfortable to share their ideas and ask questions openly in the presence of the opposite sex. This finding is consistent with that of the study by Younger and Warrington [53] and Narwana & Rathee [54]. Students also believed that coeducation would result in inactivity in the learning process and mixed-sex groups and female students' lack of self-esteem and confidence.

A number of reasons can account for these views. Afghanistan is a patriarchal society, which greatly affects interaction in coeducational classes where more attention is paid to male students than female ones. Moreover, the vast majority of lecturers in Afghan universities are male who may prefer male students' voices than female ones and may give more chances to male students to speak in the class. Teacher-centered approaches and methods are very widespread in Afghan higher education institutions that rarely address students' various needs [55]. Some lecturers discourage interaction between girls and boys in coeducational classes, and some lecturers form pseudo-cooperative learning groups made up of girls and boys, but rarely encourage cooperation between female and male students.

The results showed that students gender had a significant impact on their responses. That is, female students' attitude towards coeducation was stronger than that of male students. Compared to male students, female students perceived coeducation to be of more positive effects and fewer negative impacts. This finding is in line with that of the study by Alsaif [45] who reported that female students were more receptive to coeducation than male students. On the other hand, students' ethnicity did not have a significant impact on their responses. In other words, Tajik, Uzbek, Hazara and Pashtun participants were of similar views about coeducation.

5. Conclusion

The results showed that the Afghan undergraduate students had a positive attitude towards coeducation. The vast majority of students believed that coeducation had a wide variety of personal and social effects such as improving students' academic confidence, communication skills, preparing them for real life, promoting gender equality and reducing gender biases and stereotypes. However, less than half of the participants perceived coeducation to be of negative effects, e.g., distracting students and male students' domination of class activities. The study revealed that students' gender had a significant impact on their attitudes towards coeducation. The students' ethnicity did not significantly impact their views of positive and negative effects of coeducation.

Positive attitudes towards the learning environment are essential and help students maximize their learning and become lifelong learners [56]. Given the findings of the current study, the authors recommend the Ministry of Higher Education – the managing and policy making body of the Afghan government – to require all higher education institutions to change their single-sex classes to mixed-gender ones after a thorough investigation of other stakeholders' perspectives, i.e., lecturers, students, administrators and the public. The authors suggest further studies on coeducation in the context of Afghanistan. They should employ a larger sample from various public and private higher education institutions. Besides survey questionnaires, interviews with students and teachers as well as observations in classes should be used to gain more insights about how students and teachers feel about coeducation. Moreover, studies to find ways to minimize negative effects of coeducation and maximize students' experiences in coed environments are recommended. In order to minimize negative effects of coeducation, authors suggest Afghan university lecturers to create a learning environment that ensures equal engagement of both female and male students in the learning process and encourage them to work together to maximize their learning.

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