

# **Literacies, Masculinities and Agency Among Adult Male Literacy Learners: An Ethnographic Study in Afghanistan**

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## Abstract

Decades of conflict, regime change, economic hardship and the deliberate exclusion of girls from education prior to 2001 have significantly shaped the landscape of education in Afghanistan, with policies between 2001-2021 prioritising women and girls in literacy research and policymaking. This has meant the absence of literacy and learning spaces for men who also struggle with low literacy. In this context, male learners must navigate feminised literacy programmes while reconstructing their masculine identities in response.

This ethnographic study draws on classroom observations, workplace visits, interviews and informal discussions to examine which literacy practices are valued by adult male literacy learners and how these shape their identities, masculinities and agency across the domains of work, home, religion and classroom. The analysis is informed by an ideological perspective of literacy, Connell's theory of masculinities, Kabeer's conceptualisation of agency and Lukes' dimensions of power.

Findings show that men value and strategically use a range of informal literacy practices, including religious and digital literacy practices, numeracy, calligraphy and good handwriting, as tools and resources to assert hegemonic masculinity and gain respect in their communities. Masculinity is performed through patterns such as provider, breadwinner, physically strong worker, generous carer and 'jack of all trades.' Identities such as 'religious leader', 'elderly man' and 'educated man' serve as markers of status and authority. However, within the classroom, these men often face infantilisation and deficit perspectives that undermine their established roles, producing tensions between their self-perception and their treatment as adult learners.

The thesis demonstrates that agency is exercised not only through overt decision-making but also in everyday acts of negotiation, resistance and adaptation, both within and beyond formal learning spaces. Male learners influence curricula, challenge facilitators and shape classroom rules, while also managing family and work decisions with moral and practical reasoning. The interplay of literacy, masculinity and agency reveals that men's experiences of learning are neither uniform nor unidirectional, but are shaped by ongoing negotiation of power, status and cultural expectations. This study underscores the need to recognise men's perspectives and informal practices in literacy education policy and theory, particularly in contexts marked by political instability and social transformation.

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## Abbreviations

- ALF** – Adult literacy facilitator.
- ALLs** – Adult literacy learners.
- ANAFAE** – Afghan National Association for Adult Education.
- ELA** – Enhancement of Literacy in Afghanistan.
- FCDO** - Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office
- GDP** – Gross domestic product.
- INGO** – International non-governmental organisation.
- LSP** – Literacy as Social Practice
- MoE** – Ministry of Education.
- NESP I, II, III** – National Education Strategic Plan I, II, III.
- NLS** – New Literacy Studies.
- NGO** – Non-governmental organisation.
- OSAA** – Organisation for Sustainable Aid in Afghanistan.
- PDPA** – People’s Democratic Party of Afghanistan.
- PhD** – Doctor of Philosophy
- PLD** – Provincial Literacy Department.
- RFE/RL** – Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty.
- TESOL** – Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages
- TVET** – Technical and Vocational Education and Training.
- UNESCO** – United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization.
- UNICEF** – United Nations Children’s Fund.

## Use of Terms, Names, Quotations and Emphasis

- **Terms**

Throughout the thesis, I use the phrase adult literacy learners (ALLs) to refer to adult male learners. When I use the term “literacy learners,” this includes both adults and learners under 15 years old. In both private and public classes that I observed, there were a few learners who were about 13 or 14 years old.

- **Names**

The names used in the thesis, for both participants and centres, are pseudonyms to protect anonymity.

- **Quotations and emphasis**

When I write Dari-Farsi and Arabic words in Latin script, I set them in *italics*. For short extracts from my field notes, I use “double quotation marks.” For coined terms and phrases, I use ‘single quotation marks.’ I use block indentation for long direct quotations from the literature as well as from my field notes. An ellipsis (...) indicates that some words are omitted, and [brackets] show my additions.

- **Other conventions**

The word *Ustad Jan* was used many times by my participants when referring to their teacher or me. It means “dear teacher.” I keep it as it is throughout the thesis because it carries a cultural meaning of respect. The word HELP used in this thesis is not an acronym; it is the name of a German organisation and is written in capital letters. I used blue colour for intext citation to make them more visible in this study.

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*Professor Alan Rogers* is no longer with us. As my technical supervisor, he was a source of inspiration in starting this PhD and devoted a great deal of time to sharing his thoughts with me on everything related to my field of study. I sincerely express my gratitude to him. May he rest in peace.

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# Chapter 1

## Introduction

### 1.1 Introduction

This thesis is grounded in both my personal and professional journeys, and centres on the question of what literacy means and what it enables in the everyday lives of adult men in Afghanistan. Working as a teacher, researcher and community member within Afghan society, I have witnessed first-hand the multiple and sometimes conflicting roles that literacy plays. For instance, it can act as a marker of status, a means of survival or a site of aspiration; however, depending on the individual, context and social setting, its function and usage can differ significantly. My own experiences navigating formal and informal learning environments and engaging with learners whose lives are shaped by migration, conflict and rapid social and political changes motivated me to ask deeper questions about how literacy is practised, perceived, valued and negotiated in these complex contexts.

Much of the available research and policy discourse in Afghanistan and globally has centred on girls' and women's education. These studies and policies rightly address historic gender inequalities but often leave the experiences of adult men and the dynamics of masculinity and agency in literacy under-examined. This thesis seeks to address that gap by exploring how literacy shapes and is shaped by masculine identities and the exercise of power and agency among adult male learners.

Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in classrooms, workplaces, masjids (mosques) and community spaces, I situate my analysis within the framework of literacy as a social practice which emerged from the New Literacy Studies ([Street, 1984](#); [Barton & Hamilton, 1998](#)), and I engage with theories of masculinity ([Connell, 2005](#)), agency ([Kabeer, 1999](#)) and power ([Lukes, 1974](#)). I also consider multiple theories of power, drawing primarily on [Lukes's \(1974\)](#) dimensions of power and the practical typologies of power described by [Kabeer \(1999\)](#) and [Rowlands \(1995\)](#). Although a full discussion of these theoretical perspectives is provided in the following

chapter, here I briefly outline the main debates and gaps in the literature that this study addresses.

The chapter begins with my personal story, which has shaped my pursuit of higher education at the PhD level. This story is not presented for sympathy but for relevance. Parts of my trajectory echo patterns explored in the thesis, including disrupted education, mobility and shifting expectations of men's roles. Stating this upfront makes clear how my standpoint informed my ethnographic choices, from access and trust with participants to the analytic attention I give to literacy as social practice and to masculinities. Next, the chapter presents a review of the literature and examines the existing gaps in the field and in Afghanistan context. The research questions are also outlined in this chapter, along with a description of the thesis structure.

## 1.2 How did I end up researching literacy?

Education has been my main academic interest since I entered higher education at university. I completed my BA in English Literature at the School of Languages, Department of English Language from Herat University in Herat, Afghanistan, with a focus on literature, translation and teaching methodologies. This foundation strengthened my interest in the field of language and education. During this period, I started teaching English language classes at beginner levels in Afghanistan, which deepened my curiosity about how language shapes meaning across different social and cultural contexts. I was especially amazed when I first used games to teach a group of teenage students. They were fully engaged in the learning process. I thought if lessons were always designed in a way that supported learners and included content that motivated them and reflected what mattered to them, it could lead to a completely different pattern of learning for students of all ages.

Later, I completed an MA in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) through a Fulbright scholarship in the States, which allowed me to engage even further with education in a broader and more international context. The TESOL courses touched on both the theory and practice of pedagogy, and I had the opportunity to teach adult literacy in emigration camps in Burlington, Vermont, USA. I was then able to reflect more critically on literacy, second language acquisition and

adult education. This experience also made me more aware of inequalities in access to literacy and the social implications of being literate or non-literate across new contexts.

Besides my formal studies, I participated in a number of teacher training courses, seminars and workshops mostly focused on language teaching, curriculum development and educational planning. These experiences gave me a chance to work with practitioners, policymakers and trainers and helped me understand the educational challenges faced in different contexts.

Professionally, I have worked on a couple of research projects for international NGOs in Afghanistan exploring areas in early years and higher education in Afghanistan. Throughout this process, I developed a strong network of educators, practitioners and organisations working in education across the country. These connections not only shaped my knowledge of the field but also opened up new opportunities and collaborations, particularly in literacy-focused initiatives. One of these led directly to my first encounter with literacy as a research field.

A colleague from UNESCO invited me to attend a research workshop organised jointly by the Ministry of Education (MoE) and the UNESCO office in Kabul in January 2018. The workshop, held from 14<sup>th</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup> January, was titled ‘New Ways of Researching Literacy’ and was presented by Professor Alan Rogers from UEA. Participants included colleagues from the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Higher Education, UNESCO and several representatives from national and international organisations providing literacy services in Afghanistan.

Over the five days, I became increasingly engaged with the topic. By the end of the workshop, I found myself asking new questions about the meaning, purpose and practice of literacy in my own context. I even suggested that similar workshops should be organised for more days and with wider participation across the country, especially from higher education institutions. At the time, I wished the event had lasted longer. However, just four days later, on the evening of 22<sup>nd</sup> January, the same hotel where we had stayed and held our sessions – the Intercontinental Hotel in Kabul – was attacked by armed men. Twenty-two guests, both Afghan and international, were killed.

The news was shocking. For a moment, I thought how easily this attack could have happened during our workshop. Surviving that incident gave me a renewed sense of purpose. I began to see my involvement in literacy research not as a coincidence, but as something I was meant to do, almost a responsibility. It became personal. I felt that staying alive carried a duty: to work in a field that could help bring meaningful change to others' lives.

The workshop ended and left me with many unanswered questions. Why has literacy never been seriously prioritised in Afghanistan's education system? Why is the budget for literacy education so limited? Why is there almost no funding allocated for research in this area? I also wondered why there are so few professionals working on literacy in the country, and why literacy is not taught or researched as part of teacher training or higher education courses. These questions kept coming back to me. I found myself reflecting not only on the structural issues, but also on my own role. I asked myself: as someone who has spent most of his academic and professional life in education, how can I help? Where do I begin?

These questions marked a turning point in my thinking. I no longer saw literacy as just one strand within education. It began to take shape in my mind as a deeply social and political issue, one that touched on identity, power and access to opportunity. I started reading more, seeking conversations with people involved in adult learning and non-formal education, for example with colleagues from HELP, an international organisation with its head office in Germany. Still, I was unsure how to take the next step.

A few weeks after the workshop, Professor Rogers sent a follow-up email to the participants to see if anyone would be interested in conducting research on literacy in Afghanistan as a continuation of the ideas we had discussed and explored in the workshop. I replied immediately, expressing my interest. After several rounds of emails, we identified a possible research focus and began drafting a proposal for a small study. Together, we submitted the proposal to the UNESCO office in Kabul, hoping to secure funding as part of the workshop's follow-up activities.

That proposal marked the beginning of my journey as a literacy researcher. Looking back, my growing engagement with literacy research also reflects a broader convergence between scholarship and practice. International organisations such as UNESCO and researchers influenced by New Literacy Studies increasingly emphasised ethnographic approaches and community-based learning, focusing on what people *do* with literacy rather than what they *lack*. My early fieldwork, though small in scale, connected directly to this wider rethinking of literacy's role in development. This marked a movement that sought to centre learners' experiences, purposes and voices in curriculum and programme design.

It was the first time I conducted a research project focused specifically on adult literacy in Afghanistan. Through interviews, observations and document reviews, I began to see how literacy was understood and practised in everyday life. This experience shaped both my academic direction and my personal motivation. I started to see research in this field not only as a professional activity, but also as a form of responsibility, a way to respond to the questions that had stayed with me since the workshop.

Later that same year, I came across a call for applications to a funded PhD programme at UEA, where Professor Rogers was affiliated. I thought this was the perfect opportunity to build on my initial research and explore these issues in more depth. I prepared a proposal that focused on adult literacy in Afghanistan, drawing from my earlier project and the insights I had developed through it. To my surprise and great excitement, my application was successful and I was awarded the scholarship and offered a place to begin my PhD.

This new chapter brought with it a fresh set of opportunities and unforeseen challenges. With my PhD scholarship awarded, I spent the first couple of months working on my proposal, and after successfully passing my probationary review and mini-viva, I began preparing for ethical clearance so I could travel to Afghanistan for data collection. Because the UK government had designated Afghanistan as a "black zone" and prohibited travel there, I had to provide the ethics committee with extensive details about how I would mitigate risks in order to obtain approval for my research.

After completing my fieldwork in July 2021, I was ready to return to the UK and begin writing up my analysis. However, in August 2021, the government changed, and the Taliban took over the country. In the chaos and growing insecurity, I could not leave my family behind to move back to the UK. As a result, my studies were suspended until I was able to return at the end of 2023. Despite this two-year interruption, my commitment to the PhD project never faded. Even when I could not work formally, I remained deeply engaged with my data, constantly reflecting on the questions that had first brought me to literacy research.

### 1.3 The Gap: Why literacy and masculinity?

While conducting the research project on exploring the potentials of adult literacy facilitators with my colleagues before being granted the PhD approval, I got to know two wonderful male literacy facilitators who were in their late 40s or early 50s. They dedicated many years of their lives teaching literacy to both men and women in multiple places every day as volunteers. One of them even had the class going during the winter break when all the schools and literacy classes were officially closed for about three months.

While chatting with them about their teaching experiences, they shared that they have never been officially praised or recognised for their volunteer work. I knew that the MoE sometimes encourages and acknowledges literacy teachers and other volunteers in this section; however, I realised that most of those who received appreciation were women. The attention given to female facilitators was welcomed by international funders, but it left many male facilitators feeling overlooked and unrecognised.

The issue of prioritising one gender over another in education is not limited to Afghanistan. The matter of girls and women in education became a global concern in the 1980s and 90s given the visible gender gaps in educational access and outcomes. The Council of Europe's Steering Committee on Equality between Women and Men, therefore, in 1995 recommended that gender mainstreaming should be adopted throughout the body of all inter-ministerial committees ([Unterhalter & North, 2010](#)).

UNESCO connected this focus to women empowerment and equality, clarifying it in its five-year- medium-term strategy that:

a gender perspective will be integrated in policy planning, programming, implementation and evaluation activities in all areas of UNESCO's competence with a view to promoting empowerment and achieving gender equality. Women's priorities and vision of development goals and approaches will be addressed and promoted through greater participation of women at all levels and in all areas of UNESCO's action. (UNESCO, 2003, p. 2)

Even years after the above strategy, [Carvalho and Cameron \(2022\)](#) through analysing 900 documents in 2022 from the United Kingdom's Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) and the World Bank, found that FCDO through framing girls' education in terms of equity and World Bank viewing it "as a key to human capital and broader economic development" (p. 22) and in so doing promoted gendered education, which led to a focus on girl's and women's education in public policy and funding.

[Kenway \(1995\)](#), while exploring masculinities in crisis in Australian schools, also found that extensive feminist reforms, supported by the state since the 1970s, have led to what is viewed by many as the feminisation of education. These efforts at gender equality have been met with suspicion, resentment and even antagonism by some men and boys, who perceive that boys are now losing out or the balance has 'tipped' too far in favour of girls. Kenway found that this view can lead to defensive responses, including backlash against feminist initiatives, calls for more provision for boys, and efforts to safeguard traditional masculine values in school culture. The study highlights the troubled and contested nature of gender reform in schools and the renegotiation of masculinity in the context of changing education policies ([Kenway, 1995](#)). Even when reforms aim for equity, such as the equity act in Australia, [Lingard and Douglas \(1999\)](#) argue that "attempts to address the educational needs of boys within a framework that has grown out of a focus on girls simply exacerbates this situation, ... and further disadvantages boys" (p. 54).

Aside from policy intervention in favour of girls, having female teachers in some contexts is also linked to the feminisation of education at schools. For instance, [Guy-Evans \(2004\)](#) states that feminisation in education can happen when "there are

significant and widespread effects on education caused by the predominance of female teacher” (p.1). In the UK, the idea that the teaching profession is a female job has been promoted since the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Skelton, 2002). In fact, the tension about schools being feminised went so high in England that a journalist in the late 1990s called the British school culture a ‘sissy culture’ (Shakespeare, cited in Lingard and Douglas, 1999).

The consequences of the feminisation of education for boys can include low performance in lessons (see Heyder & Kessels, 2013) or an unwillingness to attend certain subjects, particularly when these are not regarded as expressions of masculinity (Eck, Jere & Zubairi, 2022). Boys often avoid subjects such as the arts and humanities because they are stigmatised as placing them in a non-hegemonic masculine position (Mills, 2001). This pattern is visible across contexts. Eck, Jere and Zubairi (2022), in the UNESCO Global Education Monitoring Report for 2022, highlight “the global situation on boy’s disengagement from and disadvantage in education” (p. 14). They note that in 2020 more than half of out-of-school children were boys (132 million), and argue that, in addition to conflict and forced migration, poverty and the need for boys to work are among the most significant factors contributing to dropout. This gendered pattern in education is identified as a challenge to achieving section 5 of the Sustainable Development Goals on education for all. Classic ethnographic work by Willis (1977) in the UK also showed how working-class boys created a counter-school culture that rejected academic achievement and valued resistance, leading to disengagement in school and entry into manual labour with few qualifications. His study illustrates how leaving school with limited attainment can be experienced as a cultural choice rather than simply individual failure.

Other studies point to different dynamics. Jeffrey, Jeffery and Jeffery (2008), researching in North India, found that education was strongly associated with masculine identity. Young men actively pursued schooling because being ‘educated’ was seen as central to ideals of manhood across caste and religious groups. Yet, despite this investment, many faced unemployment or precarious work, leaving them frustrated and disillusioned. Unlike Willis’s lads, who dismissed education as irrelevant to their futures, these young men valued education but encountered

structural barriers that prevented it from fulfilling its promise. Both cases, in different ways, demonstrate how boys' engagement or disengagement with education is closely tied to the performance of masculinity as well as to broader socio-economic conditions.

Similarly, in Afghanistan, poverty and child labour are among the main reasons for boys' dropout. [Mansuri \(2007\)](#) found that 50% of his male participants reported the need to work for the family as the main factor for leaving school. In 2018, the MoE et al. reported that 3.7 million children aged 7–17 were out of school ([MoE, UNICEF & Samuel Hall, 2018](#)). Considering both boys and girls, out-of-school rates were around 40% before the education restrictions introduced in 2021 but this figure has since risen to 80% for girls ([Pillai, 2023](#)). More recently, [Human Rights Watch \(2023\)](#) noted that the Taliban's ban on female teachers has severely undermined the quality of boys' education. In many cases, unqualified male teachers or in some cases no teachers at all replaced female staff, leading to declining attendance and contributing to boys leaving school.

Gender prioritisation in education in Afghanistan is primarily political. It traces back to the long history of the country. As I discuss in the following chapter, different regimes came to power and employed their policies with agendas targeting either men or women. For example, the rise of the Taliban in 1996 and again in 2021 opened the doors for men to have access to more religious courses. Many people appreciated this move mainly because the majority of Afghanistan's population follows Islam as their religion, with only about one per cent adhering to other religions, primarily Hindus and Sikhs ([United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, 2022](#)). Islamic values are ingrained in all aspects of people's lives, including education, governance, social and legal systems. In this context, society expects people to apply Islamic values and principles as a lens in their everyday life activities and practices. Thus, a government focusing on people's preferred mode of education would be appreciated. However, when they banned education for girls, people's perceptions also changed about this regime. In contrast, in order to fill the gap regarding girls' education, the Islamic Republic regime (2001-2021) focused significantly on female learners to return to

education. Thus, the gendered focus of education is rather political with social and religious support.

With regard to adult literacy, it is predominantly related to the direction of funds and policy documents after the fall of the Taliban in 2001. As will be discussed further in Chapter 2, both the government and non-government organisations in post-2001 prioritised girls' and women's education mainly because they were deprived of education for six years during the Taliban regime. Although this provides a promising environment and support for female learners, it could lead to a feeling of shame among male adult learners who are seeking hegemonic masculine identity through literacy.

As men face marginalisation in traditional aspects of hegemonic masculinity such as economic provision and social dominance, they increasingly seek power and legitimacy through literate identities. However, the feminisation<sup>1</sup> of literacy programmes can hinder this pursuit. For instance, Jabbar, a participant of mine in his 30s, felt shy to hold the literacy books 'like girls', as he put it, a theme that will be discussed in Chapter 6. The fact that the feminisation of adult literacy programmes and education happens in a very patriarchal society makes things even more difficult for the male adult learners to attend.

Ahmadi and Stanikzai (2018) highlight that, in the face of such marginalisation, some men turn to aggressive behaviour as a socially accepted symbol of manhood in Afghanistan. When economic instability and unemployment undermine their ability to be providers or exercise authority in the family, some men may be pushed towards illegal or violent activities as an alternative means of asserting masculinity. This marginalisation creates a gap that literacy could fill, offering men a new avenue for social legitimacy. However, the focus of literacy programmes on women reinforces the perception of literacy as a feminine domain, discouraging male participation. Although most literacy programmes for girls and women are currently closed (since 2021), there have not been many changes in literacy programmes for men. Ahmadi and Stanikzai suggest that redefining masculinity to value nonviolent and educational achievements

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<sup>1</sup> Feminisation, in this context, refers to the process by which educational programmes, content or participation are perceived as being mainly for women and girls, often resulting in men feeling out of place or embarrassed to join.

could encourage more men to engage in literacy programmes, addressing the exclusion of men and aligning policies with the needs of both genders. This neglect of men's needs and recognition is not only evident in policy and programming but is also experienced at the classroom level, as shown in my fieldwork.

In fact, the reaction of Saber in the first days when I visited his classroom and when he realised that I was conducting research exploring the literacy practices of adult male literacy learners indicates the lack of attention to males' class as compared to those of women. He said, "Thanks God, finally there is someone who cares about male classes." Additionally, as discussed in Chapter 3, the public literacy class was located in the functional school – a post-literacy school providing school lessons for adults beyond the literacy course. One day, I had a meeting with the Head of Provincial Literacy Department (PLD) and the Head of the post-literacy school, lobbying the issue of heating for the literacy class in the winter. The school head was surprised and did not know that the male literacy class was running in the winter in his school. This also indicated that the male literacy classes are not being taken seriously and remain invisible.

UNESCO and the Afghan National Association for Adult Education (ANAF AE) are non-state actors who work predominantly on adult literacy in Afghanistan. Adult literacy remains low, with 37% of adults being literate in 2021, including 52% of men and 23% of women ([World Bank, 2021](#); [UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2022](#)). For instance, in a recent overview report, [ANAF AE \(2023\)](#) raised concerns about significant budget cuts for literacy programmes in the country. The review reports on literacy for both genders, with a focus on female learners and the challenges they face. Another report by [MoE and ANAF AE \(2012\)](#) asserts the persistent disparities among gender, rural-urban and nomadic status of adult literacy, with dedicated sections on the challenges women learners face, female teachers' inclusion and access.

Furthermore, [Andersen and Kooij \(2007\)](#) conducted an empirical research study in Afghanistan framing literacy as a question of women's rights by backing their argument with articles from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Through an unusual literacy programme (i.e., by bringing married couples together in a classroom to study

literacy), they explored how approaches like this can foster mutual respect, support and improved relationships among adult learners, particularly within couples.

Scholarship on masculinities has illuminated how boys and men respond to the feminisation of education and shifting gender reforms ([Kenway, 1995](#); [Lingard & Douglas, 1999](#)), yet this work is mainly situated in Western school contexts and rarely engages with literacy in conflict-affected societies. Research on boys' education globally has shown patterns of disengagement and dropout linked to poverty, labour responsibilities and gendered expectations ([Eck, Jere & Zubairi, 2022](#)) but it seldom accounts for the political and religious dynamics shaping boys' schooling in countries such as Afghanistan. At the same time, studies of adult literacy in Afghanistan have predominantly framed literacy as a women's rights issue ([Andersen & Kooij, 2007](#); [ANAF AE, 2023](#)), leaving men's motivations, barriers and identity negotiations largely unexamined. Taken together, these three bodies of literature show the importance of gender in education but leave significant blind spots around adult men's experiences of literacy in Afghanistan.

This persistent neglect of men's experiences has resulted in a limited understanding of how adult male learners navigate, experience and contest literacy in Afghanistan. Little is known about their motivations, barriers and the ways in which literacy intersects with identity, masculinity and agency. The lack of attention not only leaves the needs of male learners unaddressed in policy and practice but also restricts the development of more inclusive, gender-responsive literacy programmes. By focusing on adult male literacy learners, this thesis provides new insights into the complexities of gender and education in Afghanistan and offers evidence that can inform more balanced and equitable educational interventions in the future.

## 1.4 Research Focus and Questions

In this thesis, 'literacy practices' refers to different types of literacy practised by adult male learners in Afghanistan, such as religious, digital, numeracy, school-based literacy practices and so on. These various literacy practices are not fixed but are shaped by social, cultural and contextual factors within specific domains, including the classroom, workplace, home and religious spaces.

I use the term ‘literacy practice’ to describe the actual ways in which learners engage with, use and make sense of literacy in their everyday lives. This approach follows the social practice model of literacy ([Street, 1984](#); [Barton & Hamilton, 1998](#)), emphasising that literacy is more than a set of technical skills; it encompasses the broader social, cultural and power relations in which reading, writing and numeracy occur.

These definitions guide the following research questions and the analytical direction of the thesis. Considering the gap explained in section 1.3 above, this thesis aims to address the following research questions:

**Main research question:** What is the role of literacy in shaping patterns of masculinity and the exercise of agency and power among adult male literacy learners in Afghanistan?

**Sub-question 1:** Which literacy practices are most valued and practised across various domains of life?

**Sub-question 2:** How do literacy practices influence the construction and performance of various patterns of masculinity among adult male learners?

**Sub-question 3:** How do adult male learners’ engagements with literacy practices mediate agency and power in everyday life?

## 1.5 Researching in Afghanistan

There are many reasons for choosing Afghanistan as my research site. The most important reason is that I grew up here and have spent most of my life in this country. Dari-Farsi is my mother tongue and I also understand Pashtu, so I am at home in the local languages and customs. I know the culture, values and traditions that shape daily life. Over the years, I have studied, taught and carried out research in Afghanistan, which means I have a strong understanding of academic life here, as well. Through these experiences, I have built a strong network that has helped me at every stage of this project.

Beyond these personal reasons, Afghanistan itself is a powerful context for researching adult literacy and masculinity. This is a country with one of the highest rates of non-literacy in the world, with only 37% of adults being literate in 2021 ([World Bank, 2021](#))

and decades of conflict, migration and instability have affected every family and community. Many people, especially men, have had their education interrupted or cut short due to patriarchal expectations; they are often expected to become breadwinners at a young age. As a result, practical skills and informal knowledge are highly valued, while formal schooling is sometimes out of reach. Researching in Afghanistan gave me a chance to highlight men's stories and to look closely at how they experience and make sense of literacy, masculinity and agency in their own lives. By focusing on this context, my study aims to offer something new to discussions about adult learning and gender, especially in countries shaped by conflict and change. I hope that by telling these stories, I can help show why it matters to take local realities seriously and to create literacy programmes that work for everyone.

## 1.6 Thesis Structure

The current chapter, Chapter 1 (Introduction), outlines the background and rationale for this research project, introduces my research questions and defines the focus of the thesis.

The next chapter, Chapter 2 (Situating Adult Literacy and Gender in Afghanistan: Historical, Social and Policy Contexts) provides a historical, political and contextual analysis of literacy, gender and agency in Afghanistan since 1919. It examines how different regimes dealt with literacy and gender, discussing relevant policies and practices. Furthermore, the chapter includes an analysis of literacy policy documents, mostly produced during the Islamic Republic.

Chapter 3 (Research Design and Methodology) outlines my methodological stance and describes the ethnographic approaches employed for data collection. It also details the research sites, participants and my positionality as a researcher.

Chapter 4 (Theorising Literacy Practices in Identity and Agency Formation) presents the theoretical framework underpinning this study. The chapter elaborates concepts, ideas and theories around literacy as a social practice ([Street, 1984](#)), hegemonic masculinities ([Connell, 2005](#)), agency ([Kabeer, 1999](#)) and power dimensions ([Lukes, 1974](#); [Rowlands, 1997](#)).

Chapter 5 (The Literacy and Numeracy Practices that Matter) presents findings on highly valued everyday literacy practices in which my participants engaged across different domains, such as home, work, religion and classroom, through a lens of literacy as a social practice. Additionally, it looks at the literacies that learners are taught in formal classrooms, as well as those they utilise in their everyday contexts outside formal education.

Chapter 6 (Masculinities: The Adjustable Wrench and Jack of All Trades) utilises Connell's hegemonic masculinity framework to examine how adult literacy learners (henceforth ALLs) perform and negotiate different patterns of masculinity and their relationship to literacy practices, using literacy to navigate respect, status and shifting social roles.

Chapter 7 (Agency in Adult Literacy: Enablers and Constraints) is the final data chapter; it presents findings on how agency and power are exercised, negotiated, constrained and enabled at different structural levels: policy and administrative, facilitator and learner levels, across key social domains such as classroom, workplace, home and religion. The chapter also discusses the ways in which literacy and literate identities serve as enablers of agency and power, as well as the various factors that constrain these for ALLs.

The thesis concludes with Chapter 8 (Discussion and Conclusion), where I synthesise and bring together the key findings in relation to the research questions. The chapter presents the study's limitations, suggests directions for future research and reflects on implications for both theory and practice.

## 1.7 Conclusion

In summary, this chapter established the foundations of the thesis by setting out my motivation and standpoint, situating Afghanistan as the research context, and defining literacy, masculinity, agency and power as key concepts examined through the experiences of adult male literacy learners.

The chapter highlighted how my personal and professional trajectory has shaped the direction of this study. Experiences of disrupted education, conflict, migration and

engagement with literacy work in Afghanistan and abroad informed both the questions I ask and the ethnographic approach I employ. This background also provides the standpoint from which I entered the field and built relationships with participants.

A review of relevant scholarship demonstrated that much of the global and national focus has centred on girls' and women's education. While this focus addresses urgent inequalities, it has meant that men's experiences, particularly those of adult learners, have remained under-examined. Identifying three bodies of literature – masculinities, boys' education and adult literacy (which I examine in more detail in chapter 4), the chapter showed that although these fields offer important insights, they also leave significant blind spots. The neglect of Afghan men's literacy practices, identities and forms of agency and power represents a clear gap that this thesis aims to fill.

The chapter also outlined the theoretical orientations that inform the analysis: literacy as a social practice, hegemonic masculinities, agency, and conceptualisations of power, which will be discussed further in Chapter 4. These frameworks guide the exploration of how men practise, value and contest literacy, and how these practices intersect with wider social norms, hierarchies and expectations in Afghanistan.

Finally, I presented the research questions and thesis structure. These frame the investigation across different domains of life (i.e., classroom, workplace, home and religious spaces) and guide the analysis of how literacy enables or constrains the performance of masculinities and the exercise of agency and power.

Taken together, this chapter positions the study as a contribution to literacy studies, masculinity scholarship and education research in conflict-affected societies. By examining how adult male learners in Afghanistan navigate literacies and masculine identities, the thesis aims to advance theoretical debates and provide evidence to support more gender-responsive and inclusive literacy policies and practices.

## Chapter 2

### **Situating Adult Literacy and Gender in Afghanistan: Historical, Social and Policy Contexts**

#### 2.1 Introduction

Understanding male literacy in Afghanistan requires an honest review of the country's economic realities and their impact on young men's lives. Afghanistan is one of the poorest countries in the world with a GDP per capita of only \$413.8 per annum in 2023 ([World Bank, 2025](#)). It is one of the youngest countries in the world, with two-thirds of the population below the age of 25 ([World Bank, 2020](#)). Yet, in this context, economic hardship, political instability and decades of lost opportunities for education have “placed a tremendous burden on the youth population, particularly young men who are often forced to assume the role of breadwinner at a very young age” ([Ahmadi & Stanikzai, 2018, p. 1](#)).

Most Afghan households (85%) depend on agriculture, and over 70% of the population is rural ([NSIA, 2020-21](#)). In these settings, daily life is structured by the practical demands of survival: cultivating crops, tending livestock or migrating for work. These pressures often require boys to leave school early or never attend at all, prioritising immediate and functional skills over formal education and literacy. The result is that boys acquire hands-on abilities necessary for economic survival (i.e., mechanics, construction, seasonal labour, or trade), but are frequently excluded from broader forms of literacy and the social mobility that literacy can bring about.

In this patriarchal society, men are expected to provide, and this role shapes both their aspirations and their opportunities. The demands of breadwinning leave little space for developing academic or literacy skills, producing a pattern where boys' engagement with formal education is limited or interrupted. While policy and research have rightly focused on improving access for girls and women, the experiences and constraints facing boys and men are less well understood. The prevailing discourse tends to overlook how livelihood pressures, provider roles and gender expectations intersect to shape boys' and men's literacy pathways.

This chapter presents the historical, social, educational and policy contexts which shape adult literacy and gender dynamics in Afghanistan. The purpose of this chapter is to provide a better understanding of the interpretations, discussions and conclusions emerging in this thesis. The chapter also provides a contextual and policy analysis of adult literacy and gender in Afghanistan. Although my focus for this thesis is on literacy rather than education broadly, policies in Afghanistan related to literacy programmes are similar to those in primary schooling and therefore, I will discuss these policies in this chapter alongside other contexts.

It is important to note that the data collection for this thesis was completed in July 2021, which coincided with the end of the Islamic Republic regime and the arrival of the Taliban to power in Afghanistan. Therefore, the policy documents analysed in this chapter are mostly those collected during the Islamic Republic regime. Most of these policies on adult education and literacy remain in use under the current government, except for those related to gender matters and women's education.

The chapter begins by exploring the historical background of regimes, focusing on gender and education, particularly adult literacy, from early 20th-century initiatives to contemporary programmes, primarily under the Islamic Republic (2001–2021), with references to shifts under the current Taliban regime. The chapter then analyses gender representation in policy documents and curricula, highlighting how these contexts intersect with power, masculinity and social legitimacy in Afghanistan. Next, policy documents are examined in greater detail, with particular attention to the gender dimension within the policy domain. The chapter concludes by discussing various literacy programmes implemented in the country, including governmental, non-governmental, religious and digital initiatives, with an emphasis on their gender dimensions.

## 2.2 Historical and Social Contexts

Imagine an adult literacy classroom where the king of the country is not just a supporter of education, but its facilitator. One would immediately associate a profound connection between literacy and power. This was not a metaphorical story but a historical reality in Afghanistan in 1925 ([Hasanzadeh, 2010](#)), when King

Amanullah Khan actively supported and promoted adult literacy (Baiza, 2013). After the King realised that many non-literate adults were excluded from formal schooling due to age, he established special learning spaces known as ‘Akaber’ classes, meaning ‘Adults Classes’ (MoE Proposal, 2019). He appointed one of the most respected and experienced teachers of the time, ‘Abdul Baqi Khan,’ in charge of the initiative (MoE Proposal, 2019). Although there is no official record of the language of instruction, Andeshmand (M. A. Andeshmand, August 15, 2020, personal communication), the author of the Afghanistan Modern Education book, suggests that Farsi or more specifically Dari-Farsi was likely used as the language of instruction and it was written using Dari-Farsi script.

The Ministry of Education (MoE) proposal continues that Abdul worked on a programme suggested by an educator (Said Ahmad Loudin). This programme was designed to teach so-called ‘illiterate’ people to be able to read in 40 days. Hasanzadeh (2010) adds that the programme only focused on reading using repetition and drilling; instruction was based on sounds and drilling. Hasanzadeh adds that the first adult literacy class was for the King’s palace guards, which means it was only for men. Teaching the first adult literacy class and beginning the first adult literacy course in his palace indicates that the King associated significant value with literacy and education. Although many regimes have changed since then, adult literacy has been supported by governments and international organisations in the country (Baiza, 2013). The following table presents the regimes and the literacy rates in each regime.

*Table 1. Statistics of literacy rates with male-female and rural-urban disparities in each regime over the past century.*

| Regime              | Timeline           | Lit Rate | Lit Rate by Male/Female | Rural / Urban |
|---------------------|--------------------|----------|-------------------------|---------------|
| King Amanullah Khan | 1919 – 1929        | ~5 – 10% | No record (NR)          | NR            |
| Habibullah Khan     | Jan 1929- Oct 1929 | NR       | NR                      | NR            |

|                            |                |                                        |                                                                      |                                                     |
|----------------------------|----------------|----------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------|
| King Mohammad Nadir Shah   | 1929 – 1933    | NR                                     | NR                                                                   | NR                                                  |
| King Mohammad Zahir Shah   | 1933 – 1973    | NR                                     | NR                                                                   | NR                                                  |
| Republic and Communist Era | 1973 – 1992    | 18% (1979)                             | F: 5% M: 30%                                                         | NR                                                  |
| Mujahideen Government      | 1992 – 1996    | NR                                     | NR                                                                   | NR                                                  |
| Taliban I                  | 1996 – 2001    | 28% (2000)                             | NR                                                                   | NR                                                  |
| Islamic Republic           | 2001 – 2021    | 34% (2003)<br>31% (2011)<br>43% (2018) | F: 18% (2003) M: 50%<br>F: 17% (2011) M: 45%<br>F: 30% (2018) M: 49% | RF:10% RM: 37%<br>U: 53.5% R: 25%<br>UM: 69% RF:10% |
| Taliban II                 | 2021 – present | 37% (2021)<br>37.3% (2022)             | F: 23% (2021) M: 52%<br>F: 22.6% (2022) M: 52%                       | NR                                                  |

Although the records on rural-urban disparities are limited in terms of reliable sources, all available sources<sup>2</sup> indicate that the literacy rates for both males and females were lower in rural areas compared to urban areas between 2011 and 2022.

Taking into account the information in Table 1, I will discuss chronologically the policies of different regimes with regard to literacy education and education in general, starting from King Amanullah Khan, while considering the male-female and urban-rural disparities where data is available in the following paragraphs.

Informal education such as masjid classes, where learners acquire personal responsibility, honesty, kindness and respect through poetry, stories and religious texts, existed long before the establishment of the formal education in Afghanistan (Akseer, 2013). In 1903, formal education started with a secondary school for boys for the first time in the country (Samady, 2001). It happened during the reign of Amir

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<sup>2 2</sup> The statistics in this table are drawn from various sources such as UNESCO (2021), Central Statistics Organization (2014), Ministry of Education (2007), UNESCO (n.d.). No record of data is available for some periods.

Habibullah Khan, father of Amanullah Khan, and was named as “*talimat-e jaded* (new or modern education) or *talimat asri* (contemporary education)” (Baiza, 2013, p. 54).

Following Afghanistan’s independence from the British Empire in 1919, King Amanullah Khan (1919-1929) introduced ambitious modernisation reforms (Baiza, 2013), including the promotion of education and adult literacy, and the expansion of formal education for girls. In 1922, the first girls’ school opened its doors to female students (Akseer, 2013). As stated above, Amanullah Khan established the first adult literacy classes in 1925, opened schools for both boys and girls throughout the country and made primary education compulsory. Furthermore, the King showed interest in sending Afghan students abroad for study as part of his modernisation effort (Barfield, 2010). However, a great number of communities around the country resisted these reforms, especially those targeting gender equality and unveiling of women, particularly in schools (Baiza, 2013). Resistance against Western-style modernisation existed even before Amanullah Khan, during Amir Sher Ali’s rule (1868-79) (Baiza, 2013).

This resistance illustrates how education and literacy became a site of contestation over gender norms and power. After a religious decree (*fatwa*) was published by religious leaders in the country, the King rescinded some of his reforms. For example, the girls who were sent to Constantinople (today’s Istanbul) were recalled, and some girls’ schools were closed, but the rebellions continued and eventually the reform became one of the main factors leading to the collapse of his regime (Emadi, 2002; Gregorian, 1969).

Not many people were literate in this period (1919-1929), but those who were (predominantly urban males), were highly valued. There are no statistical records on literacy rates by gender during this period, but the overall literacy rate was estimated to be very low, especially in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century (Khwajamir, 2016). This suggests that access to literacy itself offered power and status, reinforcing gender and urban-rural divides. One can imagine how it would have been valued and pursued when the King of the country was the main supporter of the programme.

With the help of religious leaders, Habibullah Khan (Jan-Oct 1929) became the king after Amanullah Khan. He was warmly welcomed by local people, but the British seemed to have a different agenda for Afghanistan, so General Mohammad Nadir, an Afghan ambassador to France (1924-1926), returned to Afghanistan, supported by the British, to remove Habibullah Khan from power ([Emadi, 2002](#)). Since Habibullah was from the Tajik tribe and Amanullah and Mohammad Nadir were from the Pashtun tribe, the war soon changed from religious to tribal.

Most of what Habibullah was fighting against (i.e. Amanullah's reforms regarding women's dressing and education) was, and still is, highly appreciated among Pashtuns. However, the tribal side of the war motivated many individuals from the Pashtun tribe to back Mohammad Nadir (1929-1933) and proclaim him as the new king, regardless of his ideologies. In order to gain tribal support, he wrote on the border of the Qur'an and signed that he would not harm Habibullah and asked him to return to Kabul and restructure the political system with him. But as soon as Habibullah Khan returned, he executed him ([Emadi, 2002](#)). Habibullah's trust in Mohammad Nadir in this scenario highlights the role and value of religious texts even between kings and in high ranks of the government at that time.

Furthermore, to gain tribal trust, Mohammad Nadir "awarded honorary titles such as colonels and majors to some of the tribal chiefs" and "exempted the Pashtun tribes who helped him seize power from paying taxes and recruitment in the army", but he "appointed Pushtun rulers as governors and administrators in non-Pushtun communities" ([Emadi, 2002, p. 34](#)). These political appointments demonstrate how power, tribal loyalty and education governance were interconnected, often marginalising non-Pashtun communities in access to state resources, including literacy initiatives.

Mohammad Nadir Shah was assassinated by a Hazara student in Kabul during a school ceremony in 1933. His son, Mohammad Zahir Shah (1933-1973), inherited the throne at a very early age. Mohammad Zahir Shah ruled for forty years. Supported by two of his uncles, his strategy was to stop any opposition right at the starting point. However, later in his rule, with the consultation of his other uncle, he respected freedom of the press and free parliamentary elections, which resulted in the emergence of many political

parties (Emadi, 2002). The gradual opening of political space under Zahir Shah also allowed for greater educational development, though still within elite and male-dominated spheres.

President Daoud Khan (1973-1978), cousin of King Mohammad Zahir Shah, ruled the country after Mohammad Zahir Shah and initially expanded education. However, gender disparities remained the same. Although education was promoted, it did not significantly disrupt traditional gender roles or rural exclusion from literacy. The Saur Revolution in 1978 brought the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) (1978-1992) to power with Soviet Union support. This regime made major efforts to increase literacy, particularly among women, as part of socialist modernisation (Khwajamir, 2016; Dupree, 1980). A mass literacy campaign was launched in 1979 and curriculum reforms sought to secularise education and promote gender equality (Khwajamir, 2016).

The PDPA regime established “the National Agency for the Campaign Against Illiteracy” (Emadi, 2002, p.43). Emadi explains that the regime used this national agency “as an instrument of ideological propagation to imbue citizens of the country with the ideology of the ruling party” (p.43). He adds that joining literacy classes became mandatory and people were forced to attend literacy classes and “those who resisted were severely punished and some were even executed, as the ruling party viewed them as anti-revolution” (p.43). This highlights how literacy was used as a tool of political control, with limited room for individual or communal agency, especially in rural areas.

After the Soviet withdrawal and the fall of the PDPA regime, Afghanistan was hit by civil war. The Mujahideen (1992-1996) groups formed an Islamic State. However, governance was weakened by instability and infighting, which resulted in the destruction of many schools and the collapse of literacy programmes. Conservative interpretations of Islam influenced policies and girls' education was restricted in many regions (Johnson & Leslie, 2004). Due to civil war and insecurity, there are no statistics recorded from this period. In this vacuum, access to literacy became even more uneven, further embedding gendered and spatial inequalities.

In the middle of the civil war, the Taliban (1996-2001) entered Afghanistan as “a movement for cleansing society rather than a party trying to grab power” ([Rashid, 2001, p. 23](#)). They gained people’s trust mainly because of their name: ‘Taliban’ (the plural form of Talib, meaning religious student), which indicated that they are knowledgeable and are not fighting for power but for peace and education. Taking control of the country for the first time, they imposed a highly patriarchal and theocratic regime. Girls’ schools and universities were banned, and women were forbidden from working or studying, leaving many women, who were supporting their families alongside men, to lose their jobs.

Literacy and formal education for girls were nearly eliminated. Their policies on female education worsened the literacy situation in Afghanistan, leading to a rise in the number of non-literate people, both males and females. The curriculum was restricted mostly to religious content and literacy campaigns for adults ceased or were redirected to religious instruction only ([Kandiyoti, 2007](#); [Human Rights Watch, 2001](#)). This regime marked a severe reversal of previous efforts towards promoting women’s literacy, using education policy as a mechanism for entrenching patriarchal power and erasing female agency.

Following the U.S.-led intervention in 2001, a new constitution, under the Islamic Republic regime (2001-2021), guaranteed the right to education for all. Massive international investment supported the rebuilding of the education system across the country, targeting girls. Millions of girls returned to school and adult literacy programmes were expanded by the MoE and INGOs. Since most of the girls were over the regular school age, accelerated education programmes started to take shape, including literacy courses and post-literacy schools for adults over 15 years old.

The adult literacy programme became an official branch of the MoE after the collapse of the Taliban regime in 2001 ([Andeshmand, 2010](#)). The MoE had a deputy minister dedicated to the literacy programmes in the country prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, but during the pandemic, it was changed into a department within the MoE, which was a major reform ([Maleki & Khaliqi, 2021](#)). It had Provincial Literacy Departments with sub-departments at the district level that had literacy classes for the local men and women all over Afghanistan.

The MoE, with the help of international and national organisations, developed a National Education Strategic Plan (NESP), which outlined the strategic plans and pathways towards nationwide education. During the Islamic Republic regime, three NESPs were developed. Since women had been largely marginalised from education for six years during the previous Taliban regime, policies like the National Education Strategic Plan (NESP I–III) emphasised gender equity and female participation in adult literacy (MoE, 2016; UNESCO, 2021a). However, rural access remained limited and many programmes focused heavily on women, with limited attention paid to male adult learners. Thus, the literacy rate for women jumped from 17% in 2011 to 30% in 2018 (from 50% to 49%); however, the level of literacy for women in rural areas remained low (10%) (UNESCO, 2021a). The literacy rate decreased by 1% for men between 2003 and 2018 (Table 1) (World Bank Data Portal, 2023). This also highlights the way in which literacy initiatives were shaped by both global gender agendas and local structural inequalities. This, in turn, reinforces how literacy in Afghanistan has always been deeply intertwined with power, gender and access.

Conflicts such as the Soviet-Afghan war in 1979–1989, the 1992-1996 civil war and the US-led war with an international coalition in 2001–2021 (Britannica, 2025a, 2025b) forced many people to migrate to neighbouring countries or internally to different provinces, which disrupted education and left millions of people non-literate and deprived of education. This particularly affected men, who, as providers, prioritised work over education and schooling. Non-literate men were seen as less authoritative compared to literate elites (i.e., religious scholars and schoolteachers); it also limited their social power within community relationships and reinforced subordinate masculinities.

## 2.3 Gender Relations in Afghanistan

Growing up in Afghanistan as a man, I have witnessed how holding a certain gender (i.e., a girl or a boy) is valued differently even before a baby is born. A mother who gives birth to a baby boy is praised by the entire family and neighbours, while the birth of a girl is often not celebrated.

Historically, religion stood against this sort of gender prejudice in some ways. Among the first decrees issued by the Prophet Mohammad after receiving his prophethood was the prohibition of female infanticide, which was a common practice in pre-Islamic Arab societies ([Ahmed, 1992](#)). Since then, Islamic teachings have emphasised that gender, colour, language or race do not determine individuals' worth, but their piety before Allah does ([Qur'an, 49:13](#)). However, despite these principles, there are still tendencies to privilege men over women. In the Afghanistan context, the breadwinner and provider roles of men make them valued the most even at the birth stage.

Afghanistan is a highly patriarchal society, where gender roles are rigidly defined. Historically, we can see that when regimes have changed, new policies and social rules have been prescribed that have directly affected gender hierarchies and roles in different aspects of society. For example, King Amanullah was among the pioneers who initiated reforms to empower women. He started this change by first encouraging his wife and family members to adopt Western-style dress, as he had seen on his historic trip to Europe ([Emadi, 2002](#)). However, after Amanullah, Habibullah Khan reversed the reform process. King Nadir Shah and his son, King Zaher Shah, took a more moderate approach regarding gender roles and women's movement and tried to balance reform with traditional and cultural expectations.

During the Republic and Communist eras, the women's movement began to take shape again. However, as soon as the Mujahideen came to power, these reforms were reversed. The rise of the Taliban in 1996 further removed women from most educational and political contexts. War and the Taliban's strict policies shut down girls' schools, blocked women's education and reinforced men's roles as the only ones expected to gain literacy and authority in communities ([Mosawi, 2023](#)).

The Islamic Republic, under pressure from international allies, reinstated women in positions of power through many different empowerment and capacity-building programmes ([Emadi, 2002](#)). In fact, gender and women's rights became one of the main pillars of the state and non-state actors' reconstruction activities ([Mosawi, 2023](#)). Although the schools were open again, the MoE strategic plan report in 2007 stated that six per cent of the schools in Afghanistan had been closed by the Taliban over an eighteen-month period ([Strategic Plan, 2007](#)). However, the government and

international partners were keen to promote women's empowerment. Thus, a ministry named the Ministry of Women's Affairs was established within the Afghan government at this time.

However, since returning to power in 2021, the Taliban have implemented severe restrictions on women, excluding them from education, employment and public life, which effectively creates a system of gender discrimination ([Moghadam, 2002](#); [Amnesty International, 2023b](#)). Women, who are more than half of the Afghan society, are banned from secondary and higher education, restricted from working in most professions and even prevented from travelling without a male guardian ([Human Rights Watch, 2024](#)). These policies reflect a continuation of the extreme patriarchal governance that shaped the Taliban's first regime (1996–2001), when women were similarly excluded from most aspects of society ([Kandiyoti, 2007](#)).

### 2.3.1 Conceptualisation of Gender and Literacy in the Policy

Unlike literacy, gender conceptualisation has been explored in various ways in Afghanistan. For example, [Kandiyoti \(2007\)](#) examines the politics of gender by exploring how women's rights have taken shape, or sometimes been restricted, by a complex mix of international influences in this country. Kandiyoti argues that the country's prolonged history of wars, foreign intervention and shifting power structures makes it hard to promote gender justice through passing laws or setting up institutions. The article traces how historical top-down reforms such as those under King Amanullah Khan and the PDPA, provoked backlash when imposed without grassroots legitimacy, especially concerning women's emancipation. Kandiyoti highlights how decades of war, displacement as well as the rise of war economies reshaped gender norms, often intensifying female vulnerability through mechanisms such as the commodification of women and conflict-related gender-based violence. She stresses the limitations of relying solely on legal and institutional reforms in a context where customary, religious and statutory laws coexist, often to the detriment of women. The paper concludes that sustainable progress toward gender justice requires understanding both global norms and local social and political realities. It recognises that gender politics in Afghanistan

are deeply embedded in broader questions of legitimacy, governance and national identity.

While this historical reshaping of gender norms in the country has often intensified the focus on women's vulnerability, it has also shaped men's experiences, sometimes leaving them feeling excluded from the dominant narratives of empowerment and reform. This may prompt some men to seek alternative forms of recognition, such as taking part in literacy programmes, as discussed below.

Since the majority of the non-literate population in Afghanistan is female, the focus of organisations, donors and the government in previous regimes, has been predominantly on women's literacy which has to some extent feminised literacy programmes. For example, the community-based literacy programmes by UNESCO have reached over a million learners in recent years, with a strong emphasis on women and adolescent girls ([UNESCO, 2022a](#)). These programmes are often delivered in the homes of trained female facilitators, which makes them more accessible to women in conservative or rural areas ([UNESCO, 2023](#)). This emphasis is not new; earlier initiatives such as UNESCO's *Enhancement of Literacy in Afghanistan* (ELA) programme and UNICEF-supported female literacy programmes from 2010–2014 also prioritised women, delivering instruction through home-based and mosque-based classes with female facilitators to respond to cultural sensitivities ([UNESCO, n.d.b](#); [UNICEF, 2014](#)).

The MoE has also historically emphasised women's participation in literacy efforts. The following analysis is based on the National Education Strategic Plan III (NESP III – 2017~2021) developed by the MoE with the assistance of UNESCO and local organisations such as ANAF AE. This is a significant document and represents the perspectives of both the public and private sectors working on literacy and education in Afghanistan.

NESP III specifically addresses gender disparities, noting that only one in five women in Afghanistan was literate and calling for targeted interventions ([Ministry of Education, 2017](#)). This followed the 2010–2014 strategic plan and the National Literacy Strategy (2013), which both prioritised reducing female illiteracy and increasing access for

women and girls through community-based approaches and the recruitment of female teachers ([MoE, 2010a](#); [ANAFAE, 2013](#)). These reports often assess the impact of literacy programmes through women's classes, reinforcing the focus on female education access and outcomes.

International organisations such as the World Bank have also echoed this emphasis. Their gender landscape report highlights the critical role of improving female literacy in Afghanistan as a means to drive broader development and social equity ([World Bank, 2022](#)). According to [UNESCO \(2021a\)](#), in 2020, 47.94% of men (4.8 million) and 70.2% (7.2 million) of women in Afghanistan did not have basic literacy skills. Although the number of non-literate women is higher than that of men, a large number of men are also non-literate; however, policy and programme efforts remain largely focused on women.

## 2.4 Analysing Policy: National Education Strategic Plans

The Islamic Republic regime (2001-2021) was a golden period in which significant attention was given by both the government and non-government organisations and institutions to improve education in all aspects, including literacy, in Afghanistan. However, there was uneven and limited progress, and significant gaps persisted across regions, gender and quality. In this section, I analyse the most influential and valuable documents that were developed during the Islamic Republic regime by the MoE and its partners, including UNESCO. It is important to note that these documents (NESP I, II, III) are the only education-focused documents publicly available in all the regimes in Afghanistan.

**NESP I**, as the first plan developed by the MoE with the support of organisations such as UNESCO, provides plans and strategies to be implemented between 2006 and 2010 on education at schools and at the literacy level. In response to the gender gap in education, it largely prioritises female education in the country. For example, in its section on literacy and non-formal education, it sets a target that “at least 60% of literacy learners will be female” ([Ministry of Education, 2007](#), p.20). It presents strategies for female inclusion in educational procedures, including developing

literacy material specific to women such as providing courses for Kuchi<sup>3</sup> women and girls and increasing female teachers by 50%. Although the NESP I does not explicitly provide plans and strategies tailored for men, vocational training programmes such as those for carpentry, plumbing and electricity may implicitly target males due to cultural associations with these trades in Afghanistan.

**NESP II** outlines plans and strategies for education in Afghanistan between 2010 and 2014. It also targets women's education as its priority. In addition to having specific courses for women and girls and increasing the number of female facilitators to encourage women's participation in literacy classes, NESP II adds that women will be given "incentives such as food, healthcare and seeds [for farming and growing crops]" ([Ministry of Education, 2010](#), p.13) as a strategy for their participation in literacy courses. This indicates that the NESP II's plans focused on rural areas, as often people in these places need seeds compared to those living in urban areas.

Similar to NESP I, this one also planned to increase the population of female literacy learners to 60% of all learners in the country. It aimed to develop learning materials tailored to women's needs. In contrast, there are no specific strategies or incentives tailored to male literacy learners. The presence of males is mentioned in general terms such as the overall literacy rate target (54% for males). The plan did not detail any male-specific challenges such as economic pressure, migration (both for work and for refuge) or cultural barriers.

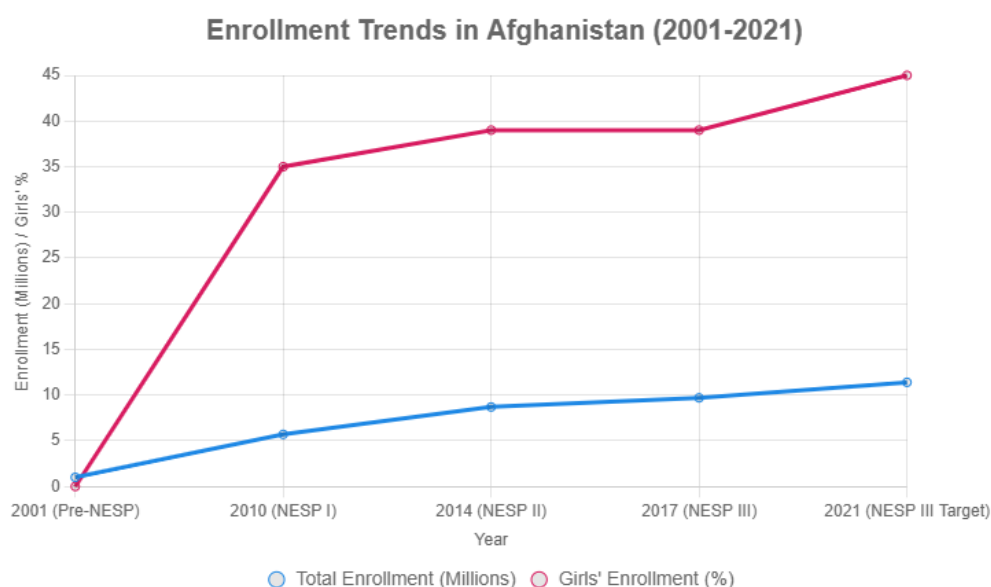
**NESP III** was developed about 13 years after the Taliban regime collapsed. It outlines the educational strategies and plans for another four years (2014-2018). Both NESP I and II, as discussed above, had set targets specifically for female education. Similar to NESP I and II, NESP III does not provide specific targets or strategies tailored to male literacy learners either. This is interesting because the Taliban banned schools for girls and women only for six years; however, thirteen years later, the government and the international donors were still prioritising female education over that of males.

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<sup>3</sup> Kuchi girls refer to girls from the Kuchi community, a nomadic or semi-nomadic group in Afghanistan. The Kuchi people traditionally migrate seasonally with their livestock.

For example, NESP III, when referring to plans for equitable access, states, “Increased equitable and inclusive access to relevant, safe and quality learning opportunities for children, youth and adults in Afghanistan, especially women and girls” ([Ministry of Education, 2016, p. 4](#)). It explicitly identifies ‘women and girls’ as a priority group in the plan while not mentioning any specific provisions for men.

A review of all three plans shows that the Afghan education system achieved great enrolment growth, from 1 million in 2001 to 11.4 million by 2021 (Figure 1). Additionally, infrastructure also expanded, from 3,400 to 16,400 schools. The findings from NESP I-III indicate that what the plans could not achieve was access, particularly for girls, due to challenges such as poverty, insecurity, cultural norms (i.e., early marriages), low quality of teaching pedagogy and donor dependency in education programmes.



*Figure 1. Statistics for girls’ school enrolment.*

The NESPs were planned to build on one another; for instance, NESP I’s focus on access informed NESP II’s quality emphasis, which in turn influenced NESP III’s holistic approach to quality and management. However, the restrictions imposed by the Taliban in 2021 have significantly altered all these developments and considering the new gender restrictions on education, all the progress made over 20 years may be reversed. [Human Rights Watch \(2023b\)](#) reports that the Taliban’s education reform has failed to address boys’ educational needs, as well. The report states that under the current Taliban regime, boys in Afghanistan face barriers to their education such as

“the absence of female teachers, the increased use of corporal punishment, reduced attendance rates, the elimination of subjects like arts, sports, English language, and civic education, a decline in educational quality, increased anxiety about attending school, and a loss of hope for the future” (p.3).

## 2.5 A Deficit Perspective Towards Non-literate Individuals

Locally, many people in Afghanistan equate a non-literate person with phrases and terminologies with negative connotations. For example, they say, “An illiterate person is blind”, “If letter Alif (A) is as big as an electric column, he<sup>4</sup> cannot read it”, “He doesn’t know the letters of his name”, “His eyes are closed”, “His heart is not open” and so on. These are fixed expressions that people in Afghanistan use frequently when talking about ‘illiterate’ individuals and ‘illiteracy’ in general. People, including some of my participants, have been using mobiles and other digital devices for years; however, they consider themselves as ‘illiterate’ or ‘low-literate’, ‘blind’, ‘unable’, or ‘dependent’, to name some of the negative terminologies to describe themselves. Many seek literacy not only for functional purposes but also to gain social recognition and be acknowledged as literate men within the communities and to avoid the stigma and subordinate positions.

On the other hand, there are positive expressions used for defining literate people, which imply the opposite for non-literate individuals. For instance, when people say, a literate person has “a wider world view, is wise, is smart, is knowledgeable”, the non-literate individuals are equated to ‘having a limited world view, not being wise, not being smart and not being knowledgeable’.

This deficit discourse is also reflected in the policies. For instance, as discussed earlier, NESP III ([Ministry of Education, 2016](#)) equates literate and educated people with “development”, “productive,” “competent,” “responsible” and “advanced” across multiple sections including the Foreword (Page 11), Executive Summary (Pages 13–14),

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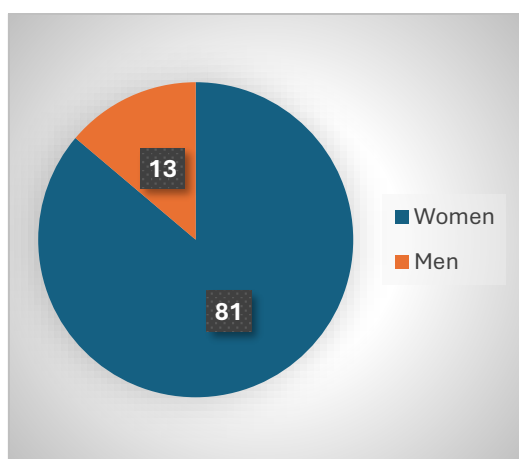
<sup>4</sup> In Dari-Farsi, there is no grammatical distinction between ‘he’ or ‘she’. Both are referred to ‘Ou’, the third-person singular pronoun which can mean either ‘he’ or ‘she’, depending on the context. The gender-neutral pronoun reflects the fact that Dari-Farsi does not use gendered pronouns.

Quality and Relevance (Pages 15–17), Equitable Access (Pages 18–19) and monitoring frameworks (Pages 108–120).

Similarly, NESP II ([Ministry of Education, 2013](#)) defines literate and educated individuals with positive terminologies such as "human development," "economic progress," "modern society," "stability," and "better livelihoods" in key sections, including the Foreword (Page 3), Executive Summary (Page 8), Introduction and Policy Framework (Pages 12–18), Strategic Framework (Pages 20–22), and annexes (Pages 49–62).

These associations in the policy language implicitly construct a deficit view of non-literate people by framing illiteracy as a problem to be eradicated and presenting non-literate individuals as less capable of contributing to socioeconomic progress, employment or decision-making.

A text analysis of NESP III (Figure 2) shows that terms related to female (i.e., woman, women, female, girl – the pronouns such as she, her, he, his were not counted) appear much more frequently (81 times) than the terms related to males (man, men, male, boy), which appear only 13 times. This can be because men are probably the standard against which women are being evaluated.



*Figure 2. The ratio of women and men mentioned in the NESP III.*

Women are not just mentioned more frequently in the policy documents; they are also usually described as vulnerable and needing support. For instance, the Ministry of Education (2013) lists women as one of their target populations alongside ‘ethno-

linguistic minority groups', 'people with physical disabilities' and 'Kuchi population' (pp. 23–24). Furthermore, the National Action Plan for the Women of Afghanistan 2008–2018 explicitly aims to reduce female illiteracy by 50% ([Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, 2008](#)). The government plans were fairly successful; as mentioned before, there has been great progress in the literacy rate for women in 2018. This strong policy focuses on women's vulnerability and empowerment reflects what [Khoja-Moolji \(2015\)](#) and [Rao and Robinson-Pant \(2006\)](#) describe as the global framing of girls' and women's education as a commonsense solution to social problems, a strategy often promoted by governments and international actors to set their development agendas. In contrast, men are either invisible or only mentioned in general terms in the government policies. This kind of language shows how ideas about gender shape the way literacy programmes are planned and funded.

It seems as if the developers of NESPs were aware of the dramatic political shift that would take place in 2021. Since the Taliban's return to power in August 2021 for the second time, secondary and higher education for girls has been banned. Female literacy facilitators have been dismissed and many adult literacy programmes for women have closed. The regime promotes religious education and discourages secular learning. Current policies remain largely undocumented but reflect extreme gender restrictions similar to the 1996–2001 period ([Human Rights Watch, 2023a](#); [Amnesty International, 2023b](#)). Although some INGOs such as UNESCO, are still active in the adult literacy sector, the literacy projects of many organisations have been put on hold or redirected to other educational aspects. The World Bank reported that the female literacy rate dropped by 7% in 2021 compared to 2018 ([World Bank Data Portal, 2023](#)). Although the adult literacy classes are open to all males, there has been little improvement (from 49% to 52%) in their literacy rate in 2022 ([UNESCO, n.d.a](#)).

In summary, as a globally recognised and supported regime, the Islamic Republic (2001–2021) worked diligently to reconstruct Afghanistan's education landscape and infrastructure, with particular emphasis on expanding access to girls' and women's education across the country. This focus is clearly reflected in policy documents such as NESP I, II and III, as discussed above. While these gender-focused initiatives were justified and resulted in increased enrolment and participation, they also contributed

to positioning literacy programmes as feminine in status. Moreover, the deficit discourse found in both policy and social expressions towards ‘illiteracy’ and non-literate individuals reinforces the subordinate position assigned to adult male literacy programmes. Importantly, these policy documents have not directly addressed the distinct barriers faced by boys and men, leaving their challenges largely invisible. This highlights a significant gap in the national approach to literacy, which this study aims to address.

## 2.6 Literacy Programmes in Afghanistan

There are different types of literacy programmes in Afghanistan, including public and non-public programmes, masjid and madrasa programmes, as well as informal literacy programmes (i.e., digital literacy programmes).

By law, education is compulsory for the first nine years (grades 1–9) in Afghanistan ([World Education Services, 2016](#)). Article 43 of the new constitution developed by the Islamic Republic is still implemented, except for the gender side of it that excludes women and girls’ education in the current Taliban regime:

Education is the right of all citizens of Afghanistan, which shall be offered up to the B.A. level in the state educational institutes free of charge by the state.

To expand balanced education as well as to provide mandatory intermediate education throughout Afghanistan, the state shall design and implement effective programs and prepare the ground for teaching mother tongues in areas where they are spoken ([Afghanistan Constitution, 2004, art. 43](#)).

However, as a result of migration, forced displacement and poverty due to the conflicts and frequent regime changes, many people prioritise safety, security or economic survival over schooling and education, which has resulted in the country having one of the lowest literacy rates in the world (37%) in 2021 ([World Bank, 2021](#)).

Adult literacy is widely seen as a vital part of social and economic development as well as peace and stability ([Andersen & Kooij, 2007](#)) – especially in a context like Afghanistan where 12 million people are considered ‘illiterate’, the majority of whom are women, around 7.2 million women compared to 4.8 million men from a total

population of about 39.6 million (UNESCO, 2022a). Illiteracy is more prevalent in rural areas because of limited access to education compared to cities.

### 2.6.1 Public and Non-public Literacy Programmes

Primary and secondary education are widely seen as stages where individuals learn to read and write proficiently and develop strategies to solve basic maths problems. Many miss out on education in their childhood. Starting from King Amanullah's time, some governments and private sectors have worked on providing literacy programmes for adults. People can join the literacy courses in adulthood if they missed the chance to go to school in their childhood. There are many centres directly or indirectly focusing on literacy programmes in Afghanistan, run by the government and local communities or by international and national organisations. These programmes vary in focus, scale and content of their materials, but all aim to offer some form of literacy skills for adult learners.

The governmental programmes provide learners with free literacy education if they volunteer to study in these classes. The facilitators, who are either public-school teachers or permanent and/or short-term contract teachers, are paid for their teaching in literacy programmes (Maleki, Rogers & Maleki, 2019).

Aside from government programmes for enhancing literacy, national and international organisations such as HELP Germany, Asem Foundation, ANAF AE and Organization for Sustainable Aid in Afghanistan (OSAA) have different programmes for literacy learners (Table 2). Additionally, some people like wealthy patrons offer literacy classes to people in their neighbourhood in their local community – usually in masjids – most of which are self-funded or volunteer programmes offering informal literacy classes (Maleki, Rogers & Maleki, 2019).

*Table 2. Details of organisations offering literacy programmes in Afghanistan*

| Organization | Focus                                                  | Description                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
|--------------|--------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| MoE          | Adult Literacy<br>(Reading, writing, numeracy, Qur'an) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A department within the MoE is devoted to offering programmes all over Afghanistan</li> <li>• Has provincial literacy departments, district-level offices</li> </ul> |

|                 |                                                                                                              |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
|-----------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|                 |                                                                                                              | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Offers literacy classes for free for both males and females</li> <li>• Students' age is 15+</li> <li>• Mostly, short-term programmes</li> <li>• Uses MoE's curriculum and textbooks</li> <li>• Duration: nine months</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                           |
| ANAF AE         | Literacy (reading, writing) + English language, mathematics and university entrance exam preparation courses | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Afghan National Association for Adult Education is a national NGO</li> <li>• Has literacy programmes in Herat, Kabul, Bamiyan, Parwan and Mazar-e Shareef districts</li> <li>• Uses MoE's curriculum and textbooks</li> <li>• Students' age is 18+</li> <li>• Duration: nine months</li> </ul>                                                                                        |
| OSAA            | Creating jobs & developing skills                                                                            | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Organisation for Sustainable Aid in Afghanistan is a local NGO</li> <li>• Offers skill development training</li> <li>• Mostly for poor people and street children</li> <li>• Students' age is 18~35</li> <li>• Offers literacy sessions for the first 45 minutes of the whole day course session</li> <li>• Has its own curriculum and textbooks</li> <li>• Duration: one year</li> </ul> |
| Asem Foundation | Adult literacy (Reading, Writing, Numeracy, Quranic studies)                                                 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Local NGO</li> <li>• Mostly for adults (18+) in rural and urban areas</li> <li>• Uses the MoE's curriculum and textbooks</li> <li>• Duration: nine months</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
| HELP Germany    | Skill development programmes or Technical and Vocational Education and Training Programmes (TVET)            | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• International NGO based in Germany</li> <li>• Offers skill development programmes</li> <li>• Mostly for poor and internal immigrants</li> <li>• Students' age: 18~35</li> <li>• Literacy session is for 45 minutes at the beginning of each day, with a focus on jobs and occupational skills</li> <li>• Has its own curriculum and textbooks</li> <li>• Duration: one year</li> </ul>    |

|         |                                     |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
|---------|-------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Masjids | Religious literacy (mostly reading) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Local masjids used as classrooms</li> <li>• For both girls and boys (separately)</li> <li>• Mostly between 7 ~ 25 years old</li> <li>• Offer Quranic literacy and some poems in Dari-Farsi</li> <li>• Follow a system called “Qa’ida” (Rules)</li> <li>• Plenty of drilling and repetitions</li> </ul> |
|---------|-------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|

All of the above organisations and institutions used to provide literacy courses for both male and female adult learners, but due to government policy changes, they currently offer courses only for men. As shown in Table 2, there are three different kinds of literacy learning programmes in Afghanistan: 1) national literacy programmes focusing on reading, writing, numeracy and the Qur’an; 2) TVET programmes with literacy as a component; 3) and religious/Quranic literacy programmes focusing on religious texts (mainly reading and memorisation). Additionally, there are other private literacy centres that offer literacy courses, but do not use the MoE curriculum. They have their own curriculum, which mainly focuses on reading, writing and maths.

Although there is another kind of literacy programme – functional literacy, I did not include it in the table because it is more like a post-literacy programme. Once the ALLs successfully complete the nine-month literacy programme, they have the option to start from Year 4 following the formal school curriculum in a functional/post-literacy school. The majority of the students in this school are adults over 15 years old, including men and women. They follow exactly the same curricula as the formal public schools. The only difference between these schools and the children’s schools is the age of the learners.

These programmes are supervised by the MoE. Most of the decisions on adult literacy learning are made in a top-down style. The MoE prescribes the design for the provincial literacy departments. Few others are involved in the decision-making from the lower ranks such as adult literacy facilitators (henceforth ALFs) and ALLs. The programme planners take these decisions, perhaps, on the assumption that so-called ‘illiterate adults’ are incapable of taking decisions. The Ministry looks for a uniform approach, a

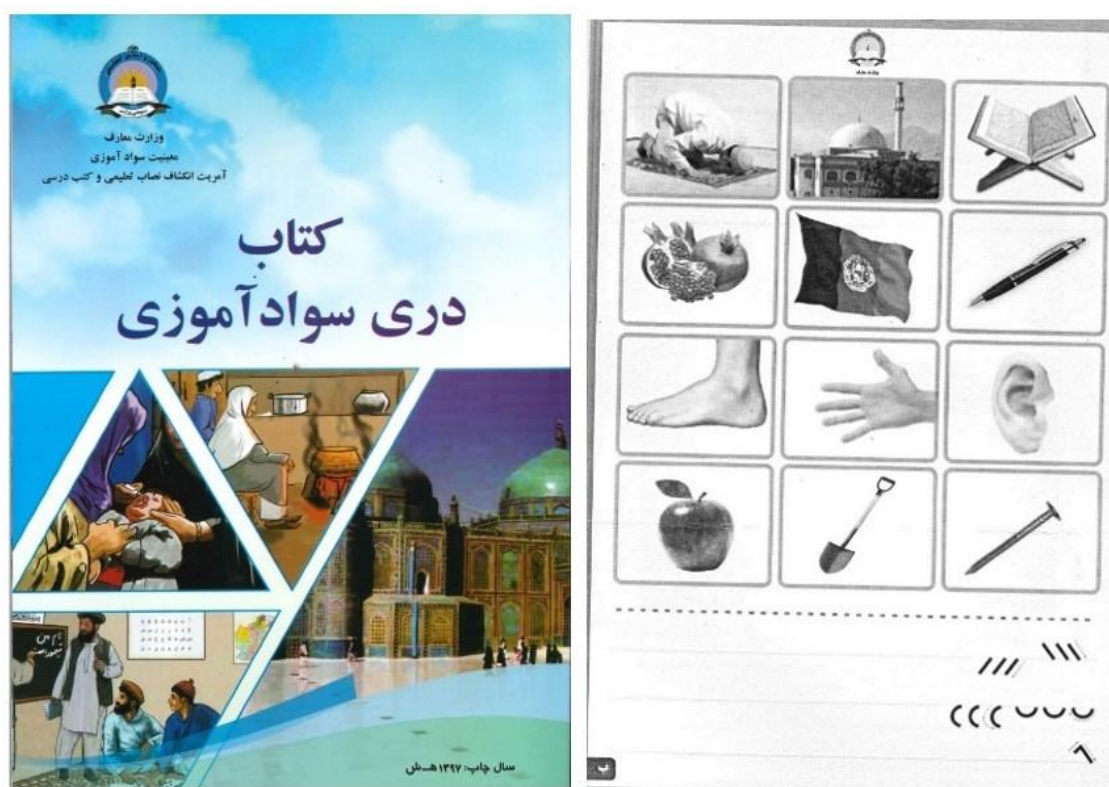
one-size-fits-all approach like schools for children rather than different approaches for different groups of adults.

Based on my experience and observation, most of the literacy programmes in Afghanistan view literacy as a set of skills, which is in line with what [Street \(1984\)](#) calls an 'autonomous model'. This can be seen from the textbook and materials that the Ministry wants the literacy centres to use in the adult literacy classes.

The MoE controls most of the literacy programmes in Afghanistan. With the help of some international organisations such as UNESCO, it developed the curriculum and textbooks modelled on those from other countries, for instance from Iran ([Rogers et al, 2018](#)). The curriculum consists of three parts: Language, Maths and Qur'an. Although this curriculum was developed during the Islamic Republic regime (2001-2021), it is still used in the public literacy course. On the other hand, private literacy centres provide learners with instruction only in language and maths. Both centres include written language as a key component of their language instruction. These subjects are intended to be taught to learners over a nine-month course.

The content of the language textbook (Figure 3) is very similar to that used in the formal children's schools. It starts with a text and ends with comprehension questions. It includes many drill activities and learners have to write the exercises at home.

Figure 3. Cover page and a sample of first pages of public literacy textbook.



The literacy textbook starts with many images of items such as body parts, tools, fruits, stationery, animals, vegetables and so on (Figure 3), with spaces and models at the end of each page to draw lines of different shapes which are not necessarily related to letters in the Farsi-Dari language. This is very similar to the textbooks developed for primary level school students to get them motivated with the images and help young students learn more vocabulary.

The book moves on to letters, words and building sentences. Most of the topics in the book are neutral, not related to any gender; for example, there are topics on health, religion, education, cultural and family values. The book also contains topics specific to each gender (men and women). For instance, there are lessons on values of breastfeeding and health during pregnancy; another showcases a young man being helpful to the community; and yet another one describes a young man working in the market. The human images are also chosen carefully, including both genders and the names of the characters in the book are also chosen considering both genders.

This content demonstrates an effort to represent both genders. However, it also reinforces traditional gender roles. The topics chosen for men and women reflect

stereotypical associations through which women are caregivers and men are public actors, rather than challenging these divisions. Of course, the neutral topics provide shared learning opportunities, but the presence of gender-specific content suggests that certain roles and responsibilities are being quietly encoded through the curriculum, an action [Lukes \(1974\)](#) describes as the third dimension of power. From a literacy-as-social-practice perspective ([Street, 1984](#)), this indicates that literacy education does not merely transmit technical skills but also legitimises particular gendered ideologies, shaping how learners perceive their place within society.

From a learning perspective, the structure of the textbook, particularly its resemblance to primary school materials, raises questions about age-appropriateness. Adult learners may not find the cartoonish imagery or disconnected drawing exercises meaningful or engaging. This is specifically true for older adults like Ali. During one of the lessons, he pointed at an image of a man in the book and, while smiling, said to me, “look at his hat.” His comment was in a sarcastic way because it was a cartoon character. Furthermore, the heavy use of drills and rote learning tasks points to a didactic approach that may not align with adults’ lived experiences or literacy needs, but it is a familiar approach in most schools.

If non-government organisations or institutions want to offer literacy learning programmes, they are required to sign an agreement with the MoE. This is the same in the current regime. The MoE then issues the copyright license for the organisations to copy and use the MoE textbooks as their teaching materials. Although the MoE wants these organisations to implement the government’s curriculum, depending on their programme’s focus, not all organisations do this.

For example, Azadi, the private literacy centre, has developed its own Dari-Farsi literacy textbook. It is mainly divided into two sections. The first section introduces the alphabet and basic words, gradually moving on to sentences and short paragraphs. The second section, which comprises more than half of the book, includes vocabulary lists with synonyms and sample sentences, all organised in tables. With regard to content, the public and private textbooks are very different. While the public centre’s textbook focuses more on everyday basic life skills, such as health, hygiene and daily

routines, the private textbook addresses topics mostly related to religion, geography, ethics and moral lessons (see Chapter 7, Section 7.1 for a more detailed discussion).

In the religious centres such as masjids, where literacy is taught through religious texts, facilitators are very independent. They choose what they think works for their students. The most popular textbook is called '*Qa'ida Noorani*' (known as *Qa'ida*), published in Pakistan for beginners. The learners at these centres can also receive certificates from the MoE if they register at their local literacy department and follow the MoE textbooks. However, most of the people learning at these centres do not attend because of the certificates.

In Afghanistan, teachers are provided with a fixed text that looks very similar to formal education textbooks. Most of the adult literacy permanent teachers come from public schools. The teaching method they implement in literacy classes is the one they use in formal schools teaching children, where accuracy in punctuation, spelling, good handwriting and formatting is valued the most; this is also true in higher education in Afghanistan ([Maleki, 2012](#)). I can also see this as a reason for demotivating learners in literacy classes. For example, although the statistics show that the literacy rate in Afghanistan (37%) is very low ([World Bank, 2021](#)), my colleagues and I ([Maleki, Rogers & Maleki, 2019](#)) found that one of the main challenges facilitators face in their contexts was a lack of motivation in learners to join the literacy classes. However, the work of Maleki and colleagues is limited to urban areas, and the situation in rural areas may differ.

The high number of non-literate individuals in Afghanistan has created a strong demand for a variety of literacy programmes, including public, private, vocational, digital, community-based and post-literacy or functional schools, each offering literacy either as a core focus or as a component. However, public programmes are designed using a top-down, one-size-fits-all strategy, with limited involvement of ALLs. The content of textbooks demonstrates a clear effort at gender inclusion, yet traditional gender roles and stereotypes persist, and the materials themselves are frequently not age-appropriate or engaging for adults.

### 2.6.2 Madrasa and Masjid Programmes

As soon as children turn five years old, they are usually sent to their local masjids to learn the Arabic alphabet, which serves as the foundation for reading and, in some cases, memorising the Qur'an. As discussed above, poverty and insecurity caused by ongoing conflicts prevent some families from sending their children to school, or from learning religious literacy. However, even if these children grow older, they still have the opportunity to catch up, as the doors of masjids are always open to people of any age who wish to learn religious literacy. Many adults join these literacy programmes because of the expectations that a Muslim adult should know at least how to recite parts of the Qur'an and understand the values and principles of Islam to apply in their daily lives. Although learners often do not practise much writing in masjid classes, they practise plenty of reading and recitation.

It is worth mentioning that men's participation in masjids is generally considered obligatory, while women's participation is typically optional; this distinction reflects the broader gendered division of public and private spaces in Afghanistan ([Echavez et al., 2016](#); [Moghadam, 2002](#)). From my own observations and experience, I have noticed that many adult men actively seek to deepen their religious knowledge and enhance their religious literacy from a very young age. While this pursuit can certainly strengthen one's personal connection to faith, the literature also highlights that it serves as a means to build social capital and elevate social status among communities and among other men ([Echavez et al., 2016](#)). By gaining recognition for their religious expertise, men can assert authority within their communities, a dynamic that, to some extent, reinforces traditional gender roles and social hierarchies ([Echavez et al., 2016](#)).

As part of my ethnographic approach to data collection, I observed participants in masjids. It is important to note that madrasa and masjid courses or classes are not the same. In Afghanistan, a madrasa refers to formal religious schools where students follow a fixed curriculum developed by the Ministry of Pilgrimage. Upon graduation, students receive a diploma equivalent to a grade 12 school level. The curriculum includes subjects such as Quranic studies, Arabic, *Hadith* (narrations of the Prophet's actions and sayings), theology, arithmetic and science. Students are taught in classes

and the lessons are delivered to the entire class. Attendance is recorded and students are formally registered. Students do not pay a fee in these madrasas.

However, since the Taliban takeover in August 2021, the curriculum and equivalent grades have completely changed. There is now a strong focus on Islamic and Quranic studies and upon graduation from year 11, students receive a diploma equivalent to a master's degree ([RFE/RL, 2024](#)).

Masjid classes are organised informally by masjids' imam with the support of the communities attending those masjids for prayers. There is no structured curriculum, and learners do not receive a diploma or certificate upon completing these classes unless they register their class with the government education department. The subjects vary depending on the learners' level. They begin by reading the Arabic alphabet from *Qa'ida*. At this stage, learners are taught phonics, sounds and articulation of each letter.

*Qa'ida* textbook moves from letters to words, chunks of words and phrases from the Qur'an. Once learners can recognise letters and words, they start reading the Qur'an. Meanwhile, they learn the rules and regulations for pronouncing certain words, known as *Tajweed*. After achieving fluency in reading the Qur'an, learners move on to Dari-Farsi poetry books like *Khaja Hafiz*. They are taught both how to read the poems and their interpretations, which often relate to moral lessons. Subsequently, they study more complex religious books related to *Fiqh and Sharia* (Islamic jurisprudential law). However, with regard to the study of poetry and Fiqh books, it depends on the learners' preferences. If they are children, their parents decide what they should study after the Qur'an. Some individuals choose to memorise the Qur'an, some discontinue the lessons, while others continue with the remaining books.

In masjids, students are taught individually based on their level. There is no formal attendance record; students are registered informally in the teacher's notebook. Students pay a fee on a weekly or monthly basis. The fee is not fixed, and students contribute what they can afford. In rural areas, some students bring bread, oil, rice or flour to their teacher instead of money.

The religious text taught in mosques, public and private institutions, is in the Arabic language. The script in Arabic and Dari-Farsi<sup>5</sup> is largely the same. Dari-Farsi language includes all 28 letters of the Arabic script (the language of the Qur'an) with the addition of four more letters (g, p, ch, zh) that are not present in standard Arabic. Consequently, when children or adults learn Arabic letters and become capable of reading the Qur'an, they can also read Dari-Farsi. However, it is important to note that Dari-Farsi and Arabic are completely different languages.

### 2.6.3 Informal Digital Programmes

After the fall of the Taliban in 2001, the political situation was more stable for a long period of time, which resulted in peace and development in many sectors. For instance, the telecommunications sector improved significantly. Many Afghan traders from all corners of the world returned to Afghanistan and brought new technologies, establishing companies in industries such as telecommunications and mobile phone production. In fact, the telecommunications sector expanded to cover over 90% of the population by 2020 and more than 34 million SIM cards were registered ([Samandar, 2025](#); [Akhgar & Burinskiene, 2023](#); [Kakar Advocates, 2020](#)). This led to increased access to mobile phones and computers among the people. By the end of this era and at the beginning of the Taliban's second rise to power, mobile phones and internet access had become very popular, especially in urban areas ([Samandar, 2025](#)).

Currently, similar to other parts of the world, most adults in Afghanistan own a mobile phone – some have smartphones, while most use basic (non-smart) models. Internet connectivity is available, but there is limited coverage in remote villages. People can access the internet via their mobile phones if they can afford the cost ([Samandar, 2025](#)).

Often, young adults who cannot afford to buy internet data use SMS bundles to exchange messages. The more contacts you have, the more SMS messages you are

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<sup>5</sup> Dari-Farsi is one of the two national languages spoken in Afghanistan (Pashtu is the other one). Dari is a variety of the Persian language, often referred to as Farsi in Afghanistan. The relationship between Dari and Farsi is similar to that between British and American English. I use Dari-Farsi as I do not see them as distinct languages, but rather two different accents. Tajiki, spoken in Tajikistan, is another accent of Farsi.

likely to receive each day, ranging from poems and religious texts to jokes and pieces of advice. Those who are at a high literacy level and are able to write sentences can reflect on the messages and write back to the sender. Most people just read and forward the SMS messages to other friends in their contact list. This kind of reading and writing is often used as a form of gaining and exchanging information or for pleasure (Samandar, 2025; Akhgar & Burinskiene, 2023). Depending on their occupation, individuals might have access to or use other digital tools such as calculators, printers, copying machines or other electronic equipment that might require some level of literacy.

Although computers, mobile phones and printers are increasingly available all over Afghanistan, traditional forms of communication such as handwriting continue to play an important role, often due to cultural habits, educational practices or the practical reliability of paper in settings where electricity and internet are not always stable (Rawan, 2002). The most important reason is the lack of reliable electricity, even in the urban areas. In most parts of the country, during the hot weather in summer and cold weather in the winter season, electricity would be supplied only for two hours daily, enough for people to fill their water tanks for drinking, laundry and other means (Samandar, 2025). The next reason that people prefer handwriting over digital writing is that since the majority of people are in rural areas, they do not have access to computers or courses to learn computer programmes and people in these areas use mobile phones mainly for communication purposes.

In addition, traditionally, since there were limited to no means of communication such as telephones and the internet, people would exchange letters or record their voices on tape and send them to their loved ones when they were far apart. In this context, good handwriting was important because the readers of the letters were often different people living miles away, who needed to be able to read the text with ease (Akbari & Samimi, 2021).

Although contacting others by mobile phone is now replacing the recording of sounds over the cassettes, people still use pens and papers in their daily activities such as in their business, when writing agreements and even farmers often record on a paper, either themselves or by someone who can write, the schedule that they would receive

water on their lands, referring to traditional water rights and irrigation timetables. This made writing further embedded into the culture (Akbari & Samimi, 2021; Samandar, 2025).

## 2. 7 Conclusion

The main purpose of this chapter was to explore the historical, political, social and educational contexts relating to gender and literacy provision in Afghanistan, in order to provide a clearer foundation for the interpretation, discussion and conclusions of this thesis. This chapter has demonstrated that Afghanistan's history has been marked by frequent regime changes, each introducing its own political agenda regarding gender and education. Support for literacy and education for women has fluctuated considerably since the time of King Amanullah Khan. Some regimes promoted girls' education and reform (i.e., Amanullah Khan, PDPA and Islamic Republic regimes), while others made efforts to reverse these advances (i.e., Habibullah Khan and the Taliban).

Despite notable progress for women, persistent gender, rural-urban and social disparities remain, and the majority of adult non-literate Afghans are still women. At the same time, policy documents and public discourse have tended to frame 'illiteracy' in deficit terms, reinforcing stigma and a subordinate status for non-literate adults, particularly men who are also being emasculated through these programmes – a theme discussed in Chapter 6. Literacy programmes in Afghanistan are diverse, including public, non-governmental, religious and digital initiatives, yet they are often centrally controlled and based on models designed for children, with materials and methods that do not fully engage or support adult male learners.

Crucially, while the focus on female literacy has brought important advances, the unique challenges faced by boys and men, such as economic pressure, early school leaving and social stigma, have received little attention. This policy and research gap has left men's experiences of literacy largely invisible. Addressing this absence is central to the aims of this thesis, which seeks to understand male literacy as a gendered, social and economic process shaped by Afghanistan's wider context.

## Chapter 3

### Research Design and Methodology

#### 3.1 Introduction

This chapter outlines the research approach employed in conducting this research project. I found ethnographic approaches to be appropriate for exploring how engagement with various literacy practices shapes the literacies of adult male literacy learners in Afghanistan, and how these practices inform their masculinities, agency and power. I will also introduce my research sites, participants as well as the procedures I used to collect data and the analysis of the data. Later in this chapter, I reflect on my positionality throughout the research journey. I will end with explaining some ethical considerations and will reflect on the methodological limitations.

#### 3.2 Methodological Foundations

This study investigates how adult male literacy learners in Afghanistan construct and perform masculinities through their engagement with literacy and how these practices shape their sense of agency and power. Qualitative research allows for such in-depth exploration of meaning-making in the participants' natural contexts ([Creswell, 2013](#)).

I view literacy, masculinity and agency not as fixed categories but as socially situated and continuously shaped by interactions, institutions and context ([Street, 1984](#); [Connell, 2005](#); [Kabeer, 1999](#)), which forms the constructivist ontology underpinning this research project. These concepts are deeply embedded in everyday life and are best understood by the lived experiences and meaning-making processes of individuals. Therefore, a methodological approach that captures these nuances, particularly one that embraces contextual depth, participant voice and researcher reflexivity, is required.

The choice of ethnography as the methodological frame allows for extended engagement with the field and close observation of the social practices, relationships and power dynamics that inform the participants' lives. My approach to ethnography is

also shaped by the New Literacy Studies ([Street, 1984](#)), which conceptualises literacy as a social practice, rather than merely a set of technical skills, and by theories of power dimensions ([Lukes, 1974](#)) that inform how individuals navigate institutional and social structures. These theories and concepts are discussed in detail in Chapter 4.

Overall, this methodological foundation reflects the study's commitment to capturing the complexity of meaning-making, recognising that knowledge is not discovered but co-constructed through interaction, reflexivity and the situated nature of both researcher and participant.

My ontological understanding is that literacies, masculinities and agency among my adult male participants are fluid and situated in different domains. Additionally, as the epistemological position underpinning this study, I observe knowledge as being co-constructed through interactions between myself and my participants, shaped by cultural norms and literacy practices.

### 3.2.1 Ethnography

Since ethnography is an “ongoing attempt to place specific encounters, events or understandings into a fuller, more meaningful context” ([Tedlock, 2000, p. 455](#)), it suits the purposes of this study, investigating literacy as a social practice to see how it shapes my informants' masculinities and informs their agency and power. This kind of research approach is not only about the “production of new information”; rather, it is “the way in which data is transformed into a written or visual form” ([Tedlock, 2000, p.165](#)). As Hymes commented, it “is continuous with ordinary life. Much of what we seek to find out in ethnography is knowledge that others already have. Our ability to learn ethnographically is an extension of what every human being must do, that is learn the meanings, norms, and patterns of a way of life” ([Hymes, 1996, p.13](#)). So, it is a common-sense process of learning which comes from the interaction and observation of what people do, think and believe. Employing this methodology provided me with a “detailed, in-depth account of actual practice in different cultural settings” ([Street, 1993, p.1](#)). Additionally, this approach provided me with the opportunity to observe my participants in their everyday lives and understand the choices and decisions they make.

### 3.3 Research Setting and Participants

This study was conducted in one of the provinces in the Western Zone of Afghanistan in 2020-2021. This zone consists of four provinces: Herat, Badqis, Farah and Ghur. Herat and Farah have a large, shared border with Iran, while Badqis borders Turkmenistan; therefore, the cultures and languages are very similar on both sides of the border. The majority of the people in these provinces speak Dari-Farsi. To protect my participants' identities, I will not specify the exact province where I collected data for this research project; instead, I refer to it as the Western Zone.

Although the study was conducted in only one province, this was a deliberate methodological decision I made from the outset. Ethnographic research required prolonged engagement and sustained access to participants across different domains of their lives, including literacy classrooms, workplaces and religious settings. This depth of engagement was feasible only in a location where I had established professional networks and could build the trust necessary for long-term participant observation. Security considerations at the time of fieldwork further reinforced the decision to focus on a single province.

The MoE has a PLD in these provinces. Each PLD has sub-departments at the district level and many international and national organisations offer literacy classes in most of the provinces in Afghanistan (please refer to the Context Chapter for more details of these programmes), which enabled me to choose different programmes for this study.

In addition to government-designed literacy courses, there are many private centres with varying capacities that offer literacy classes for learners of all ages. These private centres are either supported by international or national organisations or charge fees to cover their expenses.

#### 3.3.1 Determining My Research Site

Prior to starting my fieldwork, I conducted a one-month scoping visit to the potential research site in December 2019. This visit helped me identify gatekeepers in different organisations and institutions that were offering adult literacy courses, including the

government literacy department. I contacted the PLD in one of the Western Zone provinces with the support of a colleague in the MoE, which allowed me to gain access and arrange meetings with both the Head and the programme coordinator. Through these meetings, I learned about the structure, content and duration of government literacy programmes, including the use of UNESCO and MoE-developed textbooks and the nine-month literacy course schedule that is followed by all providers.

I also visited several NGOs, such as Azadi, Asem Foundation and ANAF AE, to understand the diversity of literacy provision. I found that Azadi provides literacy courses for both adults and children in most of the provinces in the Western Zone. I also found that Asem Foundation focuses on rural areas and includes Islamic subjects in response to community preferences, while ANAF AE operates across multiple provinces and offers additional courses beyond basic literacy. During my visits, I observed that HELP Germany's programmes were uniquely combining skill development and job-related literacy, adapting their curriculum for refugees and poor communities, while masjid-based programmes concentrated almost entirely on Quranic reading using the Qa'ida method.

In selecting programmes, I considered factors such as accessibility, diversity of participant backgrounds, organisational willingness to collaborate, the alignment of programme aims with my research focus on adult male literacy and identity, and opportunities to observe both classroom practice and community engagement. Due to some cultural restrictions, it was not feasible for me as a young man visiting the women's literacy classrooms. Even if I were allowed to visit the classrooms, I would not be allowed to visit any of the female adult learners outside the classroom domain. Thus, I did not include women's classes in this study.

Overall, the scoping visit allowed me to move beyond a purely institutional perspective and identify the actual sites and classes where the complexities of adult literacy, gender, motivation and local context intersected most clearly, ensuring my fieldwork was both feasible and relevant to my research questions.

### 3.3.2 Selection of Programmes and Participants

I selected two adult literacy classes for this study: One from a government PLD and one from a private institute (Azadi) that was offering a literacy course for adult men. The selection of the classes for the observation was based on the desire of both teachers and students to participate in this study. I used a top-down approach to detain permission, which I believed would work best in the Afghan context. Through my links and network at the MoE, I requested a letter introducing me to the PLD. The letter briefly explained the purpose of my research and that I would visit the literacy classes for the purpose of my PhD research project.

As I expected, this worked very well and the PLD were very supportive. They introduced me to the facilitators offering literacy courses for the men and I chose Saber, as he was my participant in a previous research project. As for the private centre, I had known the founder of Azadi before, since I had trained this centre's language teachers through a US embassy project providing teacher training workshops for language teachers in the Western Zone of Afghanistan. Ajmal, the facilitator of the private course, was introduced to me by the Azadi CEO and Founder.

My initial plan was to include a male class from the government and a female class from private or NGO-run centres. However, because of some cultural barriers (I shall discuss this in the ethics section of this chapter; Section 3.7) I changed my mind. Additionally, after my scoping visit, I realised that significant attention was given to female literacy classes, while male literacy learners were overlooked by both practitioners, scholars as well as literacy providers.

For instance, in one of the National Literacy Committee meetings, of which I have been a member, I suggested that the volunteer literacy facilitators should be recognised for their contributions. The committee made this suggestion as an action point for the PLD to do so through a small formal gathering at the department. Later, the department shared some photos and a report stating that certificates of appreciation had been issued to the facilitators. The names listed in the report showed that all were women who were teaching other women.

When I later asked the Head of PLD privately about the absence of male facilitators and why they were not issued a certificate, he said, while smiling, “Men should always have something to give.” He then continued, “We’ll organise another one for men, too.” The social expectation that men should always sacrifice was felt strongly in his speech. Although men like Saber have been teaching as volunteers for years, their initiatives are hardly seen and appreciated.

The other reason I chose to focus on male literacy classes was because, culturally, it would have been very hard, if not impossible, for me to access the female learners in different domains of their lives, which was an essential part of my ethnographic approach to data collection.

Thus, I selected research sites from male adult literacy classes. The differences between these two classes were:

- One was a public literacy class supported by the PLD, but the other one was offered by a private institution.
- The public class followed the official MoE curriculum, while the private centre used its own curriculum.

My rationale for choosing these two settings was to explore how different organisational contexts and curricular approaches shape the experiences of adult male literacy learners. By including a public class that was controlled by the state and followed the government curriculum and policies, alongside a private class with its own curriculum and greater independence from state control, I aimed to capture a broader range of perspectives. This comparison allowed me to examine how state regulation, curriculum content and institutional autonomy might influence teaching practices, learner engagement and the construction of literacy and identity in different settings.

There are three categories of participants in this study (Table 2). The first category is ALLs. I chose these participants in consultation with the facilitators, who knew their students better than me with regard to their willingness to be my participants and considering their occupation. After visiting the classes for a couple of months, I asked

the facilitators to introduce me to possible candidates. In some cases, I also found candidates suitable for my research and then would consult with the facilitator. The criteria I used in selecting my participants were:

- Their age: They should have been over 18 years old to be considered an adult. Although, for the PLD classes, over 15 were counted as adults.
- Their gender: they should have all been men.
- Their occupation: For example, when I chose one participant, the facilitator said that he might not be willing to help me because he is a taxi driver and cannot have me in his car for ethnographic shadowing. When I talked to him, he indirectly said the same and did not participate. Participants were required to be or have been learners in the literacy learning classes. Although, two of my participants from whom I have collected a little data were intending to participate in the literacy classes. One of them is Mahmoud, who works in different parts of a sofa company and the other one is Basheer, who was a colleague of Firouz at the Public Park.

The second category is ALFs, whose classes I have observed. As stated above, I knew Saber, the facilitator from the public centre and I recruited Ajmal from the private centre through the institution's office.

The third category was programme designers in the literacy programmes of each centre, both in PLD and Azadi classes. Delaqa, the Head of PLD, from the public centre and Alemi, the CEO and Founder of Azadi, from the private centre, agreed to participate in my research study.

*Table 3. Participants' demographic information.*

| No                                        | Name   | Marital Status and Number of Family Members | Literacy Class | Age | Occupation               |
|-------------------------------------------|--------|---------------------------------------------|----------------|-----|--------------------------|
| <b>Programme Designers/Administrators</b> |        |                                             |                |     |                          |
| 1                                         | Delaqa | Married (7 people)                          | PLD            | 40  | Head of PLD              |
| 2                                         | Alemi  | Married (6 people)                          | Private        | 38  | CEO and Founder of Azadi |
| <b>Facilitators</b>                       |        |                                             |                |     |                          |

|                                |         |                                              |         |    |                                                            |
|--------------------------------|---------|----------------------------------------------|---------|----|------------------------------------------------------------|
| 3                              | Ajmal   | Single, lives alone                          | Private | 25 | ALF                                                        |
| 4                              | Saber   | Married (7 people)                           | Public  | 46 | ALF                                                        |
| <b>Adult Literacy Learners</b> |         |                                              |         |    |                                                            |
| 5                              | Ali     | Married (3 people)                           | Public  | 28 | Guard at a generator house                                 |
| 6                              | Firouz  | Married (8 people)                           | Public  | 32 | Doorkeeper at a public park                                |
| 7                              | Fattah  | Single, lives with his parents (8 people)    | Public  | 24 | Cook, vendor, cleaner                                      |
| 8                              | Zabi    | Single, lives with his parents (10 people)   | Public  | 28 | A carpenter in a sofa production company                   |
| 9                              | Rashid  | Married (9 people)                           | Public  | 48 | Store owner sells car batteries, Solar panels, water pumps |
| 10                             | Halim   | Married, lives with parents (7 people)       | Public  | 26 | Painter in a sofa production company                       |
| 11                             | Faisal  | Single, lives with parents (7 people)        | Public  | 24 | Painter in a sofa production company                       |
| 12                             | Hashem  | Married, lives with his parents (5 people)   | Public  | 25 | Carpenter in a sofa production company                     |
| 13                             | Asqar   | Married (7 people)                           | Public  | 39 | Cleaner at the Theology School of a public university      |
| 14                             | Shamim  | Single lives with his parents (9 people)     | Public  | 24 | Tailor in a sofa production company                        |
| 15                             | Jabbar  | Married, lives with his parents (10 people). | Private | 30 | Motorbike mechanic                                         |
| 16                             | Shams   | Single, lives with parents                   | Private | 25 | Student, goes to school grade 11 and an ALL                |
| 17                             | Mahmoud | Married (6 people)                           | None    | 45 | The security guard in a Sofa production company            |
| 18                             | Basheer | Married (7 people)                           | None    | 32 | Guard at a public park                                     |

As presented in Table 3, the participants include individuals of different ages, occupations and marital statuses, with different experiences related to parenthood or absence of children. I did not include the duration of their literacy study in the table because most of them could not remember how long they had been attending the courses. Some mentioned they had attended off and on and they could not recall

exactly for how long. However, when discussing their cases in the data chapters, I have included the duration of their study when it is known.

### 3.3.3 Public and Private Literacy Classrooms Layout

The physical layout or setting of classrooms is explained in this section because I believe understanding the layout offers insight into how space, resources and environment shape adult literacy learning experiences, and it also helps contextualise my observations of interaction patterns, student engagement and the challenges learners face. Furthermore, it helps the reader visualise the classroom environment when I discuss the data in the upcoming chapters.

The public literacy classroom is located in the post-literacy school (referred to as the functional literacy school). It is a government property that has many rooms of different sizes. This school is for adults who were unable to attend school during their childhood. Adults who complete the initial literacy course can enrol in this school, starting from year four. However, adults with a higher level of literacy may join this school without taking the literacy course. They must take a placement exam through which they will be allocated to a year group appropriate to their proficiency level. The school is situated in the centre of the city. While there are only two male literacy classes, there are many female classes in this centre. The layout of the classroom is described in the following fieldnote excerpt:

It is Sunday morning (January 3rd, 2021); I arrived in the public adult literacy class at 6:25 AM. The class begins at 6:30 AM and ends at 7:30 AM, but it sometimes goes beyond this. The weather app on my mobile phone shows -5 Celsius. There is a gentle but very cold wind with no snow or rain. As I entered the class, it was quite dark. Someone greeted me, saying, “Hello, good morning”. I responded, but I couldn’t see his face clearly. There are two students sitting at different desks in the classroom. In total, there were 15 metal desks, each connected to a bench, arranged in three rows. Additionally, there are three chairs with small, attached boards serving as desks. The metal desks are originally designed for school children, where three students sit side by side with legroom fitting children’s size. At the

back of the classroom, there are several broken and old chairs stacked together. The room has no windows, but the door is large, with glass on its upper half to let in light (Figure 4). Since there was no electricity, the class remained dark until the sun rose at 7:00 AM.

Fieldnotes, Western Zone, 03/01/2021

Although there were many desks for learners to sit at, the classroom sometimes became overcrowded when many students attended, which left little space to move. ALLs who arrived early and had already completed their individual lessons would often leave the class early to make room for other learners to sit.

Since the same room was used by learners in the post-literacy courses, there were many school materials displayed on the walls. For example, Mendeleev's periodic table from a chemistry course, decorated with colourful marbles, was on one side of the room, a colourful table including Dari-Farsi letters was on the other side and students' projects, written in detailed posters, were all over the class.



*Figure 4. An adult literacy classroom in the Western Zone.*

In contrast, located in a crowded part of the city, the private centre was housed in a three-story rented building. The literacy classroom was situated on the second floor. It was a small room measuring approximately three by three metres. There were ten adult-sized benches in the classroom, which could accommodate up to twenty learners. On most days, there were typically between eight and 13 learners present.

The private literacy centre did not have any desks. Instead, it was furnished with long benches with no back support. Although there was enough legroom, because the learners would easily move the benches, one would get so tired after sitting on the benches for an hour. I usually chose a seat near the wall so I could lean against it. All the learners either held their notebooks and books in their hands or placed them on their laps.

The entrance door was located at the front of the classroom facing south, with the whiteboard next to it and a television monitor nearby. There were windows on both the north and west sides of the room, making it very bright. A Qur'an was placed on a single

shelf close to the monitor on the west wall. Since the room had large windows, the sunshine made it warm in the winter. In summer, they opened the window on the north side, which helped keep the room cool.

### 3.4 Data Collection Methods and Procedures

My fieldwork lasted for one year and two weeks (from 16th July 2020 to 30th July 2021). Data collection was primarily conducted in the Dari-Farsi language. On some occasions during the fieldwork, I had to stop writing my fieldnotes in order to listen attentively to my participants as a sign of respect. I would then return to my fieldnotes later that day or in the evening at home to write a complete description. I wrote most of my reflections at night at home while my memory was still fresh. The next section below presents the data collection strategies.

#### 3.4.1 Overview of Method and Procedures

I used multiple methods in this study. These include participant observation, semi-structured interviews and document analysis. I started with participant observation in the classroom, which helped me select my participants. Through these methods, I aimed to collect relevant data in light of the theoretical framework discussed in Chapter 4.

#### 3.4.2 Participant Observation

I employed participant observation, which is the dominant method for data collection in ethnography ([Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007](#)). As an active participant, I joined community events such as congregations in masjids and gatherings of shopkeepers and colleagues in the workplace during tea time. This approach enabled me “to meet, talk to, and observe the whole range of members of ... community” in different settings ([Johnson & Johnson, 1990, p. 171](#)).

Other doctoral ethnographies further illustrate why participant observation is suitable for literacy research. For instance, [Binesse \(2022\)](#) examined communicative practices around food and health in Dakar, [Millora \(2020\)](#) and [Millora \(2025\)](#) traced how young people and adults in the Philippines learned through volunteering and, in Malawi, [Mjaya \(2018\)](#) investigated literacy practices within rural community life. Together, these

studies highlight the value of long-term, situated inquiry for understanding how people draw on local resources and relationships to make sense of literacy in their own domains. My study builds on this ethnographic tradition by focusing on Afghan men's literacy practices across multiple social spaces, where literacy, masculinity and agency intersect.

I found the use of ethnography for this study essential because through ethnographic approaches I wanted to know "What is happening here in the field site(s) I have chosen?" (Heath & Street, 2008, p. 31). Additionally, it "encompasses any study of a group of people for the purpose of describing their sociocultural activities and patterns" (Burns, 2000, p. 393) and aligns with the epistemological stance of this study to explore literacy practices that are culturally and socially situated (Barton & Hamilton, 1998). Ethnographic approaches such as participant observation help me avoid seeking "universal truth, but examining situations, collecting alternatives and trying to understand what the implications of these alternatives are for us" (Gebre, et al., 2009, p. 8). It "forces us to think consciously about ways to enter into the life of the individual, group, or institutional life of the "other"" (Heath & Street, 2008, p. 31).

Since literacy practices could be observed in social contexts, patterns of masculinities and identities could be observed more often in performances where choices are valued and embedded in sociocultural contexts, this method would "increase the number of opinions ... [I am] exposed to, and the number of opportunities to see how cultural meanings are expressed in verbal or physical behaviour. In a phrase, it is context-building ..." (Johnson & Johnson, 1990, p. 171). This approach enabled me to observe the kinds of literacies my participants practised, the kinds of identities they performed and the kinds of choices and decisions they made.

Their 'verbal and physical behaviour' when interacting with others in the context also helped me investigate their identities and agency in relation to literacy (Emerson, Fretz & Shaw, 2011). In addition, participant observation provided me with "a better understanding of what is happening in the culture and lends credence to ... [my] interpretations of the observation" (Bernard, 1994, p. 143).

The first two months of classroom observation allowed me to establish rapport with ALLs and ALFs, and to spot and select my participants for the next phase of the ethnography, which involved visiting the individuals in their workplaces and masjids. The observations in the classroom continued as part of the ethnographic process even after I selected my participants. The focus of the observations was on collecting data with regard to ALLs' interactions with others (teachers and peers) in the classroom and the kinds of identities and decision-making they were involved in, whether visible or hidden. Although I participated in activities such as listening to lectures and writing in the classroom, my role was more of a researcher during this time in the class. Facilitators' perceptions and assumptions regarding learners' identities and decision-making were also explored through participant observation.

Although the facilitators knew the purpose of my observations, as I explained to them both verbally and in an information sheet, I felt that their teaching was influenced by my presence. For example, they began to take attendance at the beginning of the class, to maintain classroom control and encourage the learners to be quiet and take part in the lessons. However, after a few months, they felt very comfortable with me. There was no attendance sheet to mark learners' presence anymore, but classroom control still existed. The informal discussions and chats before or after the class were especially useful in shaping this normality.

I also found that the informal talks before the class started were very significant in building communication and trust with the learners. I got to know them more, about their occupations, their levels of literacy, interests in political, economic and social issues and other topics discussed between adults in Afghanistan. I continued these informal talks outside the classroom. Sometimes, I walked with my participants to their workplaces and on the way, we had long conversations.

My participation in the classroom gradually shifted from passive to moderate and eventually to full engagement. In the beginning, I was more of a passive participant, often taking notes on what was happening in the classroom. Then, as the learners got used to my presence, I joined in their activities. My role evolved into that of a smart classmate, someone they turned to for confirmation when they were not sure about how to read or write a word or when they wanted feedback on their handwriting.

My role as a participant observer in the workplaces varied, depending on which participant I visited. Some participants' occupations required me to observe from a distance due to the nature of the work. For example, when I was visiting carpenters and painters, I remained very much a passive participant. However, when visiting participants with occupations like guard, shopkeeper, vendor and generator house guard, my role was more active and aligned with that of a full participant. For instance, as I was visiting Firouz at the park entrance, I would collect entrance fees when large crowds wanted to enter the park and he needed assistance. At the generator house, I would respond to people's queries when Ali was busy with other things. When visiting Jabbar, a motorbike mechanic, I would pass him tools like a screwdriver while he worked.

In general, I had long conversations with all of them during their tea breaks and was involved in very friendly chats. Sometimes, they told me sensitive and deeply personal information that you would typically only share with a close friend. I assured them that I would only include information in my research that they were comfortable sharing. Thus, I deliberately excluded some of the conversations we had during my data collection process.

### 3.4.3 Interviews

Although participant observation was one of my key methods of data collection, I used interviews as a form of discussion to further explore issues and questions that emerged during my participant observation. These interviews included exploratory question types such as 'why?'. In fact, the interviews, participant observations and document analysis complemented each other. On occasions, "what people [my participants] say in interview can lead us to see things differently in observation" (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007, p. 103).

As I stated earlier in Table 3 of this chapter, my participants came from a wide range of occupations; therefore, I used a variety of interview protocols such as semi-structured and unstructured ones in the form of conversations during tea breaks. Using the sound recorder application on my mobile phone, I recorded all the interview sessions, stored the files and later transcribed them.

First, I started by conducting semi-structured interviews with programme designers from both PLD and Azadi centre, which included the Head of PLD and the Founder and CEO of the Azadi centre. Since Delaqa, the Head of PLD, was very busy and we were unable to arrange a time to meet him in his office, he agreed that we would talk in an open space after the official working hours. Thus, we met in a very green park and had the interview while eating boiled chickpeas (*shornakhod*, a famous on-street snack in Afghanistan). As for Alemi, the CEO of the private centre, we found a quiet classroom in his centre and had the interview there. These interviews lasted between 30 to 45 minutes each.

The questions revolved around their perceptions and programme information about learners' identities and agency in the programme, as well as the literacy curricula and programmes they offered to adult male learners in their respective centres. Additionally, after building a good relationship, I had some informal conversations with them. These methods allowed me to explore further regarding the mentioned themes.

Interviews with the ALLs and ALFs were conducted after I visited their workplaces multiple times. During these visits, I collected observational data and took notes of follow-up questions and gaps that needed further elaboration. Once a strong relationship was established and upon each participant's suggested day and time, I conducted the interviews. Some participants were excited and felt honoured to be interviewed. The interviews lasted between 30 to 60 minutes, depending on their availability, workload and type of occupations. For instance, my interview with Fattah, the vendor, lasted nearly 60 minutes, as he was free that day and had cleaned the wedding hall where he worked.

In addition to formal interviews, informal conversations allowed me to further explore participants' literacy practices, including both spoken and written forms, as they interacted and socialised in different contexts. These informal interactions also enabled me to find out more about their agency, identities and decisions.

In the very early stage, when I had only interviewed two of my participants and I saved the files in my mobile phone, the phone died and I lost all the images and the two audio files. I requested that the participants give me the chance to interview them again. They

agreed and I recorded the interviews again. Since then, I have saved the files both on the cloud and on my personal computer as a backup. In fact, the second interview gave the participants a chance to give more examples and explain further, as they already knew what kind of questions I was going to ask them.

#### 3.4.4 Documents Review

I collected and analysed various documents such as policies, bylaws, guidelines, curricula, textbooks, principles and plans published by the MoE. I started the documentary analysis process from the very early stage of my research journey to gain a comprehensive understanding of the available policies related to literacy and gender and continued reviewing them throughout my study. This process helped me find more information regarding education and gender priorities in Afghanistan.

Most documents were hard copies and there is a very limited number of documents available online. I analysed the National Education Strategic Plans (NESP I, II, and III), textbooks, UNESCO reports and internal proposals produced by the MoE and PLD. I accessed these documents through my professional networks in Kabul, where I visited offices of the MoE and UNESCO to scan or copy the materials I needed.

Since the MoE introduced me to the PLD through an official letter, the provincial office provided full support and access to documents throughout the research. Although most of the literacy-related policies I reviewed (see Chapter 5) were from the time of the Islamic Republic, some are still in use under the current government. It is worth mentioning that since this research was conducted during the Islamic Republic regime, the documents analysed in this thesis are mostly from this time.

#### 3.5 Data Analysis

My data includes interviews from ALLs, ALFs and programme designers, my ethnographic field notes and policy documents. I used my mobile audio recording software on my mobile phone to record the interviews with the consent of the participant. The recordings were later transcribed manually.

The transcribed interview data, fieldnotes and document extracts were entered into a Word file. I analysed the data through an iterative process of coding and categorisation,

identifying themes from fieldnotes, interviews and documents ([Creswell, 2013](#)). Although my initial plan was to use NVIVO software for the analysis process, since the programme does not support non-Latin scripts, I did not use it. The translation of my data started when I moved chunks of data into specific codes and themes.

I read the raw data until I was fully familiar with it. The emerging patterns and codes were recorded manually into a code book in my notebook. Ongoing data analysis was conducted in order to qualify and renew my interview questions. The raw data was coded, categorised and thematically organised for later discussions.

I adopted a hybrid approach, combining inductive coding (allowing themes to emerge from the data) with deductive attention to concepts related to literacy, identity, masculinity and agency. I looked for recurring patterns, contradictions, silences and moments of power negotiation in how participants described and enacted literacy in their lives. Furthermore, in addition to thematic coding, I paid attention to the situated nature of literacy events, who was involved, what tools were used, in what setting and with what power dynamics. This approach aligns with the principles of New Literacy Studies, where context and social practices are central to meaning-making.

Upon the completion of data collection on 30<sup>th</sup> July 2021, I went to Kabul to get the Tuberculosis (TB) test certificate, which was a required document upon my arrival in the UK. But since the regime changed and the fighting started around the airport, I could not leave the country. I had to return home and remained in Afghanistan until the political situation stabilised. My academic work was suspended for two years (August 2021- September 2023), until my family received UK visas. During this period, although my formal study was on hold, I continued to engage with my data, re-read my fieldnotes, wrote reflections and analytical memos and developed thematic reflections.

This prolonged period of immersion, albeit in a state of uncertainty, gave me time to reflect more deeply on my participants' narratives and literacy practices. It helped me return to the data with new sensitivity and insight when I resumed my PhD in the UK.

Additionally, as I moved to the UK and received a new status as an asylum seeker, I was positioned from formerly prestigious roles (i.e., university instructor, teacher trainer,

researcher, educated man with years of experience in teaching and researching) to being a member of a marginalised community. Suddenly, I became an asylum seeker, a person in limbo, facing uncertainty and experiencing significant limitations to my agency, abilities and daily imposed identity, which fundamentally altered how I was perceived and what opportunities were available to me.

This new unknown identity of mine reminded me of my participants, who are decision-makers, fathers, providers, breadwinners and supporters outside the class, but when in the classroom or when it comes to literacy, they are being limited by their status as 'illiterates' or 'low-literate' individuals, who are stereotypically being labelled as 'blinds, not wise, no able to decide properly etc.' In these contexts, they struggle to legitimise their identities that matter to them. My new identity and dramatic shift in positionality provided deeper insight into the experiences of my participants. These imposed identities can obscure their other forms of knowledge, experience and authority.

My own transition allowed me to approach data with deep empathy and reflexivity, recognising the complexities of negotiating multiple identities under shifting social structures. It sensitised me to the emotional and practical struggles my participants faced in legitimising their valued identities. This awareness informed both my interactions and my interpretation of the data, supporting a more nuanced understanding of agency, power and identity in the lives of adult literacy learners.

### 3.6 Reflexivity and Positionality in the Field

I started conducting this research project while wearing many hats. I was a university teacher, a teacher trainer, an educated man living in the centre of the city, a researcher, a father, a husband, a PhD student as well as a friend of Saber, the facilitator at the public centre. These roles all shaped my positionality in my research process.

The challenges that I faced regarding my positionality in the eyes of my participants came from my different identities. They perceived me as a literate person or as a university teacher. Initially, this encouraged them to be very formal with me. But by spending some time with them in the class, in their workplace and within communities

outside the classroom, I built trust so that they could see me as a friend and feel more comfortable and act more naturally when interacting with me.

I believe the identity of the gatekeeper, who introduces a person to a new community, plays an important role in how that person is perceived. For example, in my case, the facilitators of the adult literacy classes introduced me to their learners. The social and academic positions of the facilitator gave considerable prestige to my role in the classroom. Secondly, Saber introduced me as a university teacher. The introduction itself had a significant impact on how the adult literacy learners viewed me. This is because in this context, a university teacher is perceived as holding a much higher status than a school or literacy teacher. Thus, for the ALLs, I was more knowledgeable than their facilitator.

Age and seniority also played important roles in building these relationships. Most of my participants were younger than me, but there were also some ALLs and one of the ALFs who were older than me. For some participants, my age added to the respect they showed me as a teacher figure; for others, it allowed a more collegial rapport, especially during informal interactions outside the classroom. Age, in this sense, intersected with my professional and social roles, shaping how easily participants could approach me and what they chose to share.

This identity of mine played a dual role in this context. On one hand, it was a good status because people quickly began to trust me and respect me as an educator. On the other hand, it prevented me from note-taking at the beginning of my fieldwork process, as ALLs would often ask me to teach the class if their facilitator was late or if I arrived before he did, when I hoped to engage in some informal conversation with ALLs. Using my TESOL background and teacher training experience, I navigated this perceived identity by encouraging learners to teach each other in the absence of their facilitator. Additionally, this identity also caused some barriers at the beginning of the data collection process. The participants were not sharing the challenges and issues they have with the literacy class and their teacher out of respect, thinking that because I was a teacher, I might not like to hear negative things about teaching and teachers. It was clear in Fattah's speech when he was talking about his facilitator and kept saying

‘I like my teacher’ and ‘I respect my teacher.’ In other words, Fattah wrapped his criticism of his teacher’s pedagogy and choice of content in these positive affirmations to make them more utterable and acceptable.

At the beginning of my data collection process from the classroom observations, I was sharing summaries of my field notes with my supervisors. In fact, I am very thankful for their feedback because they made me aware that I was often observing the adult literacy classrooms with my TESOL and teacher trainer hats on. This awareness led me to reflect more critically on how my academic background, personal values and professional experiences could influence my research. As [Creswell \(2013\)](#) states, the researcher is an instrument of data collection and interpretation and therefore must remain critically reflective.

Adopting a reflexive approach ([Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007](#)) helped me significantly when I employed ethnographic work and interpreted my observations. For example, at the beginning of my fieldwork, I approached classroom visits very much as a teacher trainer. I tended to focus on the teacher, noting how he organised his lessons, managed the class and delivered content. My fieldnotes often resembled a teaching evaluation rather than ethnographic observations. Through reflection, I realised that although these details felt familiar and relevant to my background, they were not central to my research questions about adult male literacy and identity. I gradually became aware that I was overlooking the small but important moments when men engaged with texts, shared stories about their learning or expressed their identities as adult learners. By making a conscious effort to redirect my attention from evaluating teaching to observing these interactions, I was able to collect data that was not only richer but also far more relevant to my project. This process of self-awareness, though sometimes uncomfortable, ultimately helped me connect more fully with the setting and participants and reminded me to stay open to insights that did not always fit my expectations ([Clifford, 1986](#)).

This process of reflexivity also made me reflect more deeply on my own positionality as a researcher in the field. Sociologically, we Homo sapiens may classify ourselves as both insiders and outsiders – “members of some groups and not of others” depending

on our “gender, language, cultural/professional background, nationality, ethnicity and age” (McNess, Arthur & Crossley, 2016, p.26). But when it comes to ethnographic research, the way I see myself (either as an insider or as an outsider or as both) might have constructed my identity and this could have an impact on my interpretation of the culture or the situation in the field. This does not produce a simple subjective versus objective split; rather, it yields a situated, reflexive and intersubjective account shaped by relationships, context and time.

While I have travelled to many countries for work, academic purposes and migration, I have spent most of my teenage years and early adulthood in Afghanistan. Some scholars refer to the positionality of researchers when they talk about insider/outsider positions, and some propose a continuum and continual movement between these positions and viewpoints.

By critiquing the insider-outsider binary, Milligan (2016) proposes the concept of ‘inbetweeners’ to acknowledge that researcher positioning is shaped not only by how researchers view themselves in the research process, but also by how others involved, research participants and those further afield, perceive them.

McNess et al. (2016) explain ‘third space’ as “a space of dialogue, negotiation and mutual learning between insiders and outsiders in international research partnerships” (p. 438). For McNess and colleagues, the middle point is not enough; they argue that a researcher should adopt a dynamic and productive space of hybridity. In other words, they claim that the ‘third space’ is not just a comparison between two views such as insider and outsider, but a new, creative space where new meanings, practices or relationships could emerge through dialogue, tension as well as negotiation.

In my research, I found that the concept of ‘third space’ was directly relevant, especially when my insider and outsider perspectives intersected in unexpected ways. For instance, although I shared nationality, gender and language with my participants, my educational background and social class sometimes set me slightly apart from my participants. During interviews and classroom observations, there were times when they treated me both as one of their own and as someone from a different world. These

moments of tension or misunderstanding often led to productive conversations where we both learned from each other and re-examined our assumptions and understanding. I came to see these interactions as examples of 'third space', dynamic encounters where neither my perspective nor theirs was fixed, and new understandings could emerge through our ongoing dialogue.

Among all these concepts, I adopted the emic/etic perspective, which emphasises how a researcher constructs knowledge by engaging with both insider (emic) and outsider (etic) viewpoints rather than simply occupying a fixed social position (Robinson-Pant, 2016). Keeping this in mind, I have seen myself as both an insider in one sense (i.e., my nationality, gender, language and citizenship) and an 'outsider' in another (i.e., my education and social class). However, following Robinson-Pant, I recognised that these positions are not static but shift throughout the research process. Considering the reflexive approach, I became more aware of how these shifting positionalities shaped my interpretation. This reflexivity allowed me to blend emic and etic perspectives, moving between them as needed, which helped me avoid making assumptions or judgements. It also enabled me to engage more closely with how my participants themselves understood and made sense of their practices and experiences, focusing on the dynamic construction of knowledge rather than static identity categories.

### 3.7 Ethical Consideration

Upon securing the ethical approval from UEA and the School of Education, I started the data collection process. The informed consent of all participants was obtained using separate informed consent forms written in Dari-Farsi at an easy-to-understand language level.

I was concerned with the ALLs' ability to read the text in the consent form. In this case, since Dari-Farsi is my mother tongue, I explained and read these forms to them in their language. On some occasions, when I felt the participant would trust his facilitator more than me, I asked their teachers to read the form in individual cases. They were asked to sign the forms if they agreed to participate in this research prior to the data collection process. I also accepted verbal consent if ALLs felt uncomfortable with

signing the form. It was because in Afghanistan, asking people, especially those who cannot read, to sign a paper means a big deal and is a completely unfamiliar practice for most and could cause undue stress. After all, not all cultures practice things (e.g. signing consent forms) the same way; in some cases, it might harm rather than protect the participants ([Shamim & Qureshi, 2010](#)). In a context like Afghanistan, a signature or fingerprint, especially in rural areas, is used when there are legal issues like inheritance matters, divorce or issues with buying or selling properties.

In order to protect my participants' identities, they were asked to choose a pseudonym for themselves to keep their data confidential. Most of them said that they do not mind having the real names, but after I insisted, they said that I can choose whatever name I like. I also removed any personal identifiers from my participants.

Because I shared the same culture and spoke the same language as my participants, I was able to communicate ethical matters clearly and build trust more easily. This cultural and linguistic familiarity helped me to explain issues such as informed consent and confidentiality in ways that were accessible and meaningful to participants. It also meant I could pick up on subtle cues and concerns from participants and be more sensitive to any potential risks or harm that might have arisen during the research. Even so, I reminded myself that ethical research is about much more than sharing a culture or language. At every stage, I tried to keep my participants' rights, wellbeing and autonomy at the centre of my decisions and actions.

I remained aware of potential power dynamics, particularly because of my position as a university researcher and the participants' roles as literacy learners. I tried to build trust and ensure participation was voluntary and make it clear that they could withdraw at any time.

A further challenge arose when one facilitator was also a friend. This dual relationship carried a simple risk: what I wrote could put his job at stake. I applied the same anonymity steps as for all participants but went further in his case. I avoided naming or describing the organisation in ways colleagues might recognise; I adjusted or combined non-essential details about place and role; and I used composite vignettes where needed. I grounded claims in patterns across sources rather than single

episodes tied to him. I sought his informed consent for how I described his practice, while making clear that I alone was responsible for the final analysis. I also checked drafts for unintended clues others might notice. These steps did not erase the ethical tension of researching a friend, but they made it visible and manageable. My aim was to keep the analysis honest and useful while keeping him safe.

In order to address ethical considerations related to participants' culture, I audio-recorded interviews rather than relying solely on *note-taking*. In my first interview, when I was taking notes, the ALL kept glancing at my notebook and shortened his sentences so I could write more quickly. Note-taking thus became a barrier rather than a support. In this cultural context, maintaining eye contact and signalling attention through nodding and facial expressions is important. Writing while someone is speaking can signal busyness, prompting the speaker to shorten his account.

### 3.8 The Impact of COVID-19 on Adult Literacy Programs in Afghanistan

The COVID-19 pandemic took the entire world by surprise and it affected everyone in Afghanistan, especially the education sector. In early 2020, the Ministry of Education, following the guidelines of the National Literacy Action Plan ([Ministry of Education, 2013](#)), closed public literacy courses and private institutions during nationwide lockdowns ([UNESCO, 2020a](#)). With only 37% of adults able to read and write (of which 52% are men), these closures posed major challenges for male learners who depended on flexible and community-based literacy classes to balance work and education ([World Bank, 2021](#)). Economic hardships such as job losses and market closures further discouraged men from attending classes, as they prioritised providing for their families ([World Bank, 2020](#)).

As I started my fieldwork in July 2020, the literacy programmes had cautiously resumed. There were restricted health measures, including face masks and maintaining a two-meter distance between learners ([UNICEF, 2022](#)). Public and private classes either reduced their size or divided learners into smaller groups, which presented a challenge due to limited funding ([UNESCO, 2020a](#)). I observed that facilitators shifted their focus to Quranic verses and sayings of the Prophet about patience and cleanliness, which offered emotional support to men facing the

uncertainties of the pandemic. These religious lessons, deeply valued, helped men find strength and maintain their sense of community during the crisis ([UNESCO, 2020b](#)). On occasion, the facilitator held a few sessions in the open air, in the masjid's yard next to the literacy centre, but only when the weather conditions permitted.

I also observed that the health measures sometimes conflicted with Afghan cultural practices, where men typically stand 50 to 80 centimetres apart when talking, a sign of respect and friendliness. Keeping a distance felt unnatural, but ALLs adapted by using their traditional scarves to cover their faces as masks. This blending of cultural identity with public health protocols demonstrated a creative and practical response to the crisis among ALLs.

These measures also affected my data collection process. When observing the classroom or visiting the workplaces, I had to balance health guidelines with cultural expectations. For instance, when I visited my participants, I had my facemask on and tried to observe social distancing for their and my safety. In the beginning, keeping social distance was perceived as cold and unfriendly by the people. I often had to explain to them that this behaviour was not out of disrespect, but rather, I was doing it because I cared about their well-being and mine. Interestingly, these conversations became important moments for building trust and negotiating meaning across cultural norms and health priorities.

In the beginning, my participants thought COVID was not real or was not that dangerous. Slowly, when they witnessed deaths among relatives, colleagues and community members, they started to take the pandemic more seriously. However, some ALLs associated these health measures with weakness. They often referred to men who strictly observe health guidance as 'girls' or 'women', terms that, in this context, functioned as the opposite of a physically strong 'man' who could fight off illness like a common cold.

This perception reflects broader cultural constructions of masculinity in Afghanistan, where physical strength and emotional toughness are often idealised. In this context, behaviours such as wearing a mask or maintaining social distance may be perceived as signs of weakness or vulnerability. Such views framed COVID-19 as something to be

“fought off,” not accommodated. These gendered attitudes are explored further in the next chapter, particularly in relation to how dominant masculine ideals influence men’s engagement with literacy.

### 3.9 Limitations

As with any qualitative research, there were challenges and limitations in my study regarding methodology and data analysis. Building relationships in the field was rewarding but also complicated, especially when I found myself writing about people who were not just participants but friends. At times, I struggled with how honest or critical to be in my analysis, wanting to respect those relationships while also presenting an accurate account of what I observed.

Losing my mobile phone with interview data was another practical setback. Having to re-interview participants was not ideal, and although people shared more stories the second time, I realise that something unique about those first conversations may have been lost.

Respecting cultural norms and values posed a limitation for my methodology. At the outset, I intended to observe women’s literacy classes and compare them with men’s classes. However, it was difficult to find a women’s class that would permit a young man to observe. I considered looking for literacy classes run by international organisations in cities, which I thought might be more open to male observers. Unfortunately, during the scoping phase, I found that repeated attendance at women’s classes was not feasible. Moreover, ethnographic approaches require extended participant observation and fieldnotes not only from classroom observation but also across other domains such as workplace, home and social gatherings. Given these constraints, I limited classroom observations to men’s classes, which necessarily narrows the comparative scope of the study.

Lastly, I cannot ignore the role of power in all these encounters. Whether in the classroom or in interviews, both my own authority and the authority of others affected what was said and what remained unsaid. I have tried to stay aware of these dynamics throughout, knowing that they inevitably shaped the research in ways both seen and unseen.

### 3.10 Conclusion

This chapter outlined my methodological stance and approaches for this qualitative research study. I explained how I used ethnographic methods as my data collection procedures to collect data from my participants across different domains. As I elaborated above, my literate identity both helped me quickly gain trust among the learners and acted as a barrier, as I was expected to run the class in the absence of the facilitator.

This chapter outlined the methodological foundations and research design that underpin this qualitative ethnographic study. Ethnographic methods, including participant observation, in-depth interviews and document analysis, enabled rich and contextual engagement across multiple domains of the participants' lives: classroom, workplace and masjids.

My role as a literate and educated male researcher situated me in complex ways within the field. While my academic and cultural proximity facilitated trust and access, it also created expectations that shaped interactions and data collection, especially in classroom settings where I was sometimes seen as a figure of authority. Reflexivity has therefore been essential and enabled me to navigate the shifting dimensions of insider-outsider status and critically engage with the meanings constructed in and through the research process.

Throughout the chapter, I presented how my methodological choices are inseparable from the theoretical framing of this study, particularly social practice as part of the New Literacy Studies, Connell's concept of masculinities, Lukes' power dimensions and Kabeer's theory of agency. These frameworks not only informed my fieldwork but also shaped the way I interpreted the interactions and lived experiences of my participants.

The ethnographic approach has made it possible for me to uncover the complex, situated literacies and the ways in which adult male learners mobilise them, sometimes subtly, sometimes strategically, in response to the constraints and opportunities of their lives.

In the following chapters, after presenting my theoretical stance (Chapter 4), I will build on this methodological groundwork to analyse the empirical data and show what literacy practices ALLs value and practise inside and outside the classroom (Chapter 5), how these practices shape their masculinities and explore the patterns of their hegemonic masculinities (Chapter 6) and how ALLs' literacy practices and identities inform their agency and power in different domains of their lives (Chapter 7).

## Chapter 4

### Theorising Literacies in Identity and Agency Formation

#### 4.1 Introduction

The main objective of this thesis is to explore the role of literacy in shaping patterns of masculinity and the exercise of agency and power among adult male literacy learners in Afghanistan. To examine this overarching aim, the following research questions are addressed:

- Which literacy practices are most valued and utilised in the classroom, workplace, home and religious domains?
- How do literacy practices influence the construction and performance of various patterns of masculinity among adult male learners?
- How do adult male learners' engagements with literacy practices mediate agency and power in everyday life?

In this chapter, I discuss the theoretical perspectives around literacy, identity (including masculinity) and agency in order to explore the above questions. Each of these concepts shall be explored in detail, highlighting my conceptual perspectives.

I ground this chapter in a poststructuralist epistemological approach, which views literacy, identity, and meaning-making as fluid, socially constructed and situated within power relations (Butler, 1990; Street, 1984; Connell, 1995). Rather than seeking fixed or universal truths, I embrace multiplicity, contestation, and context-specific understandings. Thus, for me, literacy, masculinity and agency are conceptualised not as stable entities, but as processes continually shaped through social interaction, discourse, and power dynamics. With this lens, the chapter explores the theoretical debates and frameworks informing the study.

## 4.2 Theoretical Debates on Literacies

### 4.2.1 Critiques of the Autonomous Model of Literacy

Since the 1960s, scholars such as [Goody \(1963, 1968\)](#) and [Ong \(1982\)](#) have argued about the differences between ‘oral’ and ‘literate’ societies. They claimed that writing creates a clear divide between these two societies, a distinction often referred to as the ‘great divide’; Goody extended the ideas about the great divide between ‘traditional’ and ‘modern’ societies to include the place of literacy in those societies ([Goody, 1968](#)). From this point of view, writing lets people store information outside their heads, make lists and tables, compare ideas across time and develop law codes, bureaucracy, history and science ([Goody, 1968](#)). In Goody’s view, literacy drives more abstract and analytical thinking and brings cognitive changes, while oral cultures are portrayed as relying more on memory and context. In other words, literacy has cognitive benefits, implying that literate people are more intelligent than non-literate.

However, the ‘great divide’ theory was strongly rejected by literacy scholars such as [Brian Street \(1984\)](#). [Street \(1993\)](#) argued that the distinction between orality and literacy (the ‘great divide’) should be seen instead as a continuum. He argued that Goody’s approach treats literacy as a uniform skill, assuming that those who possess it automatically gain the same cognitive and social effects. This is the model of literacy that Street termed the ‘autonomous’ model, which he rejected. In this model, literacy is viewed as ‘a set of fixed skills,’ with the assumption that individuals first learn these skills and then apply them in their lives in the same way, regardless of context ([Street, 2001](#)).

Expanding the autonomous model, [Street \(2001\)](#) sees it as an “imposing Western conception of literacy” (p.7), where the ‘fixed’ and ‘culture-free’ entity of literacy is viewed as a set of cognitive skills separated from culture and context, with the assumption that literacy can be universal ([Street, 1984, 1993](#)).

This perspective is especially important for my study. In the Afghan contexts I examine, oral practices remain deeply intertwined with written ones. For example, listening to religious sermons or speeches, and then re-communicating these ideas orally in local religious centres, can be seen as part of the same continuum of literacy practices.

Recognising this overlap allows me to treat oral skills not as separate from literacy but as integral to the ways my participants construct identity, exercise agency, and navigate social power. Consistent with Street, this thesis challenges the privileging of writing over orality and rejects the ‘great divide’ between oral and literate modes (Street, 2003).

Building on Street’s critique of the autonomous model, viewing literacy as a set of skills could imply that some people lack the reading and writing ‘skills’ and capabilities; therefore, in order to ‘catch up’ they should learn them (Rogers, 2004). This is called a ‘deficit approach’ in which “research and policy in international education has often been framed” (Aikman & Robinson-Pant, 2016, p. 314). I have noticed this view in conversations with authorities in the Ministry and in the PLD. They usually address people who are not literate as ‘blinds’ who need to be guided.

Imagine an illiterate person goes to Saudi Arabia for pilgrimage. Since he is not able to read, he is blind. He looks around and sees things, but he cannot understand what’s written there. He cannot read his hotel's name, the road signs, or the addresses. So, he is blind, blind. It’s our responsibility to help these people learn and have literacy and be able to read and write.

Fieldnotes, West Zone, 15/07/2021

The above fieldnote excerpt is an example of this belief, which was stated by the Deputy Governor in one of the Provincial National Committee for Literacy meetings.

The autonomous model advocates (i.e., Abadzi, 1994; Goody, 1968) believe that, for example, it is possible for a literacy model designed for learners in the UK to be implemented (i.e. in exactly the same way) effectively in Afghanistan. According to this perspective, individuals who possess these skills are considered *literate*, while those who do not are labelled ‘*illiterate*’.

Additionally, the autonomous model of literacy treats reading and writing as practices that involve skills and techniques. There is no doubt in it, but that is not all; in addition to these skills and techniques there is much more associated with the practices of coding and decoding if we look at it from a social and cultural point of view (Papen, 2005). Papen emphasises that it is what people ‘do’ with literacy, not merely what people have “learned and therefore they know” (p.25). For example, my participants

might read a text from a textbook or from what the facilitator writes on the board, but this kind of reading and meaning-making would differ from when they read a blueprint with measurements for a cupboard as a carpenter. They are different literacies in different contexts associated with different materials and cultures.

As an alternative to the 'autonomous' model, [Street \(1984\)](#) introduced the 'ideological' model of literacy, which sees literacy as embedded within social and cultural practices rather than viewing it as being a neutral thing that one possesses. Through this model, literacy is always shaped by the values, purposes and power relations of the contexts in which it is practised and used.

This ideological model is central to the New Literacy Studies (NLS). The NLS is an interdisciplinary field that emerged in the 1990s through the work of scholars such as Brian Street, James Gee, and David Barton. NLS reconceptualises literacy not as a neutral skill but as a set of socially and culturally embedded practices that are always situated in power relations ([Street, 1993](#); [Gee, 1996](#); [Barton & Hamilton, 1998](#)). As [Barton and Hamilton \(2000\)](#) state, the focus of literacy research should shift from 'what literacy is' to "what people do with literacy" in their everyday lives (p. 7). In addition to this, the NLS also focuses on how those practices are valued differently depending on their social, cultural and institutional contexts. It challenges standardised notions of literacy and highlights how dominant literacies are often privileged over local or vernacular ones ([Gee, 1996](#); [Street, 1995](#)).

#### 4.2.2 Literacy as a Social Practice

Although the skills idea and the autonomous model of literacy have been valued when it comes to measuring and monitoring human activities, this perspective has been seen to ignore the deeply socially constructed nature of literacy ([Barton, 2007](#)). Looking at literacy from this perspective, [Barton, Hamilton and Ivanic \(2000\)](#) view literacy as situated in culture and context. Thus, literacy is "located in particular times and places" and "patterned by social institutions and power relationships" and it cannot be understood apart from these social institutions ([Barton, Hamilton and Ivanic, 2000, p. 1](#); [Barton & Hamilton, 2000, p. 8](#)).

Utilising the socio-cultural way of viewing literacy, I perceive literacy as a 'social practice' which sheds light on the plurality of literacy (Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Street, 1999; Papen, 2005). It is because "if literacy is a social practice, then it varies with social context and it is not the same, uniform thing in each case" (Street, 1999, p. 37); it is rather "always contextualised, situated within a particular socio-cultural setting" (Rogers et al, 1999, p.55). In Afghanistan, for instance, since the social contexts vary in different cultures, spaces and time, the literacy associated with each of these contexts would also vary. People draw upon different literacy practices (i.e., religious literacy, digital literacy and school literacy) in various literacy domains such as religion, digital and school (Barton, 2007). The above literacy practices and Street's (1984) 'Maktab', commercial, and school literacies in Iran; Barton and Hamilton's (1998) 'community literacies' in England; and school, community, and personal literacies discussed by Gallego and Hollingsworth (2000) in America all illustrate this concept of social literacies, focusing on the social practices and contexts rather than fixed entities centred around different modes.

Furthermore, we can argue that often it is not the dominant literacies that reinforce empowerment in social contexts and structures; rather, it is the contextualised and situated literacies that are valued and preferred in various domains. For instance, people in Afghanistan often value certain literacies, such as religious and digital literacies, more highly than school-based or formal literacies.

This study moves beyond traditional deficit views of literacy to an approach that recognises literacy as situated, performative and shaped by social interactions, and that individuals and communities value and resist different literacy practices. Looking at literacy from a social practice perspective helps me explore the values and power associated with different literacy practices in different domains in which my participants engage. In light of these debates, I see literacies as social practices in which modes (i.e., written texts, speech, visuals, etc.) and channels (i.e., books, phones, and tech gadgets, etc.) function as tools rather than fixed forms of literacy itself. Instead of solely focusing on modes and channels, I explore what, how and why people use them within specific social, cultural, and power-laden contexts and domains. This will help me explore what matters to people in their daily lives.

### 4.2.3 Literacy Events and Literacy Practices

When we look at literacy as a social practice at a more micro level, the concepts of *literacy event* and *literacy practice* emerge as core concepts developed within the NLS. These two concepts were first introduced by [Heath \(1983\)](#) and [Scribner and Cole \(1981\)](#), analysing situated literacy. A literacy event is defined as “any occasion in which a piece of writing is integrated into the nature of participants’ interactions and their interpretive processes” (Heath, cited in [Street, 1993, p. 12](#)). The ‘piece of writing’ could be alphabetical (i.e., in Dari-Farsi or in Pashtu – the national languages in Afghanistan), numerical, or religious text (i.e., in Arabic). [Barton \(2007\)](#) simplifies it further and states that literacy event refers to “sorts of occasions in everyday life where the written word has a role” (p.35).

In fact, literacy events can help researchers and practitioners to focus their work on a specific situation where they can see observable events happening that include reading and/or writing ([Street, 2001](#)). However, Street emphasises that focusing solely on the literacy event would remain at a descriptive level, and thus it does not present how the meanings are constructed.

On the other hand, “the concept of *literacy practices* attempts both to handle the events and the patterns around literacy and to link them to something broader of a cultural and social kind” ([Street, 2001, p. 11](#)). Street states that what literacy practices add to the concept of literacy events are the social models that shape the nature of the event and make it meaningful; this is where power becomes visible. Applying literacy practices in this study enabled me not only to collect and document moments of reading and writing but also to record how literacy is shaped by cultural expectations and values, power relations, and daily practices among my participants in various domains.

To record the depth and breadth of my participants’ everyday life practices related to literacies, I have looked into “the general cultural ways of utilizing written language which people draw upon in their lives” ([Barton and Hamilton, 2000, p. 8](#)) – ‘literacy practice’. Through these lenses, I have been able to explore “what people do with literacy”, which, in fact, is “the basic unit of a social theory of literacy” ([Barton and](#)

Hamilton, 2000, p. 7). Barton (2007) provides an example of both a literacy event and literacy practice. He talks about a man discussing the contents of the local paper with a friend,

the two of them sitting in the living room planning a letter to the newspaper is a literacy event. In deciding who does what, where and when it is done, along with the associated ways of talking and the ways of writing, the two participants make use of their literacy practices. (p.37)

Considering this example, my participants discussing the content of a mobile text message about a religious text – whether with their peers, a religious teacher, or a tutor – and talking about the meaning, interpretation and real-life application, or discussing the content of a book or a record related to their occupation, can be seen from the perspective of both literacy event and literacy practice. Following Street, I treat literacy practices not only as culture but as power: decisions about who reads aloud, whose explanation is accepted, which medium is used and how talk is sanctioned are shaped by authority, status and institutional norms (Street, 1984; 1993; 2001). In Afghan settings, this includes the authority of elders or figures like mullahs, control of smartphones and data and the value attached to Arabic, Dari-Farsi or Pashto in different spaces. These initiatives position ALLs differently and make some practices legitimate while marginalising others.

#### 4.2.4 Multiple and Multimodal Literacies

In order not to fall into the trap of the autonomous model, some treat literacy as plural (i.e., literacies) (see Street, 1984; Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Hamilton & Barton, 2000). However, Street (2000) warns against the utilisation of various terminologies that presume to capture the multiplicity of literacy, leading to the ‘reification’ of literacy. He critiques the term ‘multi-literacy’ when it is framed around specific modes or channels, such as computer literacy or visual literacy. Street warns that such framings risk reifying literacy as a technical skill detached from its social and cultural contexts (p. 19). In other words, when we treat literacy as a set of discrete and fixed categories defined by separate ‘modes’ and ‘channels’, we risk oversimplifying the complexity and fluidity of literacy. This view contradicts the reality that literacy is always evolving and

shaped by the social contexts in which it is used. Rather than conceptualising literacy as a dynamic and evolving practice, we may come to view it as a set of technical skills, which is the essence of reification.

Street also discusses concerns that an extreme interpretation of this conceptualisation of literacy could signal ‘the end of language,’ moving towards “semiotic systems that cut across reading, writing, speech, into all these other semiotic forms of communication” (p. 19). For example, [Street \(2000\)](#) argues that from a multi-literacy perspective, visual literacy related to technology or channel would have certain effects which could differ from computer literacy, where the focus would be on the mode (i.e., the visual part and the computer), rather than the social practice aspects in which these modes and channels are given meaning and are combined.

While the multi-literacy approach has been promoted by scholars such as [Kress \(1997, 2010\)](#), [Cope and Kalantzis \(2000\)](#) and the [New London Group \(1996\)](#), who view literacy as a diverse and evolving set of practices, [Street \(2000\)](#) cautions that such approaches can unintentionally lead to reification if literacy is divided too rigidly into discrete and technical categories. Cope and Kalantzis argue for a broader framework that includes various forms of literacy (i.e., visual and digital), but it is important to ensure that these categories are not viewed as fixed or technical skills, as Street warns.

Street adds that even the concept of ‘multiple literacies’, which acknowledges the diversity of literacy practices across cultures, could fall into the risk of reification problem if it is framed around modes or channels rather than social practices. This critique aligns with Street’s broader advocacy for an ideological model of literacy, which emphasises the contextual and cultural dimensions of literacy practices.

As a characteristic of LSP (Literacy as Social Practice) perspective, the multimodality of literacy has long been recognised. To know about multimodality, we need to first define ‘mode’; [Kress \(2010\)](#) has a dynamic view; he states “*socially*, what counts as mode is a matter for a community and its social-representational needs. What a community decides to regard and use as mode *is* mode. ... *Formally*, what counts as mode is a matter of what a social-semiotic theory of mode requires a mode to be and to do” (p. 87, emphasis in original). In other words, ‘mode’ is socially grounded and

reflects the semiotic resources that communities draw upon to make meaning. From this perspective, literacy is never reducible to writing alone; it is always realised through patterns of modes. Such an understanding connects directly to empirical studies that demonstrate how people combine modes in everyday literacy practices.

[Ormerod and Ivanič \(2000\)](#), for instance, show in their study that texts are not simply written words but combine writing, images, layout and material features. They highlight how children made deliberate choices in shaping their projects: one boy explained that he used a pencil for shading because it made the job easier, while others preferred word-processing because it hid mistakes or looked neater. These examples illustrate that “the verbal and visual elements of a text are inextricably bound up with the physical, and writers and readers interact physically with a text during its production and use” (p. 101). This highlights how literacy is always embodied and multimodal in nature.

This insight is extended through other studies focusing on the digital and educational contexts. [Cárcamo and Pino \(2025\)](#), examining the use of infographics in English as a foreign language classroom, demonstrate how visual and textual elements combine to support comprehension and meaning-making in ways that neither mode achieves alone. Similarly, [Marissa and Hamid’s \(2022\)](#) work with Saudi students composing multimodal texts illustrates how learners integrate their own digital tools and out-of-school practices into formal assignments, blending multiple modes to construct identities and navigate between contexts. Multimodality has also been framed as a critical practice; for instance, [Cappello, Wiseman and Turner \(2019\)](#) show how students use sketches, videos and performances not only to communicate but to retell dominant narratives and challenge inequitable power relations.

Taken together, these studies reinforce [Barton, Hamilton and Ivanič’s](#) claim that literacy cannot be reduced to isolated skills but must be understood as a multimodal, socially situated practice tied to identity and power. This framing provides an important foundation for my own discussion of digital literacies, where the combination of written text, images, emojis and voice recordings in online shopping and religious communication illustrates how meaning and authority are negotiated through multiple modes.

#### 4.2.5 Literacy Functions

In addition to the multiplicity and multimodality of literacy as characteristics of the LSP view, literacy can also have multiple functions within a given activity. As [Barton and Hamilton \(2000\)](#) argue, literacy can have different social meanings; it can act as “*evidence, as display, as threat, and as ritual*” (stress in original, p. 12). In the context of Afghanistan, both literacy and numeracy can have multiple functions depending on the domain, the context and the individuals who engage with these practices. For instance, an adult male shopkeeper might use literacy as evidence when recording the shopping list of a customer who will pay later. Similarly, in a religious setting, a mullah or community elder might use written Qur’anic verses as part of a marriage contract, where the act of reading and signing the document serves as a public ritual.

Looking across these functions, I can also see the power dimensions associated with each one. For example, when literacy functions as a threat, the level of power connected to it can vary depending on the actors involved. From this perspective, “literacy becomes a community resource, realised in social relationships rather than a property of individuals” ([Barton & Hamilton, 2000, p. 12](#)). In all these cases, the meaning and impact of literacy are inseparable from the power relations that shape who controls it, how it is used, and whose purposes it serves.

#### 4.2.6 Literacy Domains and Social Institutions

In this study, especially in Chapter 5 on literacy practices, I use the idea of literacy domains to refer to both physical places where literacy practices occur, such as classrooms, schools, workplaces and homes ([Barton & Hamilton, 1998](#)), and conceptual spaces defined by social, cultural and religious norms that shape these practices ([Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Street, 1995](#)). [Barton and Hamilton \(1998\)](#) emphasise that “domains are not simply places but are shaped by the social activities and relationships which go on within them” (p. 8). In line with this perspective, I treat domains as settings in which literacy is practised and given meaning, shaped by broader social and cultural forces.

For example, a classroom is not just a physical room where learning happens. It can also be a social space defined by roles (such as teacher, student and curriculum), accepted ways of interacting, and shared cultural understandings about learning and authority. Similarly, the home as a literacy domain is shaped not only by its physical boundaries like walls but also by family relationships, gender roles and cultural beliefs about reading and writing. By using ‘domains,’ I aim to capture both the material and the social dimensions that make each context unique for literacy practices. This way, I move beyond a simple focus on physical place to include the complex web of norms and values that shape what people do with literacy in each setting.

Alternatively, in Chapter 6, in addition to domains, I refer to social institutions, which are “the more enduring features of social life” ([Giddens, 1984, p. 24](#)), encompassing structures such as the family, education, state, religion and the workplace. I view these social institutions as broader spaces that organise and sustain social practices and norms. While literacy domains describe the more immediate contexts where literacy is enacted, such as the classroom, workplace or home, social institutions operate at a structural level, shaping the rules, expectations and values that underpin those domains. In this sense, domains and institutions overlap, but they differ in scope and durability: domains capture the situated arenas of practice, whereas institutions represent the larger frameworks that sustain and regulate practices across many domains ([Barton & Hamilton, 2000](#)). For example, the institution of religion influences literacy practices not only within the domain of the mosque but also within homes and schools, showing how institutions extend beyond any single site of practice.

In the context of masculinity, these institutions play a central role in shaping, reinforcing and sometimes challenging gendered identities and expectations ([Connell, 2005](#)). Connell, by referring to “the state, the workplace and the school” as social institutions, argues that these institutions are substantively gendered (p.73), and thus, the opportunities and constraints they create for men’s literacy practices are deeply tied to questions of agency: men’s ability to access, use and negotiate literacy is shaped not only by the immediate domains in which they interact and operate, but also by the broader gendered structures and power relations embedded in these institutions.

Barton and Hamilton (1998) explain that “domains are structured, patterned contexts within which literacy is used and learned... Literacy practices are patterned by social institutions and power relationships, and some literacies become more dominant, visible and influential than others” (p. 8). While their work does not explicitly examine how domains might be gendered, later work by Hamilton, especially in *Literacy and the Politics of Representation* (2012), shows how representations of literacy in public discourse are gendered, selective and power-laden. Other studies remind us that literacy is always related to cultural and social hierarchies, including gender (Street, 1995; Connell, 2005). In this thesis, I take up the concept of domains with attention to these dynamics, noting that in my analysis domains are not neutral arenas but may be shaped by gendered expectations and relations of power. The empirical discussion of how this operates is developed in later chapters.

#### 4.2.7 Borderlands and Liminality

When we consider literacy as embedded in a social context, we see it as constructed differently within different domains such as home, school, religion and work. Although there is a distinctiveness to many literacy practices at home, there are also multiple and overlapping literacy practices that can take place in the home (Barton & Hamilton, 1998). The overlaps and blurred boundaries between domains are described as *borderlands* (Gee, 1990), where people bring literacy practices from one domain (for example, work) into another (Barton & Hamilton, 1998).

Liminality is a concept widely used in the context of refugee studies. It is described as “spaces of permanent temporariness where people wait for extended periods of time to move into the next stage of their lives: between inclusion and exclusion” (O’Reilly, 2019, p.143). Victor Turner was among the pioneers who developed the theoretical concept of liminality as a state of individuals “betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial” (Turner, 1969, p. 95). For Turner, liminality is the in-between state where the usual social rules often do not fully apply, people’s identities are ambiguous, and they are being reshaped before taking on a new role or status. Recently, liminality has been used to explore asylum

seekers' agency in uncertain spaces in Europe ([Ghorashi et al., 2018](#)), showing how people negotiate identity and power even in prolonged states of uncertainty.

In this study, although the ALLs are not moving 'into the next stage of their lives', they remain in moments of confusion over whether to act according to the norms of the classroom or to follow the norms of their adult social roles that are constructed outside the classroom domain. Their uncertainty over whether to raise a hand to speak, ask permission to enter the classroom, or remain silent so as not to disturb illustrates this tension. In this case, their experience is better understood as a situated liminal state in which they become trapped between competing expectations.

Both concepts – borderlands and liminality – help me analyse the states of my participants when moving between domains. Borderlands allow me to see how literacy practices travel across contexts, while liminality enables me to capture the emotional and identity tensions that emerge when adult men navigate contradictory roles inside and outside the classroom.

#### 4.2.8 Literacy as Collaborative and Mediated Practice

Within the NLS, literacy is increasingly recognised not as an individualised set of skills, but as a collaborative practice embedded in social structure and relations. As [Barton and Hamilton \(1998\)](#) emphasise, literacy is “a community resource, realised in social relationships rather than a property of individuals” (p. 12). In practice, this means that reading and writing are often shared tasks, where people rely on one another to access, interpret or produce texts. [Street \(1984\)](#) similarly insists that literacy cannot be reduced to technical competence but must be understood in terms of the ways it is embedded in the cultural and social life of people.

Literacy mediation is a key concept that grows out of this perspective. Mediation highlights how literacy is frequently achieved through the assistance of others – often more literate – who act as mediators, making their skills and knowledge available to support others in specific contexts. “Literacy mediators are also positioned within the larger social structures of which their mediatory literacy practices are a part” ([Jones, 2000, p. 85](#)).

Baynham (1993, 1995) provides rich evidence of literacy mediation within the Moroccan community in London. From a sociolinguistic perspective, he shows how literacy mediators help others engage with written texts by codeswitching between languages and shifting registers to bridge the gap between everyday community practices and institutional discourses. In these contexts, those with stronger literacy in English often read or interpret bureaucratic texts for others, translating them into Arabic or vernacular forms that make sense locally.

Baynham and Masing (2000) extend this perspective in their study of multilingual literacy events, showing how mediators act as “translators and interpreters of discourse” who work “across speech and writing, across registers and genres, across languages and varieties” (p. 191). They argue that mediators “do more than simply convey the literal meaning of texts; they reframe, recontextualise and adapt meanings so that they can be understood and acted upon in new contexts” (p. 191). In multilingual settings, this can involve “code-switching, register shifting and the use of visual or oral resources to render written texts accessible” (p. 192).

Importantly, mediators are not always restricted to human actors. Digital tools and devices can also act as mediators, enabling access to texts and practices that might otherwise remain closed. For instance, mobile phones and apps that provide Qur’anic translations or digital dictionaries allow users to interpret and understand religious or official texts without depending on a person to translate for them. In such cases, technology itself becomes a mediating resource, standing between the text and the user and shaping how meaning is made.

Mediators can overlap with Brandt’s (1998) concept of ‘sponsors’, but they are not the same. Sponsors function in a broader power structure, employers, schools, churches/or mosques, governments, or even technologies, that open or limit individuals’ access to literacy. A sponsor sets the conditions (i.e., funds the class, requires the form, controls the machine); a mediator helps someone do the reading or writing in the moment (explains, translates, fills in). Brandt defines sponsors as “any agents, local or distant, concrete or abstract, who enable, support, teach, model, as well as recruit, regulate, suppress, or withhold literacy” (Brandt, 1998, p. 166). Importantly, sponsorship is not limited to institutions: within households, relatives can

act as sponsors by lending time, knowledge and credibility (i.e., dictation, correction, encouragement) even as they mediate day-to-day tasks. In my data, these roles often meet: the literacy programme or workplace could be a sponsor, while the wife, co-worker or imam working alongside the learner could act as a mediator providing support for the nonliterate or low-literate individuals. These individuals can also function as local sponsors when they provide sustained access, practice opportunities, and motivation.

This body of work demonstrates that literacy is not only socially situated but also socially distributed. Human mediators, digital devices and sponsors alike play crucial roles in enabling access to dominant literacies and in negotiating meaning across linguistic and cultural boundaries. Rather than treating literacy as an autonomous, individual skill, the idea of mediation underscores its collaborative nature and reveals how literacy practices are tied to issues of power, identity and participation in wider social structures.

#### 4.3 Adult Numeracy Practices

Following [Baker's \(1998\)](#) social practice view, I focus not on numeracy per se but on numeracy practices and how they are organised, valued and mediated across domains and social institutions. I view numeracy practices like literacy practices “as more than the behaviour that occurs when people 'do' mathematics or numeracy. Numeracy practices are not only the events in which numerical activity is involved, but are the broader cultural conceptions that give meaning to the event” ([Baker et al., 2003, p. 12](#))

Using the social practice lens, numeracy can also be viewed in a ‘numeracy events’ and ‘numeracy practices’ framework. [Street \(2005\)](#) illustrates it as follows:

Likewise, in parallel to literacy practices, we might see numeracy practices as more than the behaviours that occur when people do mathematics/numeracy, more than the events which involve numerical activity, and so explore the conceptualisations, the discourse, the values and beliefs and the social relations that surround numeracy events as well as their context (p. 88).

The culture and context surrounding numeracy shape the way ALLs utilise and practise these activities. For example, [Barton and Hamilton \(1998\)](#) present a diverse list of daily activities where numbers are used alongside other literate activities and symbol systems: using phones and recording numbers, house repairs such as fixing furniture, carpets and wallpapers, dealing with finance, bank accounts, health and medicine are a few examples listed by the authors. The nature and usage of these numeracies differ from one another because they are practised in specific contexts and domains.

Adult numeracy practices gained global recognition through being published as a separate chapter in the Second International Handbook of Research on Mathematics Education in 2003. The Handbook states that:

- adult mathematics teaching and learning deserve attention in their own right;
- practice and research in adult mathematics education demand a broad conception of mathematics that is not limited to specialized mathematics;
- there is a coalition of interests in the field across a wide spectrum of related or contributing disciplines;
- there is a recognition that research must be closely linked with practice in a field where development and improvement in practice have priority status; and
- the community of researchers is truly international. ([FitzSimons, Coben, & O'Donoghue, 2003, p.117](#))

The Third International Handbook of Mathematics Education ([Clements et al., 2013](#)) also includes a separate chapter for adult numeracy; however, the Fourth handbook ([Clements et al., 2024](#)) embeds adult-relevant issues within equity and curriculum sections rather than as a stand-alone topic. In a recent scoping review, [Gal \(2024\)](#) found only 39 empirical studies on adult numeracy across 2019-2022. This suggests that the agenda from 2003 remains unfinished and there is still much to be done in this field.

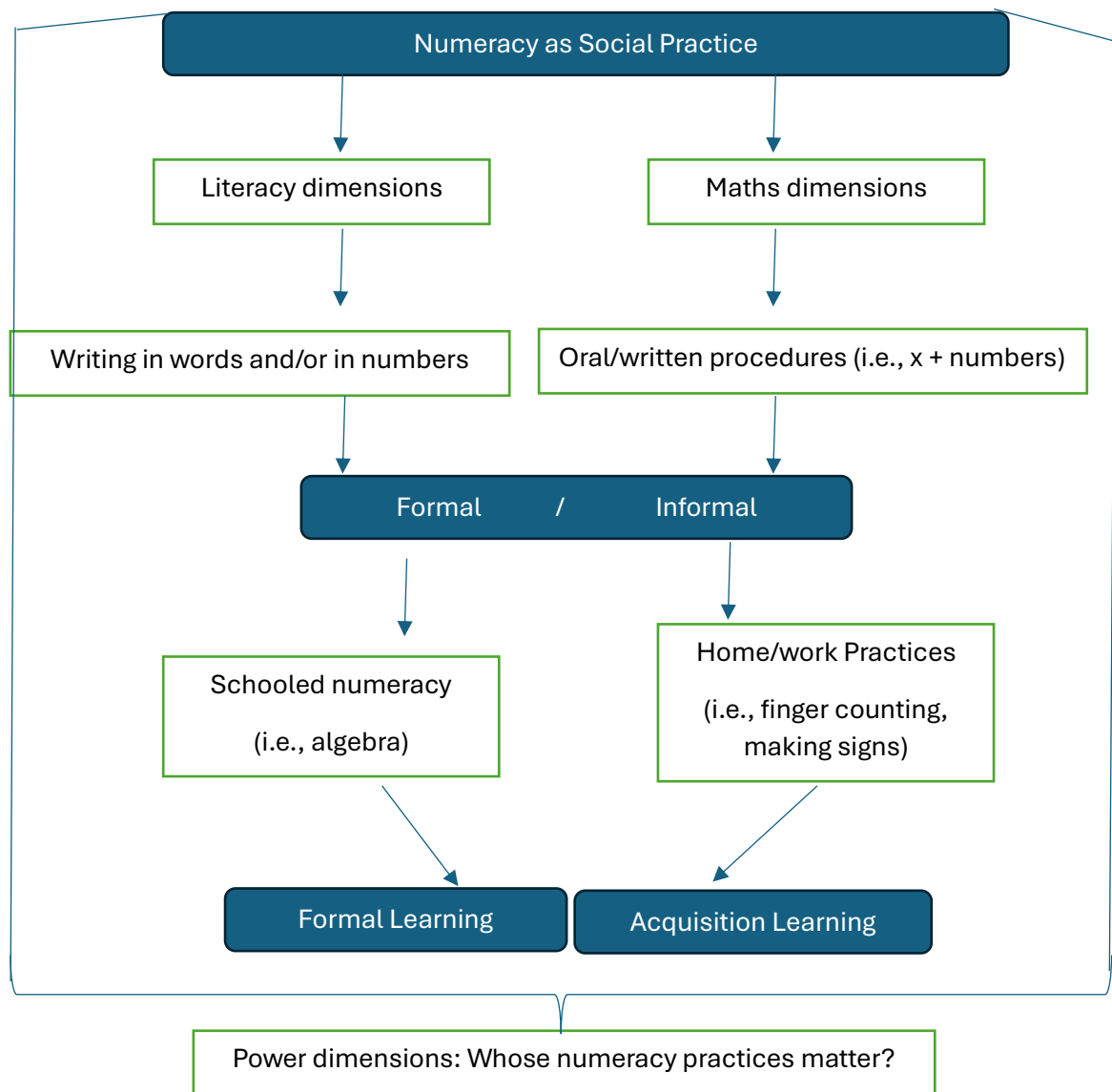
Furthermore, viewing numeracy as a social practice, we can observe it also as either ‘autonomous’, “decontextualized, abstract, and formal”, such as the ability “to decode and write symbols, replicate given procedures, and follow rules and conventions” ([Wagner, Venezky & Street, 1999, p. 244](#)), or ‘ideological’, moving from the ‘body of

knowledge' to the 'context of knowledge' while also considering contextual and cultural contributions (p.245). As Wagner and colleagues argue, through an ideological model, mathematics is viewed in its use in everyday life, and it is then that it becomes numeracy.

What I like about the 'ideological' model of numeracy is its focus on context. It would make more sense to present mathematical problems to adults within real-life scenarios using numerical symbols. In such cases, they can more easily relate the symbols to familiar items or situations in their lives and would respond more effectively. In other words, if an ALF simply asks, 'what is two plus two?', many adults might find it hard to respond; however, when asked, 'if you have two kilos of apples and you buy another kilo because you have guests, how many kilos do you have?', they most likely would respond correctly.

With regard to the literacy aspects of numeracy, [Street \(2005\)](#) brings in the formal and informal as well as oral and written dimensions of numeracy as social practice (see Figure 5) and argues that numeracy practices may include writing in texts using numbers and words or they may take place mentally using fingers to count. Thus, depending on the context, they could be learned (formally at schools) or acquired (informally at home or work domains).

*Figure 5. Illustration of numeracy as a social practice.*



Adapted from [Street \(2005\)](#)

We cannot ignore that numeracy is an essential part of our everyday life, especially when it comes to money and measurement ([Barton & Hamilton, 1998](#)). Additionally, power dynamics shape which numeracy practices are legitimised, valued or marginalised ([Street, 2005; Barton et al., 2000](#)).

Since my participants come from different contextual and occupational backgrounds, they engage in various numeracy practices and for different purposes such as measuring, counting, calculating and recording information like calendar dates, times, telephone numbers, serial numbers, codes and so on. Viewing adult numeracy as a social practice enables me to observe how my participants engage with it across social domains and in different modes (visual, written, oral), and how institutional and power

relations shape what counts as legitimate numeracy (Baker & Street, 2004). I will analyse these numeracy practices in Chapter 5 in relation to their contexts and will explore the strategies ALLs use to navigate these practices.

## 4.4 Conceptualising Identity

I see literacy as an entry point for exploring identity, masculinity and agency. In line with the social practice view of literacy, I shall use post-structuralist conceptualisations. This school of thought frames identities, masculinities and agency as culturally and contextually situated and are fluid (Butler, 1990; Connell, 1995).

### 4.4.1 Identity as Performance

Through the poststructuralist perspective, I see identity “as multiple, shifting and constantly in the process of formation” and reformation (McNess, Arthur, & Crossley, 2016, p. 21 & Baxter, 2016) rather than from an essentialist stance – viewing identity as fixed and static (Baxter, 2016).

Further, my use of identities shall be informed by Butler’s (1988) argument that identity could be viewed as an action or performance. By performance, I mean everyday life actions in different contexts. Thus, ‘to perform’ means “to underline an action for those who are watching” (Schechner, 2013, p. 28); that is, an individual’s *interaction* with others. Goffman (1978) sees performance as an activity to influence others: “A “performance” may be defined as all the activity of a given participant on a given occasion which serves to influence in any way any of the other participants” (p.26). It is not only to influence the audience but also these performances or acts can influence the self and might shape individuals’ identities as well. For example, Butler (1988) argues that ‘gender’ as an identity is “instituted through a *stylized repetition of acts*” (p.519 emphasis is original). Butler’s emphasis on *stylized* and *repetition* of the actions suggests that identity is developed over time. So, it is what you do that constitutes and shapes your identities. The individuals may perform either individually or within a social group. Thus, viewing identities in action and performance, I shall explore how ALL’s identities are shaped in relation to literacy in different contexts.

#### 4.4.2 Identity and Literacy

There has been special attention paid to the “role of texts and literacy practices as tools or media for constructing, narrating, mediating, enacting, performing, enlisting, or exploring identities” (Moje & Luke, 2009, p. 416). So, individuals’ use of literacies, whether reading or writing a text or talking about it, may perform their identities through these mediums. For example, in some literacy learning contexts, ALLs are ascribed various additional identities by teachers. Wortham (2006) refers to some of these identities as ‘good reader’ or ‘poor reader’.

Moje and Luke present the ‘identity as narrative’ metaphor to highlight the connection between identities and literacies. They argue that the social practice of literacy where the focus is “on the role of language in all its registers and genres as a medium for communicating concepts, emotions, and experiences ... [would make] more sense for examining the relationship between literacy and identity” (p. 427). In my context, this is evident in the way one participant engages with religious discourse: by listening to speeches from influential religious figures and then reinterpreting and delivering these ideas to local audiences in religious centres. Here, oral communication, shaped by religious language and rhetorical style, becomes a form of literacy practice that both expresses and reinforces his identity within the community.

An individual might take for granted his/her performance if they observe a sense of approval and confirmation from the audience (Goffman, 1978). To be satisfied with his or her performance, the actor considers the audience. For example, politicians declare their identity by gradually adding their ideas when they see the listeners’ reaction to it. So, in contexts like literacy classes, the observers are the ALFs and the other ALLs who validate a student’s identity in the class. Therefore, “individuals behave in certain ways or possess certain characteristics, and those behaviours or characteristics are interpreted by the individual and by others as signs of identity, as indications that the individual belongs to a recognized social type” (Wortham, 2006, p.30) which in this case they are ‘good’ or ‘poor’ readers/writers, or even ‘morally well-behaved individuals.’ This view could also apply to ALFs where ALLs might label them as ‘good’ or ‘bad’ teachers.

On the other hand, [Street's \(1984\)](#) ideological model offers a more profound understanding of adult learners' identities. It highlights that these identities are not fixed or simply defined by labels like 'good' or 'poor.' Instead, learners' identities as readers and writers are shaped through their interaction with texts and the social practices surrounding them ([Hall, 2012; Coffey & Street, 2008](#)). This approach encourages us to view literacy as a dynamic and context-specific process rather than reducing individuals to simplistic binary categories.

In exploring the ALLs' identities and literacies, these ideas shall lead me to consider the 'poor' and 'good' labels both for ALLs and ALFs in and outside the class; through observation, these labels could be personally accepted or socially ascribed identities or their identities could be constructed through text (i.e. spoken and written).

The literate identity has been linked to an enhancement of some level of empowerment in individuals. For instance, [Fiedrich and Jellema \(2003\)](#) found that women participants in Reflect (Regenerated Freirean Literacy through Empowering Community Techniques) programmes "spoke with great enthusiasm about the self-confidence that resulted from the prestige of being an educated person" (p. 27). Although their education level was at basic literacy, this identity brought a degree of empowerment within their local communities. Here, empowerment could be observed both internally (i.e., through confidence and voice) and externally (i.e., through social recognition and influence); and literacy acts as a medium through which new identities and roles are negotiated.

Similarly, [Jeffrey, Jeffery and Jeffery\(2008\)](#) argue that factors such as caste, religion and local economic conditions shape an individual's educated identity. They highlight that the meaning of being 'educated' is context-specific and embedded in broader social structures. Building on this, [Jones \(2023\)](#) shows that educated identity is performed through literate practices and recognisable displays rather than schooling alone. In eastern Uganda "being educated" is an identity people work on throughout their lives, and it carries advantages in disputes and dealings with authorities (p. 286). Familiarity with committee "procedures and paperwork," together with small signs like "a pen and paper in the breast pocket" or "diligent notetaking," help to scaffold that identity (p.

285). In Afghanistan, parallel literate performances such as reading official forms, signing documents, handling Qur'anic and school texts, placing a pen behind ear or in the front pocket, managing mobile phone's SMS, Telegram or WhatsApp messages can likewise function as display and evidence, shaping how educated masculinity is recognised in various social domains.

## 4.5 Conceptualising Masculinities in Context

Masculinity, as a social position or identity in gender relations, is defined through practices in which men and women are engaged; and these practices, in turn, shape bodily experience, personality and culture (Connell, 1995). I view masculinity as a type of dynamic identity shaped within individuals, and influenced by different social, cultural and contextual factors across various domains and social institutions (Connell, 2005). Particularly, my conceptualisation of masculinity is shaped by Connell's (1995, 2005) theory of hegemonic and subordinate masculinities, which elaborates on how dominant forms of masculinity maintain power while marginalising other forms of masculinities (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Since my participants are all male, I focus on exploring various aspects of their masculinities in different domains and social institutions in relation to their literacies.

### 4.5.1 Hegemonic Masculinities

The concept of hegemonic masculinity has been utilised in various academic domains, and it has particularly influenced gender studies (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Hegemonic masculinity is “defined as the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees ... the dominant position of men and the subordination of women” or other marginalised men (Connell, 1995, p. 77). It refers to a dominant form of masculinity related to social actions and could differ according to a particular social setting (Connell, 2005). Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) argue that hegemonic masculinities could be presented as an idealised social construct in some societies, which “do not correspond closely to the lives of any actual men. Yet these models do, in various ways, express widespread ideas, fantasies, and desires” (p. 838). For instance, a father in a rural area of Afghanistan might value education and wish to

send his daughters to school but still prevent them from going because of social and Taliban-imposed expectations of men. Connell and Messerschmidt assert that the subordination of nonhegemonic masculinities through the dominance of hegemonic masculinities is not just a local phenomenon. This pattern has been documented globally, highlighting that the mechanisms shaping gender roles in Afghanistan are part of wider processes found in many societies. For example, [Connell and Messerschmidt \(2005\)](#) discuss how hegemonic masculinities subordinate other masculinities and femininities across contexts including North America, Western Europe and the Global South.

To elaborate further on hegemonic masculinities, Connell and Messerschmidt categorise them into geographical levels. They assert that hegemonic masculinities constructed through face-to-face interactions among families, local communities and organisations are considered local and can be found through research methods such as ethnography and life-history. The second level is regional, where hegemonic masculinities are constructed at the cultural or national-state level. Finally, the authors present the global level in which hegemonic masculinities are formed in a broader level, shaped through global politics and international media and business. I will examine the hegemonic masculinities of my participants at the local level, within their personal interactions among their peers, facilitators, co-workers and family members in different domains and social institutions, utilising ethnographic approaches.

#### 4.5.2 Patterns of Hegemonic Masculinities

As discussed earlier, I do not view masculinity as a single and fixed identity, rather, I follow [Connell \(1995, 2005\)](#), viewing it as an identity that evolves in hierarchies which are embedded in social and cultural values and practices. It was discussed above that some forms of these masculinities are dominant and hegemonic, which “are more socially central, or more associated with authority and social power, than others” ([Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 846](#)), while others are marginalised and subordinate.

As masculinity rapidly continues to assert hegemony over femininity in Afghanistan, it evolves and takes on various forms (Moghadam, 2002; Kandiyoti, 1988). Similarly, Connell (1995, 2005) argues that patterns of hegemonic masculinities reshape over time, adapting to different social contexts. For example, in her earlier book (1995), she contrasts traditional heroic masculinity with new forms in the global economy, particularly among business executives, where “calculative rationality,” (p.188) “technical expertise” (p.194) and a subdued emotional style are taking place.

Another pattern of hegemonic masculinities discussed by Connell is the heroic breadwinner. She argues that this type of masculinity was hegemonic both ideologically and structurally in the labour market and the welfare state. In countries like Afghanistan, this type of masculinity is still dominant and continues to function as a hegemonic ideal. The man of the family is expected to provide financially and keep the economic state of the household as his priority.

Connell also highlights physicality, body strength, or bodily performances as culturally idealised norms among athletes that reinforce masculinity – particularly the hegemonic one. She explains that professional sports such as baseball, football, boxing, ice hockey, and surf sports are key sites for constructing hegemonic masculinity. Similarly, Connell connects bodily strength to working-class masculinity, emphasising how physical labour reinforces gender norms. She states,

“Heavy manual work calls for strength, endurance, a degree of insensitivity and toughness, and group solidarity. Emphasizing the masculinity of industrial labour has been both a means of survival, in exploitative class relations, and a means of asserting superiority over women” (Connell, 2005, p. 55).

This pattern of hegemonic masculinity could also be observed in Afghan men when they migrate for manual labour work to neighbouring countries to fulfil their financial responsibilities to their family and communities and to showcase their manhood in this way.

### 4.5.3 Islamic Masculinities

Some dimensions of hegemonic masculinities discussed earlier (i.e., being a breadwinner, protector and provider) also apply to and are supported by Islamic masculinities. In Muslim societies, these roles are often reinforced and shaped by Islamic teachings, traditions as well as culture, which set out expectations for men's behaviour and responsibilities. Building on the ideas around elements of hegemonic masculinities, this section focuses on these patterns from the Islamic point of view.

The essays in [Ouzgane's \(2006\) \*Islamic Masculinities\*](#) present a wide range of masculine identities across different contexts. For example, Ouzgane points to dominant masculine characteristics among Palestinian Muslim men, such as being protectors and providers for their families. [Rothenberg \(2006\)](#) explores how social pressures shape men's roles and expand their masculinity. Themes such as love for their wives, even when they come from different communities and religions, returning from the diaspora and being fighters or martyrs for a nationalist cause are emphasised in Rothenberg's account. [Rahman's \(2006\)](#) essay highlights the role of men as fathers, drawing on the story of Abraham.

Although the themes and roles stated in [Ouzgane \(2006\)](#) on Islamic masculinities do not explicitly mention qualities such as hard work and sacrifice, being a fighter, a provider and a lover for a foreign woman likely requires all these traits and more to meet hegemonic ideals. Clearly, this places great pressure on men, and those who are unable to meet these expectations might be regarded as subordinate – whether men or women.

Furthermore, moral and spiritual masculinities such as being kind, helpful, humble and respectful with others – especially with the elderly – are other forms of Islamic masculinities that could be explored in the Afghanistan context. These patterns of masculinities are reinforced by religious literacies; for example, when a man holds a religious book in his hand, people expect him to be a religiously literate man and would expect all the above traits from him. While such characteristics might elsewhere be seen as subordinate, in the context of Islam they can take on a hegemonic dimension.

Since my participants are all Muslim men living in an Islamic country, I will consider these patterns of masculinities and discuss them in my data chapters.

Like all other masculinities, Islamic masculinities are not singular but are shaped through multiple and sometimes competing interpretations across different social, sectarian and political contexts. Existing scholarship emphasises that there is no singular Qur'anic model of masculinity. Rather, masculinities emerge through diverse and context-specific interpretations of Islamic texts and practices (Peletz, 2021). These masculinities are not only multiple but also hierarchically organised, with some forms becoming dominant while others are marginalised.

This is particularly evident in Afghanistan, where interpretations of Islam and the masculine ideals associated with them have shifted across different historical and political periods. From the reformist agenda of King Amanullah Khan to the socialist policies of the PDPA, and from the Islamic orientations of the Taliban governments and the post-2001 Islamic Republic to the current Taliban administration, different governance frameworks have promoted particular understandings of gender, education and social responsibility. In doing so, they have influenced which forms of Islamic masculinity become socially legitimate and which alternative interpretations are marginalised.

Drawing on Connell's (2005) theorisation of hegemonic masculinity, certain interpretations may become hegemonic, establishing normative expectations of what constitutes a "proper" Muslim man. These patterns are further shaped by broader socio-historical processes, including state formation, political governance and economic transformations, which influence how particular interpretations gain authority and legitimacy (Peletz, 2021). Consequently, Islamic masculinities should be understood not as fixed ideals, but as socially situated and contested patterns linked to power, literacy and access.

#### 4.5.4 Subordinate Masculinities

Drawing on Connell's framework of hegemonic masculinity and the gender order, where some configurations of practice are culturally authorised and others are marginal, relations among men are organised hierarchically in specific contexts

(Connell, 1995). Within this framework, specific gender relations are formed in relation to dominance and subordination among men. For instance, literate or educated men may be positioned as dominant, while the non-literate or low-literate men might be regarded as and perceive themselves as subordinate. This further supports the ideological model of literacy and places literacy as a marker of status, which interacts with gender hierarchies and shapes the ways masculinities could be performed and perceived within a given context. Jeffrey, Jeffery and Jeffery (2008) found that education and 'educated identity' in India are closely associated with masculine ideals and were actively demanded by young men from different castes and religious backgrounds, including Muslims. In the context of Afghanistan, the educated pattern could refer to both mainstream formal school education and religious Islamic education.

Since the majority of non-literate people in Afghanistan are women, literacy programmes have a special focus on female participation, which has, in turn, given these programmes a more feminine character. Thus, non-literate men might feel a sense of subordination when they are positioned as non-literate or early literacy learners in adulthood. In contexts with hierarchical relations of masculinities, individuals with non-masculine traits, in this case, being non-literate and attending a literacy class, are often subordinated and marginalised, lacking access to dominated forms of power such as institutional authority, economic capital or social legitimacy (Connell, 1995).

Informed by these patterns of hegemonic and subordinate masculinities, I explore and discuss various patterns and ways in which my participants navigate and perform masculinities in different domains of their everyday lives. Additionally, I view literacy learning and practices, as spaces for ALLs to redefine their masculinities, especially in post-conflict and low-resource contexts like Afghanistan where traditional masculine roles such as provider and protector are challenged.

#### 4.5.5 Caring Masculinity

Hegemonic masculinities often pressure men to be aggressive, heroic and emotionally restricted. These patterns leave little space for gentleness, vulnerability or responsibility expressed as care. Yet research shows that men's lives and identities

also include practices that counter these expectations. This has led scholars and practitioners to frame and promote caring masculinities as an important dimension of gender equality and social change.

Caring masculinities have long been part of men's everyday practices. As [Gärtner, Schwerma and Beier \(2007\)](#) argue, there is no need to invent the concept anew. Care has also been used as a strategy in gender equality policies, encouraging men to take on more caring roles ([Hearn, 2001](#); [Scambor et al., 2014](#)). For example, the multinational *Fostering Caring Masculinities (FOCUS)* project, implemented in Germany, Iceland, Norway, Slovenia and Spain, sought to engage men in caring practices to achieve a better balance between work and private life ([Langvasbråten & Teigen, 2006](#)). Such initiatives show how caring masculinities have been recognised in European contexts as a key element in both social policy and everyday life.

The White Ribbon Campaign in Canada (1991) also marked an early collective effort by men to distance themselves from violent masculinities and to publicly embrace respect, care and non-violence. [Flood \(2003\)](#) analysed this activism as part of men's struggle for gender justice. While the language of 'caring masculinity' was not yet widely established, the campaign can be seen as a forerunner of the concept. The term began to take shape in European research in the early 2000s (i.e., [Varanka, Närhinen, & Siukola, 2006](#)), before being developed further by [Hanlon \(2012\)](#) and then theorised in more detail by [Elliott \(2016\)](#).

[Elliott \(2016\)](#), drawing on feminist care theory and critical studies on men and masculinities, describes caring masculinities as identities that reject domination and integrate "values of care such as positive emotion, interdependence, and relationality" (p. 240). In this framing, care is not a weakness but a reworking of masculine identity with potential for social change. [Wojnicka and de Boise \(2025\)](#) expand this discussion by showing that caring masculinities are not only about individual attitudes or performances, but are embedded in wider social processes, shaped by structural conditions and intersecting inequalities.

In this sense, caring masculinities both challenge and extend hegemonic norms. They give value and recognition to traits once dismissed as weakness under hegemonic masculinity, or relegated to subordinate masculinities. In the data chapters, I will use this concept to highlight how Afghan adult male literacy learners expressed care

through provision, protection, mentoring peers, ethical responsibility in religious settings, and small acts of service tied to literacy learning.

#### 4.6 Conceptualising Agency and Empowerment

The sections above on literacies, identities and masculinities feed into enabling or disabling the agency of my participants. My perspective about agency is also shaped through the lens of poststructuralist views, seeing it as fluid and unfixed and its formation and reformation as a continuous process (e.g. [Baxter, 2016](#)).

As my overarching theme for this study, I also perceive agency as “a measure of individual awareness or control over the means by which subjects are ‘interpellated’ or called into existence” (Althusser, as cited in [Baxter, 2016, p. 38](#)). [Kabeer \(1999\)](#) goes one step further beyond control over existence to “the ability to define one’s goals and act upon them” ([p. 438](#)). In order to ‘act upon goals’, individuals may go through some decision-making processes. In fact, agency can “be operationalized as ‘decision-making’” ([Kabeer, 1999, p. 438](#)). Some see it as an individual’s capacity, equipped with decision-making, in relation to society and change ([Long & Long, 1992](#)). Others connect it to identity: “the degree of control which we can exert ourselves over who we are” ([Woodward, 2004, p. 6](#) & [Baxter, 2016](#)).

Looking at agency in a broader sense, [Kabeer \(1999\)](#) states that it encapsulates “the meaning, motivation and purpose which individuals bring to their activity, their *sense* of agency, or ‘power within’” ([p. 438](#)). The ‘meaning’, ‘motivation’ and ‘purpose’, I believe, are very personal and self-oriented concepts which might provide an answer to ‘why do they do what they do? – whether in a negative or positive way’. Agency embeds ‘power from within’ the person regarding his/her performance and actions which is “the spiritual strength and uniqueness that resides in each one of us” ([Rowlands, 1995, p. 13](#)).

[Long \(1992\)](#) emphasises the role of agency in bringing individual changes in relation to society. He argues that we identify agency “when particular actions make a difference to the pre-existing state of affairs or course of events” ([p. 23](#)). Through the ‘actor-oriented paradigm’, Long recognises individuals as “knowledgeable and capable” ([p. 21](#)) actors who process external forces through their lived experiences and interactions

rather than accepting them passively. Through this perspective, I can analyse how my participants, as Muslim men, actively negotiate their hegemonic masculinity roles such as, for example, fatherhood, breadwinner and hard worker within the constraints of Islamic cultural norms and their own socio-economic status, often engaging with literacy practices – be it religious, digital or numeracy practices, to strategize and bring change in their social roles and status.

The change making actions could be from an individual or a group of people in a social group which are referred to as ‘power with’ ([Rowlands, 1995](#)). However, I believe, this view of agency might limit the individuals’ actions or decision-making to those leading to change; but what about the decisions and actions that do not result in any change? What would be the potential barriers? Considering these in mind, below I present a more detailed discussion of theories around power. This helps me dig deeper into the concept of power and its relationship with agency, masculinity and literacy.

#### 4.6.1 Power

Power is a complex concept that has been debated and used in various fields. For instance, Steven Lukes is among the recognised figures in the field of social and political science who has been writing about power since the 1970s. His first work is a short book titled ‘Power: A Radical View’ published in 1974. Lukes wrote this book in response to Robert Alan Dahl who had already written plenty of papers and books on power (i.e., [Dahl, 1957, 1961](#)). Dahl has been extensively writing on the two dimensions of power debating around the questions like ‘who wins?’ And ‘what gets discussed?’ in the context of the United States.

[Lukes \(1974, 2004, 2022\)](#) agrees with the two dimensions of power that Dahl presents; however, he argues that power is not just about observable conflicts (i.e., who wins?) or even setting the agenda (i.e., what gets discussed?) but is also about shaping people’s perception, preferences and beliefs ([Lukes, 1974, 2004](#)).

Lukes sets out what have become known as the three dimensions of power. The first one is the most visible and straightforward; this is about direct conflict and who comes out on top or wins when interests clash. It is the classic question of who gets their way

in open disputes, and it tends to focus on what can be seen and measured in real-time. Power at this level is unidirectional and top-down (Berger, 2005).

Rowlands (1997) theorises this level from gender and empowerment perspectives and interprets it as 'power over'. In this case, 'power over' "is wielded predominantly by men over other men, by men over women, and by dominant social, political, economic, or cultural groups [i.e., hegemonic power] over those who are marginalised [or subordinated]" (Rowlands, 1995, p.86). Additionally, Kabeer (1999) connects this form of power to agency and argues that 'power over' is "the capacity of an actor or category of actors to override the agency of others" (Kabeer, 1999, p. 438). The concern in this kind of power in gender studies is that, for example, "when power is defined as 'power over', then if women gain power it will be at men's expense" (Rowlands, 1997, p. 11). In other words, under this way of thinking, power is always about domination, so if women gain power, men must lose it; one group is always hegemonic, while the other is subordinate. This is why gender scholars argue for broader ways of thinking about power, such as 'power to' and 'power with', which I will discuss next.

At a macro level, in the context of adult literacy in Afghanistan, I have already highlighted how policy decisions have historically privileged women's and girls' education, often sidelining the literacy needs and identities of adult men. However, at a micro level, there is still room to explore who actually decides what happens in the classroom, who influences the choice of content, the method of teaching and the focus of the lessons. This first dimension of power or 'power over' draws attention to both the formal authority at the policy level and the everyday decision-making dynamics within literacy classes themselves.

Lukes' second dimension moves beyond the obvious. It is not only about who wins or decides but also about what gets onto the agenda in the first place. Here, power is about setting boundaries and making sure some issues are talked about, while others are quietly kept out of sight. It is the kind of power that operates behind the scenes, shaping what is considered debatable or even thinkable, often without people noticing (Lukes, 1974, 2004, 2021).

The second dimension is regarded as the core of agency and empowerment; it is referred to as 'power to' by Rowlands (1997). It is where everyday agency, negotiation and resistance happen. In fact, in relation to power, agency can be seen as "people's capacity to define their own life choices and to pursue their own goals, even in the face of opposition from others" (Kabeer, 1999, p. 438) which is an example of 'power to' (Rowlands, 1995). Rowlands also values 'power to' and argues that the term 'empowerment' refers to the 'power to', and that in this form of power and empowerment, "an increase in one person's power does not necessarily diminish that of other" (p. 87); thus, it is a win-win scenario for all the group members. The relational and agentic notions of 'power to' make it a valuable dimension among scholars (Kabeer, 1999).

In the context of my research on adult male literacy learners, I can use this second dimension or 'power to' to look at the subtle ways certain topics or concerns are included or excluded from classroom discussions, materials and programme goals. This dimension encourages me to ask not just what is being taught but also what is not talked about, whose questions never make it onto the table, and what kinds of male agency are made possible or limited by these silent boundaries.

By paying attention to this level of power, I can uncover how power operates less through visible conflict and more through the silent shaping of classroom priorities and accepted topics. This helps reveal how adult male learners' agency is shaped, not just by what is allowed, but by what is left unsaid or unexamined in literacy settings; how ALLs negotiate and resist regarding their identities and agency as men. This can be possible through examining the ALLs' everyday activities and practices inside and outside the classroom domains and social institutions.

Lukes sees the third dimension as the most subtle and far-reaching. He states that this level is more about shaping people's underlying perceptions, beliefs and even their sense of what is possible or desirable for them in specific contexts. This is power at its least visible, when people accept social norms or their position in life as natural, or do not even realise that their choices and preferences have been shaped by others (Lukes, 2021). This final dimension is what Rowlands interprets as 'power with', in which power is exercised in a collective manner to benefit the whole group: "a sense of the whole

being greater than the sum of the individuals, especially when a group tackles problems together” (Rowlands, 1997, p. 13).

As I discussed in Chapter 1 and 2, non-literate individuals in Afghanistan and in other contexts such as Nepal (Robinson-Pant, 2001), often describe themselves as ‘blind’ and ‘unable.’ I also discussed how adult literacy textbooks are designed to model children’s schoolbooks, and how policies and funding priorities are gendered. These are not just random features; they are examples of the third dimension of power operating in the context of adult literacy in Afghanistan.

There are many other aspects of this subtle form of power, an often hidden dimension that can be explored further at the micro level especially in how individuals interact within families, classrooms, workplace, religious and other social institutions. Through this dimension, I can explore how literacy practices shape and reshape adult male learners’ sense of masculinity and agency; whose definitions of success or ability are internalised, and how these beliefs influence men’s participation, aspirations, or silence in literacy programmes. In this way, Lukes’ third dimension allows me to trace not just the visible outcomes of power, but also the deeper processes through which people come to accept, resist or reimagine their identities in everyday life.

Lukes argues that to really understand how power works, especially in contexts like education, we need to pay attention to all three levels of these dimensions. Power does not just operate as visible to everyone; it is also present in the silent ways that norms and expectations get under people’s skin and shape their daily lives.

There is a general consensus that power in any of the above forms and levels is connected to decision making and choices (Kabeer, 1999; Rowlands, 1997; Lukes, 1974), and that it is conceptualised as a process which can be “defined as 'power to', 'power with', and 'power from within', this entails very different meanings for empowerment” (Rowlands, 1997, p. 12).

In order to understand how literacy, identity and agency are shaped in various domains of ALLs’ everyday life, power plays a key role. As illustrated in the introduction of this chapter, power is associated with every core concept (i.e., literacy, identity, masculinity and agency) of this thesis.

In my fieldwork, these shifts in power were visible across different domains. For instance, considering the classroom domain, there were moments when learners suggested changes to activities or brought up issues and topics that mattered to them. In fact, at times, the authority of the facilitator was questioned, while in other situations, men with little formal education held respect and influence in religious or community settings outside the classroom. The way people took part in group work, made decisions, or even drew on their social or religious status also signalled the changing and negotiated nature of power.

In light of this, the current study mostly draws on Lukes' three dimensions of power, particularly the second dimension, presented earlier and the idea of "power to" as described by [Kabeer \(1999\)](#), [Rowlands \(1995\)](#) and [Berger \(2005\)](#): the ability to act, make choices and influence outcomes, all of which mattered greatly to the ALLs in this study. Adult learners are constantly involved in adjusting their routines and bringing changes based on their priorities when interacting in different domains and with different communities. Through their daily life experiences, these learners have the ability and capacity to find their ways to express agency and reshape their roles and relationships through these interactions and communications, whether in oral or written forms.

Taken together, these perspectives show that power, like literacy and identity, is not static or singular. Instead, it is shaped and reshaped in context, through relationships and social practices.

#### 4.6.2 Agency and Resources

Another significant component that can operationalise agency is the availability of resources to individuals ([Nussbaum, 2000](#)). Kabeer's definition of resources refers to "not only material resources in the more conventional economic sense, but also the various human and social resources which serve to enhance the ability to exercise choice" (p.437). These resources could be literacies as well as masculinities, which may act as enablers for individuals to make the right choices and exercise their agency.

For instance, in the Afghanistan context, ALLs might use literacy as a resource not only through the skills of reading and writing, but also through participation in social

practices. This could include engaging with written texts – whether through digital tools such as mobile phones or books and notebooks – in group settings and networks, drawing on collective knowledge, or navigating social networks to reach certain goals. In these ways, literacy goes beyond the technical mastery of skills and operates as a socially situated practice that allows ALLs to interact with others, access new domains and act purposefully within their communities. Through these resources, ALLs can negotiate power relations and expand their agency; thus, literacy becomes a means through which individuals can challenge constraints, make decisions and exercise greater control over their lives.

Resources can also take the form of social relationships or interaction. When facing challenges in a context where reading or writing a text is required, non-literate or low-literate individuals often approach other literate people in their communities or surroundings as resources to solve their problem. [Rogers \(2014\)](#) refers to these people as ‘literacy mediators’ through whom non-literate individuals are able to meet their needs while engaging with literacy practices. [Long \(1992\)](#) calls these social resources, ‘network of actors.’ He argues that individuals enrol them to achieve their goals within a social domain.

Since the adult literacy learners have limited literacy skills, they might face challenges enabling their agency across different domains when they are required to use their literacies. Therefore, they may use these social resources as mediators or facilitators to achieve their intended goals, whether related to their masculine roles or power and agency.

In this thesis study, I will consider resources to explore how ALLs access, value and engage with literacy practices and hegemonic masculinities to navigate their social roles within their communities in various domains such as classroom, workplace, religion and home. Specifically, these resources facilitate decision-making by providing the knowledge and social capital needed to strategize and act, as highlighted by [Long’s \(1992\)](#) actor-oriented paradigm, where actors are ‘knowledgeable and capable’ and make decisions to mediate external forces.

### 4.6.3 Decision-Making

Agency as mentioned earlier, is the degree of control or awareness individuals have over the external forces (as well as internal and personal) and actors that shape their identity and existence (Althusser, 1971). To approach this level of agency, one should bring their various literacies, knowledge, identities and masculinities/femininities into play. In this process of ‘interpellation’, empowerment shapes, and decision-making plays the main role; mainly because empowerment is “about bringing people who are outside the decision-making process into it” (Rowlands, 1995, p. 87). Thus, in order to enable people’s agency and empowerment, they should be involved in the decision-making process no matter at what level.

In order to take an action or perform a role, an individual may need to decide upon the availability of the choices. Furthermore, Kabeer argues that “not all choices are equally relevant to the definition of power” (p. 437). Some choices are evaluated and valued by individuals depending on their consequences for their lives. The choices could be *first-order choices*: “strategic life choices” which are considered “critical for people to live the lives they want” (Kabeer, 1999, p. 437). The mentioned categories of choices could include “livelihood, whether and who to marry, whether to have children” (Kabeer, 1999, p. 437). These choices help to frame the second-order ones which are “less consequential choices” in an individual’s life (Kabeer, 1999). In addition, it is “the *ability to make choices*” that empowers a person; and “to be disempowered, therefore, implies to be denied choices” (Kabeer, 1999, p. 436). Kabeer emphasises the connection between agency and empowerment and argues that those who are marginalised (i.e., could be non-literate people in the Afghanistan context) and were not given the opportunity to make meaningful choices are disempowered: “Empowerment is about the process by which those who have been denied the ability to make choices acquire such an ability” (p. 437).

Furthermore, Kabeer, Khan and Adlparvar’s (2011) study in Afghanistan show that empowerment is not just about gaining more choices, but also about how women see themselves and their role in society. Empowerment, in this context, means both a change in women’s self-confidence and identity, and an increased ability to make

important decisions that affect their families and daily lives. This is true even when such choices are heavily constrained by cultural norms and economic realities (Kabeer, Khan & Adlparvar, 2011).

There are two things to keep in mind here; first, insofar as power and agency are concerned, what choices are available for individuals in, let us say, an adult learning classroom or regarding their involvement in the programme? Second, to what extent are ALLs aware of these choices and use their identities as learners and adults to exercise their agency in making decisions?

Individuals use their identities and power to negotiate 'who decides and on what'. For example, Silberschmidt (1992) argues that formal decisions (i.e., who owns property, when to sell livestock, how household income is spent) are ascribed, and informal ones are negotiated between individuals. By informal decisions, the author refers to the ways in which women, in private, often negotiate, persuade, or even quietly subvert the decisions of their husbands. These informal decisions are negotiated in private with women and in fact, women are decision-makers who are involved in 'informal decision-making' (Silberschmidt, 1992). Thus, people make decisions and choices that are socially accepted or negotiated in a community or structure.

## 4.7 Conclusion

I began my PhD research with a broad view of literacies, identities and agency which was inspired by the rich and varied practices I observed among adult male literacy learners in Afghanistan. In this chapter, I bring these ideas together into a framework to understand the experiences of these men and to provide answers to my research questions in the coming chapters.

With regard to the conceptual relationships between the four core concepts underpinning this study, I argue that literacy practices shape, inform and structure masculinities; masculinities, in turn, enable or constrain agency. The entire framework is encapsulated within power, which operates as an overarching force that structures access to and the legitimacy and valuation of particular literacies, masculinities and forms of agency.

This chapter has located the study within the New Literacy Studies and treated literacy as a social, situated and multimodal practice. I have distinguished literacy events from literacy practices, emphasised how practices are organised within domains and social institutions, and noted how borderlands and situated liminality help to explain movement across contexts. I have also highlighted literacy mediation, showing that both people and technologies can enable access to texts and practices. These ideas matter in the Afghan context where everyday literacy practices often mix oral, written and digital forms.

Considering Judith Butler's conception of identity, I believe it is not fixed; it is something we perform through our actions and is shaped through time. These men are always performing different roles, and these roles shape how they see themselves and how others see them. Raewyn Connell's work on masculinities adds another layer. It shows how some ways of being a man are seen as ideal, while others are less valued. In Afghanistan, where being a man carries heavy expectations, literacy can either reinforce these norms or offer a way to rethink them.

Agency and power bring all these ideas together. Naila Kabeer and Norman Long describe agency as the ability to make choices and act on them, even when facing resistance or obstacles. This is closely tied to the idea of "power to" – the capacity to pursue one's goals – rather than simply having power over others. In this view, ALLs exercise agency and power as they use literacy to navigate social relationships and negotiate their place in the community. Literacy can enable this agency and can foster empowerment, but it can also highlight inequalities, especially where some hold more authority. In Afghanistan's complex social context, I will explore how literacy shapes these power dynamics, from personal growth to navigating societal hierarchies.

This theory provides lenses for the chapters ahead, where I will analyse the stories and observations I have gathered from various domains and social institutions. This study is about understanding how these adult men make sense of their world, challenge norms and find empowerment in a low resource and changing society.

This framework guides my study by bringing these perspectives together to answer my research questions. To identify which literacy practices these men value, I will use

Street's approach to uncover practices that matter to the participants themselves across the diverse domains in which these men engage. To understand how literacies shape their identities as men, I will draw on Butler's idea of performance and Connell's focus on hegemonic and subordinate masculinities. To explore how literacy fosters agency and empowerment, I will use Kabeer's and Long's concepts to examine decision-making, resource use, and power dynamics. Power is central here. I track how power operates across Lukes' three dimensions in Afghan literacy settings.

Taken together, the framework positions literacy, identity, masculinity and agency as relational and context dependent. It equips the study to show how adult men make sense of their worlds, negotiate constraints and pursue change in a low resource and shifting society, while keeping power in view as the force that shapes what is possible, legitimate and valued.



## Chapter 5

### The Literacy and Numeracy Practices that Matter

#### 5.1 Introduction

The main goal of this chapter is to explore the literacy practices that are valued among ALLs and their communities both inside and outside the classroom settings. The chapter also examines these literacy practices and associated values in various domains of ALLs' lives. According to [Barton \(2007\)](#), considering literacy as a social practice, it could differ from one social context and culture to another and so "different literacies are associated with different domains of life such as home, school, church and work" (p. 39). In this thesis I use the term *domain* in both a physical and a conceptual sense (after [Barton & Hamilton, 1998](#)): not only the places where activity happens (e.g., mosque, workshop, classroom), but also the patterned social spaces of practice, norms and relations that give those places meaning. Thus, in order to structure the analysis, the chapter presents findings across the major domains of literacy practice: classroom, home, workplace and religion. This is to highlight the specific literacies valued and enacted in each setting.

Furthermore, I employ literacy as a social practice as suggested by [Street \(1984\)](#) and [Barton and Hamilton \(1998\)](#). This perspective contrasts with the autonomous model by emphasising that literacy is shaped by social, cultural and contextual factors rather than being a neutral or technical skill. Through this perspective, I examine how literacies are embedded in the everyday experiences, identities and power relations of the participants in this study. (see Chapter 2 for a detailed discussion of the theories and frameworks that I am adapting on this perspective.)

In the following sections, I shall examine the various types of literacies in which participants engage during their daily activities in different domains including the

workplace, classroom, home and religious institutions. I refer to these collectively as ‘literacy domains’, because literacy practices have been observed in all these domains. I begin with the workplace domain because it represents a core social and cultural space where many everyday literacy practices take place for most ALLs. Then, the chapter presents the data from religious and home domains. As I explained in the methodology chapter, I did not visit participants in their homes. However, I draw on data provided by participants when talking about their literacy practices and experiences within the home domain. This section ends with the classroom domain, as it is the only formal space where ALLs are engaged in various literacy practices.

I observed that some literacy practices such as reading the Qur’an at home or at work and solving maths problems in the classroom or at work often blur the boundaries between domains. In this chapter, and across the following data chapters, I decided to categorise activities by their primary social purpose. This means, for example, if reading is part of religious worship or formal religious study, I place it in the religious domain; if it is a shared family activity with broader educational aims, I analyse it within the home domain.

## 5.2 Workplace Domain

The workplace domain constitutes conceptual spaces where ALLs are engaged with literacy practices and activities related to their work and occupations. These practices are associated with numeracy, digital tools and technology, and independent reading and writing practices.

### 5.2.1 Numeracy Practices at Work

My participants were frequently engaged in numeracy practices in their workplace domains. Whether they were carpenters, doorkeepers at a recreational park, cleaners at a university, mechanics or cooks, numeracy played a crucial role in their everyday work. For instance, I have observed Zabi (the carpenter) and Hashem (another carpenter at the sofa company), the two carpenters who attend the public adult literacy course, in situations where literacy and numeracy practices (coding, decoding, measuring sizes and dimensions of wood and drawing sketches) had a main role. These carpenters always carried measuring tools such as tape measures, a ruler and

a pencil (often tucked behind their ears as a marker of status). They would read the dimensions of the boards from a blueprint or a pre-designed sketch, and then would cut or saw the boards accordingly using a ruler with numerical markings on an electric saw on the cutting machine. The cutting machine itself had rulers at both ends. When Zabi was cutting a board, his apprentice, often his brother, would assist by holding and positioning the board on the machine, while Zabi held the other end. Zabi would read the measurements from his notes, usually, a design sketched on another piece of board (see Figure 6), and both of them had to align the board on the ruler based on the size indicated by Zabi. This required both Zabi and his apprentice to read numbers on the ruler accurately in order to place the board in the appropriate position. This kind of numeracy practice was repeated every day. When Zabi was asked whether he learned the numbers and calculation skills at the literacy course, he explained:

Dear teacher, we studied the course but ... we are poor people. We have to learn to stand on our feet ... to help our family. I remember, numbers ... I learned since my childhood; when I was selling Shornakhot (boiled chickpeas) on the streets. I could understand the shape of numbers from money (coins and notes). I also learned to stack money and used my fingers for addition and subtraction. (while having a big smile) I still do so. After I went to the class (adult literacy course), I also studied multiplication. It's hard.

Interview excerpt, Western Zone, 13/12/2020

Zabi's explanation indicates that, as the first child in his family assisting his father in providing for the family, he has been involved in learning numeracy informally since childhood, primarily through practical experiences related to street vending. His participation in the literacy course has further enhanced his numeracy skills to a higher level. On another day, when I visited Zabi, I found him struggling with adding numbers.

I hardly find time to talk to Zabi because he is always busy cutting wood and boards and there is the noisy sound of the electric saw. He's measuring wood but seems to have a hard time calculating the numbers. He asked his apprentice, "Look, what is 7.4 plus 3.7?" His

apprentice started to think, they both paused for a bit, trying to solve the problem in mind and moving their fingers while looking at them. Then Zabi said, “11.1?”. The apprentice nodded his head, confirming the number.

Fieldnotes, Western Zone, 06/01/2021

Figure 6. Sketch and design of a cupboard with measurements on a board.



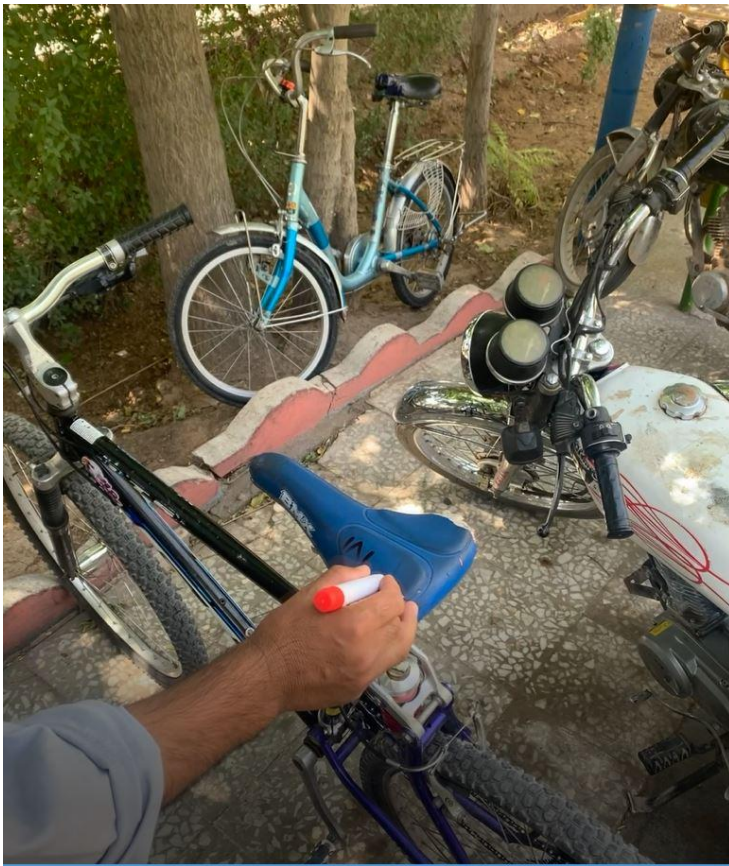
Zabi and his apprentice struggled with adding numbers containing fractions, but through collaboration, they solved the problem without the presence of any maths expert like a teacher or a machine such as a calculator. I have not seen the ALFs teaching or solving problems with fractions in the classroom, perhaps because it is a higher level of maths. However, they found a way to solve the problem using their fingers. This excerpt also illustrates that people like Zabi face challenges in real-life contexts that might be addressed in a higher-level class in the formal education system. However, as an exercise of agency, the learners have to find their own way and continue their lives and occupations despite the barriers.

These accounts illustrate how adults negotiate literacy and numeracy demands in daily life without relying on formal schooling. This echoes [Gebre et al.'s \(2009\)](#) observation that adults, including those considered non-literate, “can and do negotiate literacy tasks such as money, bills, letters, election notices etc” (p. 2). Such evidence challenges deficit notions of non-literate adults and highlights their adaptive strategies in context.

Asqar, the cleaner at the university, had to read the numbers from the tags and then write them on the students’ exam papers while assisting the teachers during the exam period. The numbers in Asqar’s occupational setting have different meanings. They are not to measure the size or dimensions but rather to represent students’ related exam papers. Additionally, he needed to enter the numbers into the copying machine to indicate the desired number of copies that needed to be printed. He claimed that he became acquainted with numbers during his time in primary school up to year four, approximately 30 years ago. As he grew older, he mostly learned numbers from the keyboards of mobile phones and dealing with money and financing family life, as he explained. While he mentioned being capable of basic calculations such as addition and subtraction, he expressed a preference for using a calculator. On another occasion, I observed Asqar while he was looking at his pocket calendar, a small book that contained explanations and holiday information as footnotes at the end of its pages. Though he did not write on it, he had marked certain dates with symbols like circles and stars, indicating holidays and days when he had no shift at the Theology School, as Asqar explained.

Firouz, the doorkeeper at the park, would read and copy the serial numbers or the codes from the tickets onto the body of the bicycles when he was responsible for supervising the bicycle area and ensuring security at the park entrance (see Figure 7). Furthermore, he had to report the balance and the number of bicycles for which he received money. He puts a dot on his chair with a marker for every 10 bicycles and then in the evening, he counts the dots, counts the money he received from taking care of bikes and reports to the park’s manager. When I asked him about the dots strategy, he indicated that he came up with this idea because it is quicker, easier and helps him remember the number of bikes.

*Figure 7. An ALL writing a ticket's serial number on the bicycle*



Jabbar, the mechanic, relied on numbers when he had to replace parts of a motorbike to ensure the correct sizing. He also had to carefully monitor and analyse numbers corresponding to the price of motorbikes when he browsed online to purchase motorcycles, a practice that will be discussed further in the digital literacy section of this chapter.

These participants utilised various informal and self-generated strategies and methods to deal with numbers and do the calculations (i.e. using calculators, fingers, dots or orally counting and solving problems). Interestingly, the formal curriculum does not always align with these everyday needs. As one ALF explained:

Maths is the most disliked thing ... subject for my students. I used to have a fixed schedule for this class ... we had maths on Thursdays. But now, I prefer not to tell them which day they have maths ... you see, it's because many will not show up if they know it's a maths day.

Interview excerpt, Western Zone, 23/06/2020

Although, in the above excerpt (and in many more short talks we had), the ALF blamed students' disinterest in maths, I observed many instances where ALLs, including Fattah (the vendor), Hashem, and the female learner in the private classroom, specifically requested maths problems on their notebooks in addition to their language assignments. All my participants utilised a great amount of maths in their work domain, regardless of their profession or level of literacy.

The question is to what extent do curricula respond and build on these literacy and numeracy practices? This emphasis on practical, work-based numeracy resonates with wider research on adult skills and vocational learning, which highlights that much essential learning for work occurs informally, through practice and interaction, rather than only through formal instruction (McGrath, 2012; McGrath & Powell, 2016). Recognising the value of these situated literacies and skills is crucial for understanding how adults actually use and develop knowledge in their everyday lives.

The above examples all illustrate socially-situated numeracy practices in my participants' daily lives outside the classroom. As discussed above, the ALLs were involved in numeracy practices utilising different strategies which suited their needs and were deeply contextualised.

Beyond arithmetic with fractions, which is formally taught only once a week, participants in this study also used geometry in practical work-related contexts. Carpenters needed to work out the dimensions and properties of boards, while painters calculated the surface area of sofas, tables and beds to determine how much paint was required. These are real-world maths problems, often requiring a level of skill that goes far beyond what is taught in most literacy classes. These informal numeracy practices are acquired through experience and social interaction, rather than through direct classroom instruction. Dealing with shapes, sizes, dimensions and properties of figures and spaces requires more advanced mathematical understanding than is typically acknowledged or taught in literacy classes. This finding echoes Nirantar's (2007) ethnographic research in rural India, where researchers documented the sophisticated and context-rich numeracy practices used by adults in markets, households and trades, even though these were not reflected in the formal curriculum.

This distinction between formal and informal learning is well established in the literature. Rogers (2014) argues that much of what adults need to know is acquired informally, through participation in daily life, rather than through planned instruction. McGrath (2012) and McGrath and Powell (2016) similarly emphasise that essential workplace skills, including numeracy, are often developed on the job, shaped by practical experience and social interaction, rather than by formal education. For many of my participants, these informal numeracy skills are not just more useful but often stay in their minds much longer than anything learned in a classroom.

All-in-all, the examples provided illustrate the significant role of numeracy and of numeracy learning in the workplace domain of individuals across various professions. Whether it be Asqar, the university cleaner assisting teachers during exams, Firouz, the park doorkeeper managing bicycles or Jabbar, the mechanic working on motorbikes, all of them encounter numeracy practices in their respective roles.

### 5.2.2 Digital Literacies at Work

As technology advances in every aspect of life, people rush to prepare themselves for the changes and to be recognised as ‘modern’. My participants also tried to keep up with the pace at which technology is advancing. I present data from some of my participants who use technology in their workplace contexts, specifically focusing on its relationship to literacy (i.e., ‘schooled’ literacy).

Apart from his profession, Jabbar has a passion for luxury motorbikes, particularly cruisers and sports bikes. During the time I spent collecting data, I noticed that he had exchanged three bikes. He would purchase them, enjoy riding them for a while and then sell them for a profit. When I asked him how he bought the bikes, he mentioned buying them from the internet. Since he did not have any formal education experience on how to use the internet, specifically on, for example, ways to do online shopping and navigate an internet browser, I was curious to know how he managed this with his limited literacy skills, specifically referring to his ability to write and communicate with the seller during the transaction using online facilities.

My assumption was that internet browsing or navigating, as a form of digital literacy, would require knowledge such as reading product specifications and details,

comparing and contrasting different items online – including prices and quality – placing orders from various sources and making online payments. I believed that these tasks might be challenging for him to handle.

However, I discovered that his approach to internet shopping was quite different. He explained that he used the internet mainly for browsing rather than engaging in extensive research and online transactions. Nevertheless, he had developed his unique method of online shopping.

See *Ustad Jan* (dear teacher), we have a group [a Telegram group of motorbike dealers]. Sometimes I check the group to see if any new bikes are listed. Then, I see the pictures and send a sound [of recording his voice] to the person and ask him for the price and a short video. And I send a voice if I have any more questions. If I like it, I will make an appointment with the seller to view the bike in person and then I will forward him to the money exchange stores to get his money ... *Ustad Jan*, the world is modernising [as he smiles].

Fieldnotes, Western Zone, 11/01/2021

Jabbar uses a smartphone to connect to the internet and, through social media platforms like Telegram, he purchases motorbikes. While he is not extensively engaged in writing, he reads certain information such as prices, brands and models, when conducting business using his approach. He mentioned that he acquired these skills independently with the help of friends. He sees this as a step towards becoming more ‘modern’, as he believes that the world is progressing in that direction, as indicated by his words: “*Ustad Jan*, the world is modernising.”

This account highlights that as a male adult, Jabbar navigates his skills and abilities and uses the available resources such as his social networks and friends to learn these processes and fulfil his role as a provider for his family.

Asqar is another participant who engages in digital literacies in his workplace and elsewhere. He is in his 40s and works at a public university. His official job title is ‘cleaner’, but he performs additional duties at the School of Theology. During the examination period, teachers are responsible for copying their exam papers using a

sophisticated copying machine. The machine offers numerous options, making it challenging to operate. Asqar assists the teachers with the photocopying and tagging of the exam papers. These tasks require a range of scripts and literacy practices: reading Dari-Farsi (Arabic script) names on class lists and cover sheets; occasional Pashto (Arabic script) names; Arabic words and formulae appearing in theology papers; English labels and menu items on the copier interface; and numeracy for serial numbers (both the Western Arabic numerals (i.e., 123) and Eastern Arabic numerals (i.e., ١٢٣), page counts and batch codes. He also engaged with other literacy practices such as navigating menus, selecting duplex/staple/collate, matching initials to full names and aligning serials with class sections. When I asked him about his approach when dealing with these practices, he explained as follows:

I would read the first letters of the names of the students and then I guess the rest [the student's name]; if I am not sure, I ask the teachers next to me. I can read the serial numbers for tagging and can write the numbers too. As for the copying machine, I read only the first words and I know what the buttons do. The teachers read all the instructions and it takes a lot of time to know all the buttons. I show them how to do and it's quicker.

Interview excerpts, 08/03/2021

The excerpt shows that Asqar is not aiming for school-like, full-text comprehension; he reads for function. He decodes students' names by using first letters and familiar patterns, and when uncertain, he draws on mediation from more literate colleagues. This illustrates a situated, functional literacy.

So, Asqar is capable of reading and writing numbers in Western and Eastern Arabic styles and operating the copying machine which is in English. Basically, he is involved in dealing with both letters and numbers in different languages. However, he consistently claims to be non-literate, as he puts it, "I don't have literacy".

The way he was explaining his experience was in a very proud manner through his facial expressions and a proud smile on his face as if he sees himself helping university teachers who are much more literate than him. Being socially recognised and

empowered in this context has pushed him to engage in more such practices and to learn further.

Firouz, the doorkeeper in his early 30s, uses his mobile phone when engaged with literacy in different modes. For instance, he uses his mobile phone to create a movie. The film depicts a young man who immigrates to another country to work and pay the dowry to his fiancé's father. Despite having no formal training or official courses in filmmaking, Firouz explained that he had ample free time during his work in an Iranian poultry farm. He motivated his fellow non-literate workers to join him in making the movie as a hobby. With only a smart mobile phone at their disposal, they formed a team of four. Firouz utilised his mobile phone to schedule each scene, record video and audio, write character and actor names, apply basic editing functions, and send short clips to his brother in a different country for further editing and the addition of sound effects. Since he has not been supported financially or able to generate income, he gave up on movie-making and chose to focus on other paid occupations.

Additionally, Firouz shared poems, motivational quotes and messages with both me and his classmates. The messages were in Dari-Farsi and since he perceives me as a teacher, he must have tried hard to write correctly. However, the texts contained spelling and grammar errors, which indicated that Firouz wrote them himself rather than forwarding them from someone else. But he did not compose the poems; they are old poems told to children by their grandmothers and grandfathers. The content of the messages shifted from poems to more personal and communicative texts which shows his level of confidence in utilising his literacy skills using his digital facilities.

Firouz explained in a brief talk that he uses his mobile phone for dictation purposes. One day, I observed him with a notebook that appeared to be his son's school homework notebook. The pages were fully written, yet he was writing along the borders where he could find small blank spaces. As I was looking at him, his son said, "Oh, yeah, he loves writing." He continued as he was smiling, "You know what, he even calls my mom to give him dictation." Firouz looked up, smiled, and said, "*Ustad Jan*, is it a bad thing? When I find free time, I take the notebook and call my wife to give me dictation. She reads from any book she finds close to her, and I write." His wife studied up to high school and is more educated than Firouz and his son. I asked him about the

accuracy of the spelling and who checks it for him. He said he either asks his son or any other literate individual who enters the park. He said many university students come to the park to study.

One interesting aspect, which could be analysed further in this excerpt, is the role of digital literacies and the negotiation of informal learning spaces within the family. The usage of a mobile phone by Firouz for dictation illustrates how digital tools become embedded in everyday literacy practices and blur the boundaries between formal and informal learning in different contexts. Although the act of dictation resembles that of a formal classroom exercise, Firouz and his wife have recontextualised it as a social and familial activity, thus transforming a traditionally school-based practice into an informal and collaborative learning event. This demonstrates the fluidity of literacy domains (Barton & Hamilton, 1998) and how literacy practices migrate across spaces, roles and relationships.

Furthermore, the excerpt reveals the social distribution of literacy expertise within the household domain, with Firouz's wife and son serving as literacy sponsors (Brandt, 1998), providing support, feedback and motivation. This is a mutual learning process in which all the family members – the wife, the son and Firouz – “gain advantage in some way” (Brandt, 1998, 166).

The collaborative nature of this learning activity is further extended to the broader community, as Firouz mentions consulting university students or other literate park visitors for spelling checks. This underscores the communal dimension of literacy acquisition and maintenance, where learning is scaffolded not only by family members but also by the extended social network (Tett, 2023).

Fattah is another ALL who used his mobile phone to exchange text messages with his network. He utilised text messages as a means to enhance his literacy skills. Additionally, when I asked Fattah in an informal talk about the content of the messages he exchanges, he said,

After I receive messages from my friends, I read and see if it's a good one I forward them to other brothers. That teacher... I cannot remember his name... my Qur'an teacher at the masjid where you visited him... he sends

excellent *hadiths* <sup>6</sup>and I forward them. I like him so much. I usually receive *hadith*, *ayah* (Qur'an verses), poems, quotes and so others.

Fieldnotes, Western Zone, 08/12/2020

Since the religious texts are primarily in classic standard Arabic, people might interpret them differently if they were not well familiar with both Dari-Farsi and the Arabic language. Therefore, I went on and asked how he decides which message is a 'good one' and what he does if he does not understand the content. He said he texts his religious teacher if he does not understand the content and the teacher either sends a short text message or leaves him a long audio message explaining or interpreting the *hadith* or *ayah* and then Fattah decides to whom he could forward the message. So, he analyses the contents and does further research to understand the messages and then forwards them to the appropriate people in his circles using his mobile phone.

There are a couple of aspects of digital literacies that could be discussed in this scenario. Firstly, using mediation and seeking informal learning support about unfamiliar content illustrates how mobile phones and messaging apps serve as crucial platforms for informal and on-demand learning. The process of interpreting religious content is not confined to traditional spaces but is negotiated through digital communication, which enables immediate access to expert knowledge regardless of physical location.

Secondly, Fattah's use of his mobile phone to research, verify and forward religious messages demonstrates the agency that adult learners exercise in digital environments. Rather than acting as passive recipients, individuals like Fattah critically engage with content, evaluating its accuracy and appropriateness before sharing it within their networks.

The adult literacy learners in the aforementioned stories, utilising photocopying machines, smartphones and internet platforms, illustrate the diverse range of digital literacies that enable creativity in overcoming obstacles. Instead of relying on formal training, these ALLs developed their own strategies such as experimenting with device

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<sup>6</sup> Narrations about what the Prophet said are called *hadith*, which differ from *sunnah*, referring to what the Prophet did (Baiza, 2018).

features, seeking assistance from family or peers and using trial and error, to navigate and make the most of digital tools. Through this resourcefulness, they harnessed the potential of digital technologies to directly and indirectly enhance their literacy skills.

The above illustrations also indicate that the kind of digital literacies they utilise in different domains of work are strikingly different. Some (i.e., Jabbar, the motorbike mechanic and Asqar, the cleaner) use digital literacies for the purpose of their occupation and business but others (i.e., Firouz and Fattah) use these literacies for communication with friends and social networks. These accounts also show that digital literacies are a significant part of ALLs' literacy practices in the workplace domain and beyond.

### 5.2.3 Independent Reading and Writing

Throughout my fieldwork, I observed ALLs in their workplaces engaged in certain literacy practices around reading and writing. During my visits to Firouz, Fattah, Rashid (battery store owner), Jabbar, and Ali (the guard at a generator house), I noticed multiple instances where they were engaged in reading or writing from various books, rather than using the designated literacy textbook. In fact, none of these participants owned the official literacy textbook provided to adult learners in public or private centres. Below is an excerpt from my fieldnotes during an unexpected visit to Firouz's workplace.

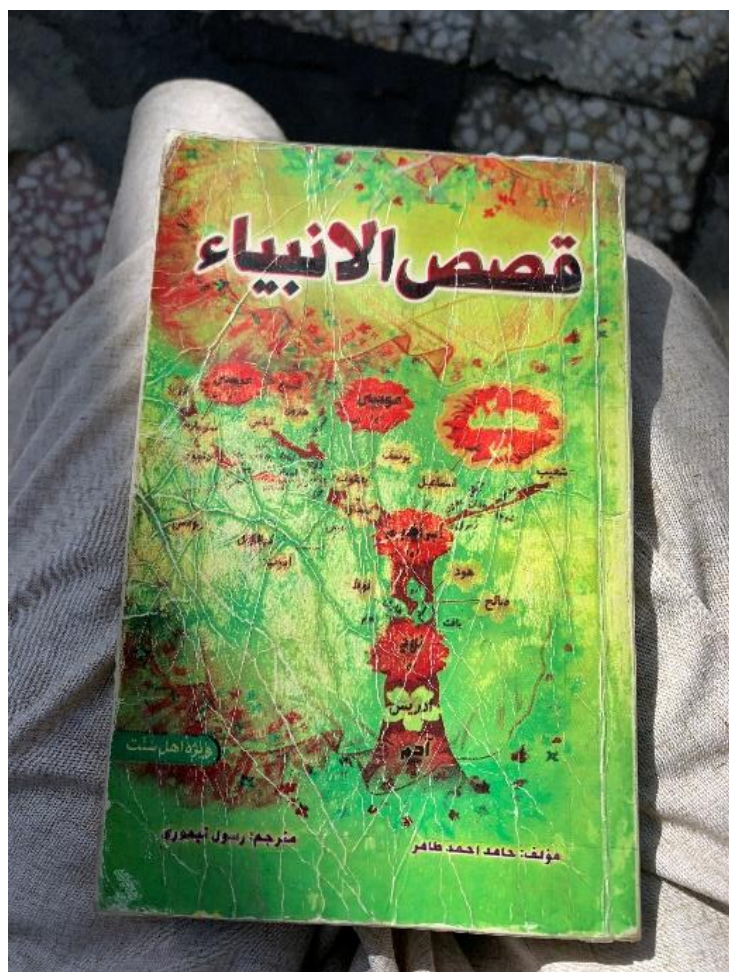
It's a sunny summer day at 11 am and as I was passing by the park where Firouz works, I saw him reading a book under a tree close to the park's entrance. I was not supposed to visit him today, but I was curious to know what's he doing; so, I stopped and greeted him. He has a book in his hand. Its name is *The Prophets' Stories* (see Figure 8). He's happy to see me and said, "Welcome, teacher, great you are here. See this book, I got it from a friend, I really like the stories. And look teacher, this notebook; I wrote a paragraph from the stories; amazing stories."

Fieldnotes, Western Zone, 19/07/2020

Firouz shows enthusiasm in sharing his reading experience with me. He expresses his appreciation for the stories. Interestingly, I believe, in the above setting, he did not share this because he was perceiving me as a teacher. It is because if he did so, he would have asked me for comments on his writing. I believe he shared this moment with me to show how much he cares about learning. His excitement is evident in his warm greeting and his eagerness to discuss the book. This suggests that literacy practices could foster a sense of connection and enjoyment in him when shared with others, especially me, as he knew I was conducting research on literacies. I encouraged him to keep reading what he enjoyed, and suggested him to find an audience to share the stories with. He liked the idea and said he would share the stories with his family.

Additionally, as shown in the above extract, Firouz is engaging in an informal literacy practice (i.e., interacting with the book through reading and writing) during his work break at the park. Despite not being in a formal educational setting, he takes the opportunity to read a book at his workplace. He seems to be interested in reading materials such as this religious book which is outside of the literacy curriculum and textbooks. It is likely he would read more if he had access to more books through his literacy course.

Figure 8. The stories of prophets read by an ALL.



On another day, while visiting Fattah at his workplace where he sold bedding on a trolley on a crowded street, I noticed him holding a book entitled ‘The Life Stories of Prophet Mohammad.’

While standing next to his trolley, he holds a book and reads it. He wears a white scarf on his head, which hangs down to protect his face from the sunshine, he could not notice my arrival. I drove close to him with my motorbike; he put his book down and greeted me with joy.

He introduced his book to me excitedly. The book is in the Dari-Farsi language and is about the life of the Prophet Mohammad. I asked Fattah if he understood the text, and he proudly claimed that he finishes a couple of books every week. He said, “To be honest, dear teacher, I don’t understand all, but I like it when I finish one book and then I go get another one from

masjid or from my friend.” He has a friend who is also a literacy learner, and they exchange books.

Fieldnotes, Western Zone, 15/07/2021

This extract shows that, despite the demands of his work as a street vendor, Fattah incorporates reading into his everyday routine. By reading while watching over his trolley, he integrates literacy practice into his everyday life. Moreover, I can see from the above extract the role of community support in literacy practice (borrowing books from masjid) and the presence of a fellow literacy learner with whom he exchanges books.

Both Firouz and Fattah were reading religious books, which reflects their personal beliefs, interests and values they place on such content. However, their goals were different. Firouz was reading and was excited about the content and stories, while Fattah was excited about his fluency in reading, and finishing a book was a big accomplishment for him. In fact, he and his friend have formed a reading circle where they exchange their books with each other. I suggested that he could consider adding more people such as Firouz and Rashid to his circle. He liked the idea.

Ali, the guard at a generator house, also uses books other than the official literacy textbook when he is in his workplace. He is more into writing than reading. He practices his handwriting whenever he is free. I observed him multiple times writing on his notebook which is always rolled and placed in his pocket wherever he goes. Although his mother tongue is Pashtu, he used the Dari-Farsi language textbook from grade 2 of public school. He received it from one of his colleagues at work. He copies the text from the book but sometimes he writes his own text. He said he cannot read or write in Pashtu because the Dari-Farsi literacy course is the only one available for him, so he studies Dari-Farsi as a second language.

These examples from the workplace domain show that while numeracy is essential in some occupations, there is also a significant amount of independent, informal literacy activity, often outside the official curriculum. Most participants showed a preference for religious material and personal writing practice. Despite not having access to official textbooks, they actively sought out materials that suited their interests. This

demonstrates real enthusiasm for self-initiated learning and a willingness to explore new sources of knowledge. The Head of PLD acknowledged these gaps, stating that they struggled to provide even basic literacy textbooks due to the limited budget allocated by the Ministry of Education, let alone additional resources like a library.

In summary, my data from the workplace domain illustrates how literacy practices are shaped by the realities of daily work and personal interest. These practices were often learned informally, through observation, collaboration, and initiative, demonstrating the vital importance of context in shaping what is valued as literacy. As with other domains (religious, home, classroom), the boundaries between formal and informal literacy learning are fluid, negotiated by learners themselves in response to their roles and responsibilities.

### 5.3 Religious Domain

As Muslims, everyone is supposed to offer their five times daily prayers, preferably at masjids. This makes the masjids very populated seven days a week. Besides providing praying facilities, masjids also offer religious lessons and courses such as Qur'an recitation, memorisation and reading. This section explores the kind of literacy practices that my participants engaged with in this domain.

#### 5.31 Religious Literacies in Masjids

All of my participants, prior to their formal adult literacy classes, had participated in some occasional and informal religious literacy sessions, which mostly took place in masjids. Some of them, such as Fattah and Shams (the school student), are still attending these classes. Sending children to masjid (not *Madrasa*; details on the differences are provided in the Context Chapter) to learn Qur'anic script is a typical Afghan cultural practice. While the religious literacy course primarily emphasises reading and memorisation rather than writing and mathematics, the facilitators perceive it as an opportunity for learners to develop a faster recognition of Dari-Farsi letters. For instance, in his interview, Saber, the ALF in public centre, expressed appreciation for the masjid classes, noting that they help ALLs recognise letters and sounds in Dari-Farsi.

As discussed in the Context Chapter, it is considered a beneficial scaffolding practice for Afghan students in their Dari-Farsi reading and writing lessons when they transition to formal schools because of the similarities in alphabets and scripts between Dari-Farsi and the Arabic languages.

In fact, just recently, the PLD posted a picture of a man and announced on their social media channels that one of their adult literacy learners joined the literacy classes after he finished memorising 16 chapters of the Qur'an in Arabic, which is about 320 pages. They stated that he joined the literacy classes to learn Dari-Farsi so that he could also read the meaning and interpretation of the Qur'an.

The learners in masjid not only learn about the reading of the Qur'an scripts, but they also discuss and learn about some religious cultures, ethics and the main pillars of Islam such as *Shahadah* (the testimony that there is no God worthy of worship but Allah and Mohammad is his messenger), *Salat* (prayers, both obligatory and optional), *Zakat* (giving 2.5% of your wealth to needy people as a form of charity), *Ramadan* (fasting and its rules), *Haj* (going for pilgrimage in Mecca and its rules) and more. For instance, while visiting Shams in the masjid, I observed two religious instructors with the students sitting in a big circle facing the instructors. One of the instructors is responsible for teaching the religious text and the other one is teaching general lessons on Islamic ethics based on the Prophet's lifestyle. The ethics instructor started the class by giving a short speech on politeness and respecting neighbours. He referenced a short story of the Prophet:

Whenever the Prophet, peace be upon him (PBUH), was going to masjid, there was an old woman in his neighbourhood who would throw her garbage on the Prophet's (PBUH) way. This was repeated many times and then it's stopped. The Prophet noticed that the woman doesn't do it anymore. He asked his companions to find out what happened to that neighbour. The companions reported that she was sick. The Prophet (PBUH) went to her home to visit her. She was surprised to see him and didn't bother the Prophet anymore and had special respect for him afterwards. So, we all should learn from our beloved Prophet (PBUH) and

respect our neighbours even if they don't like us or sometimes bother us.

You shouldn't respond to evil with evil.

Fieldnote, Western Zone, 01/06/2021

After this speech, the actual class resumed, and the learners started to repeat their previous lessons individually. There were 22 learners, mostly children (both girls and boys) in the class of whom four were over 20 years old males. Then, one by one, they came to the facilitator and read their lesson from the previous day. The facilitator would correct them and if they had minor mistakes, they were given a new lesson otherwise the facilitator would ask them to go back to their place and repeat. There were no writing lessons in this masjid.

However, while visiting Fattah in another masjid, in addition to repeating their lessons individually, the students would write some lessons in their notebooks. It was a chapter that the teacher prepared himself about the rules of correctly pronouncing certain letters in the Qur'an (called *Tajweed*) and the explanation of the main pillars and phrases from the Qur'an in Dari-Farsi. The learners would borrow the chapter and copy it into their notebooks and later would memorise those rules. They were expected to implement those pronunciation and articulation rules when reciting or reading the Qur'an.

Fattah also added that the masjid offers another religious session in the evening. He explained that the session is a very informal one where adults attend after the evening prayers. This session provides not only Qur'an reading and recitation, but also lectures on how to be a proper Muslim man, father, community member, husband, co-worker and so on.

As discussed in the workplace domain section, some ALLs showed great interest in reading religious books (for instance, Fattah and Firouz read prophets' stories). On another occasion, Rashid also approached me to ask for my suggestions about religious books to add to his reading list. I directed him to his teacher, as Saber knew more about the available religious books.

### 5.3.2 Digital Literacies and the Religious Domain

Although most of my participants learned religious literacies at masjids, some practised and learned parts of these literacies at home using digital tools. For example, Rashid, in his late 40s, is one of the oldest learners in the public literacy class. He owns a store and occasionally joins it to pass the time and ‘have some fun’, as he stated. He put his children in charge of the business because he wanted his children to take on the provider role. I was particularly amazed by Rashid’s use of technology in learning the Qur’an. He utilises a smartpen (see Figure 9) to learn Qur’anic scripts. During a conversation with Rashid’s sons at the store, Mansur, who had completed year 11 of school, mentioned that his father had gone through three smartpens in his quest to learn how to read the Qur’an. Rashid explained the process as follows:

See *Ustad*, this thing ... the pen is very useful for me. I bought it from Pakistan ... [while smiling and looking at Mansur] I have bought three up to now. I place it on the words or letters, and it reads them aloud for me. I repeat it many times. Thank God, I can now understand all the letters (Arabic alphabet). I used them (smartpens) for about four months. I don’t need it anymore.

Fieldnotes, Western Zone, 05/12/2020

The pen functions like a scanner and reads the scripts when placed on them. It is not intended for writing purposes. This was the first time I had heard about this technology being used in Afghanistan, and the fact that Rashid, despite his age and being non-literate in his language, utilised smartpens as a tool to learn the Qur’an, surprised me.

Figure 9. An ALL using smartpen to learn Qur'an.



Rashid's approach to learning the Arabic script differs significantly from the teaching method employed in the literacy or masjid classes. While his class focuses primarily on writing, Rashid listens to a smartpen and repeats. Rashid explained that first he learned the letters and some reading skills in Arabic using the smartpen which has also prepared him for basic Dari-Farsi language literacy skills. Once he gained confidence, he decided to enrol in the adult literacy class to further enhance his learning.

If there were similar gadgets available to support Rashid in learning Dari-Farsi, he would likely make use of them too. Furthermore, his decision to initially begin with religious literacy utilising a smartpen seems to have yielded positive results for him.

It also showcases how adults exercise their agency and choose what works best for them when it comes to learning. Furthermore, the fact that he spent a great amount of money to find this gadget from another country also highlights the value he places on learning religious literacies.

### 5.3.3 Oracy Skills as a Continuum of Literacy

As mentioned earlier, the majority of adult learners who attended masjid classes focused on acquiring religious literacy, particularly reading skills. However, Asqar's experience at the masjid differed, as he explained. His primary focus was on developing his oral skills, specifically learning how to deliver speeches to a small audience. During his interview, Asqar mentioned that he had spent four months in Pakistan as part of a *Jamaat* group. In Afghanistan, *Jamaat* refers to a group of individuals who travel to Pakistan to receive training as missionaries. They spend several months listening to Muslim influencers in their own language, and once trained, they go among the local people to spread what they learned. Typically, *Jamaat* members are literate Madrasa students or individuals who are passionate about serving the religion and spreading messages such as the benefits of prayer, fasting and obedience to Allah.

What astonished me the most was Asqar's involvement in these groups because I believe it would require a certain level of literacy to decode texts in both Arabic (to read the Qur'an and *Hadith*) and Dari-Farsi (to understand the meaning of the scripts if not familiar with Arabic). However, Asqar explained that he recorded all the speeches, uploaded them to his mobile phone and listened to them repeatedly until he memorised all the *Hadith* and Qur'an verses by heart. He would then utilise this knowledge when delivering speeches to others.

While he still aims to catch up with his studies, Asqar has taken a slightly different approach. He asks his daughter to read his book to him, a form of family literacy; and using his daughter as a literacy mediator or sponsor in this case. For Asqar, oracy skills encompass the ability to speak in public and effectively convey the message to individuals who may not have a strong background in Islamic studies.

The ALLs practise various literacy practices in the masjid domain (i.e., reading the Qur'an, reading and learning *Tajweed* and engaging with literacy practices related to Islamic culture and principles), all of which mostly focus on religious topics. These practices not only influence their formal school literacies (i.e., through teaching

learners' pre-literacy skills and scaffolding) but also shape their identities in different domains, which will be discussed in the next chapter.

Both the spiritual and social practices in the religious domain shaped individuals' literacies. In this domain, it was the informal lessons in masjids and the support from community and family networks that constituted the learning space for participants. These activities underscore the importance of religious literacy not only for personal faith but also for identity formation and social belonging. Following [Street's \(1984\)](#) critique of the autonomous model, I also treat Asqar's memorisation, recorded sermons, family read-aloud and public speaking as oracy on a literacy continuum, interdependent practices that build knowledge, identity and social voice.

## 5.4 Home Domain

Home constitutes another domain in which my participants were engaged in a variety of literacy practices. Although my participants spent most of the daytime in their workplace, they would join their families at home in the evenings (except for Ali who lives in his workplace). The home domain literacies also included literacy practices from other contexts. The home domain was a key space where participants enacted their various roles as fathers, husbands, brothers and heads of household. Through literacy practices at home, such as helping children or siblings with schoolwork, male participants were able to demonstrate care, responsibility and authority. These qualities are often associated with masculinity in Afghan society and provide opportunities to exercise agency within the family context, as men. Although they consider themselves 'non-literate', ALLs negotiated expectations around support, guidance and educational leadership. This interplay between literacy, masculinity and agency in the home domain will be further explored in the following chapters.

### 5.4.1 Calligraphy and Handwriting Practices

Calligraphy and good handwriting, with pen or pencil, are other forms of literacy practices that have been pursued directly or were supported and praised by the participants outside the classroom setting. This literacy practice is valued by both so-called literate and non-literate people in Afghanistan. Although mobile phones and

computers are widely used in Afghanistan (Kakar, 2020), local people, especially those from rural areas, value good handwriting. Some local low-literate or non-literate people even use this as a mechanism to evaluate a person's literacy level. The better and more stylishly one writes, the more literate you are considered by them. The most recognised handwriting style in the context of calligraphy in Dari-Farsi is the Nasta'liq style. Any handwriting in this style looks like a work of art (see Figure 10).

*Figure 10. A sample of Nasta'liq-style handwriting by Ustad Abdul Jalil Tawana.*



Considering this fact, Jabbar asks his brother who is a dentist to check his handwriting's quality at home.

When it was night, in the beginning [of his course], I'd go to my younger brother [he finished high school] with my book. We are three brothers living with my father; the two of us [the younger one and him] sit on one side of my dad and the other one [the dentist] sits on the other side. We are all so friendly with each other and have fun chatting every night. In the beginning, I'd ask the one next to me to read for me and then I'd read and then he would correct me and would read a couple of times with me. But now, I read and write by myself and only sometimes ask him to check my handwriting and if

I cannot read a word. They are all so happy and they know that I improved this time. They all encouraged me not to leave the course this time.

Interview excerpts, Western Zone, 16/12/2020

As shown in the above extract, Jabbar, who has a dentist brother and supporting his children to go to school, specifically asks his brother to give him feedback on his handwriting. He does not ask for accuracy, content or spelling but for handwriting. This indicates that he puts a lot of value on writing neatly and beautifully.

Furthermore, Zabi also explained that he is involved with calligraphy at home.

They [his brothers and sister] show their writings to me and I check them, for example, I cannot really read well, but I see how they write. For example, if they write nicely and cleanly, I tell them well done and great; like this, I also learn some writing.

Interview excerpt, Western Zone, 13/12/2020

I asked him about the kind of writing Zabi's siblings share with him. He said it was usually their school homework but they sometimes also wrote for fun from other books or from memory to show off their writing styles to each other.

Ali, the generator guard, is directly engaged in calligraphy and strives to write beautifully. Whenever I visited him at his workplace (which is also his home during the day), he proudly shared his writings with me and sought feedback on his handwriting skills.

Additionally, good handwriting is valued in the local society of Afghanistan. I recall instances where my uncles and father would ask me and my cousins to write something, and they would praise the one with good handwriting, which happened to be my older cousin most of the time. It is worth noting that even if an individual holds a PhD degree, they may still be labelled as 'low-literate' if their handwriting is not deemed good enough. This highlights the strong emphasis placed on visually pleasing handwriting as a symbol of literacy and education within the Afghan culture. This perception could originally be related to the communication means in the past. When there was no phone or internet, people used to write letters to each other to be aware

of their situation. Thus, a clearly and nicely written letter would have been easy to read and would have been praised by the readers. This value is still preserved today.

The value of good handwriting and calligraphy is also reflected in the children's school curriculum. There is a specific school subject covering these topics in grades 1 to 6. 'The Beauty of Handwriting' is the name of the course in which students are taught calligraphy and beautiful handwriting such as Nasta'liq. This reflects the social value placed on handwriting. Some well-known calligraphers' works are very expensive, and people often display them in their living rooms and guest rooms. Therefore, beyond basic decoding and transcription, then, the visual form of script carries prestige. Good handwriting has long been seen as a marker of literate identity in Afghanistan and individuals with good handwriting enjoy recognition and respect among their local communities and colleagues. In this sense, the artistic mode of script functions as a sign of moral and educational worth; the visual appearance of handwriting communicates as powerfully as the written words themselves, aligning with Kress's view that what counts as a "mode" is socially grounded and collectively decided (2010, p. 87).

Overall, these examples show how literacy in the home domain is not only about educational support, but also about performing and negotiating social roles, which are closely linked to both agency and the expression of masculinity, an aspect which will be examined further in subsequent chapters.

#### 5.4.2 Family Literacies

Monitoring, assessing and helping children with their school homework and lessons at home were regular literacy practices that I categorise as family literacies in the home domain. ALLs used these practices for different purposes. For instance, Firouz uses this strategy as a form of monitoring his son with regard to his school lessons and homework.

*Ustad Ian, I always make sure Mohammed [his son] is not behind with his lessons. Although, sometimes he is different. He asks me to buy him a computer. I told him many times that I cannot afford it but because his classmates had one, he insisted. At night, I ask him to bring his book and*

notebook. I also learn words from him. I, for example, look at his homework and make sure he is doing it. Sometimes I ask him to read here and there. This is all I can do but [while smiling] sometimes he thinks I understand everything, but I don't. I keep saying that was good, and excellent to keep him happy with what he did.

Interview excerpt, Western Zone, 23/11/2020

This seems to be an ongoing activity or strategy (i.e., I always make sure ...) that Firouz uses every night. As he admits, he is not only monitoring his son's progress and involvement with school material, but he also learns indirectly from his son, a sense of control and monitoring the family as a father. Such practices highlight how everyday home literacy practices contribute to the construction of masculine identity and reinforce the sense of agency that male participants experience within the family.

Fattah also said he checks with his brother and sisters at night to make sure they do their assignments. He said at first, he would ask them to read from their school textbooks (Years 2 and 3) but now he is happy to understand and can correct and help them when they cannot read or write. In fact, this strategy was suggested by Saber, the ALF too. These supportive roles can be understood as both practical and symbolic terms and at some points affirm the ALLs' position as a knowledgeable and respected figure in the home.

Furthermore, Zabi said he cannot read his sister's school textbooks, as she is in grade 7, but he encourages her and his brother to review the school lessons every night in front of him at home.

The other participants such as Ali and Rashid use school textbooks as a kind of extracurricular and independent activity at home or work to boost their own literacy skills. For instance, Rashid's son while I was visiting him in his store said that his father picks the schoolbooks at home and reads or writes from them. He added that his father then asks one of his sons to highlight or underline his mistakes.

Although asking children to read or write to check their progress and improvement with school lessons has been advised by one of the ALFs a couple of times when I was observing the class, the second strategy where ALLs use the school textbook to

improve their literacy skills was their choice. It could be because these books are more accessible to them at home. I also see this as an act of exercising agency by ALLs.

The other ongoing literacy practice in the home domain explained by my participants is dealing with finances and numbers at home. For example, both Firouz and his brother Asqar mentioned that their wives are in charge of the finances and shopping related to home and family needs. Firouz explained that he provides his wife with details on his income and then his wife makes plans and does most of the shopping. This will be discussed in greater detail in the following chapter.

The literacy practices in the home domain are closely connected to family life and social roles. The home domain illustrates the ways in which these ties are interwoven. Acting as fathers, brothers, and mentors, the adult learners use literacy to support children's schooling and reinforce family responsibilities in this domain. In fact, practices such as monitoring school assignment or valuing good handwriting are shaped by expectations around masculine identities and agency within the household. In summary, the findings in this section indicate that home literacies are both a means of educational support and a way for men to assert their authority and care, reinforcing the idea that literacy is always contextually situated and socially negotiated.

## 5.5 Classroom Domain

This sub-section presents the literacies that ALLs in this study engaged in within the classroom domain. It includes both formal literacies or schooled literacies such as reading and writing that are taught to them by the facilitators as standard classroom lessons and self-initiated literacies that they practised informally without being taught or directed by the ALFs in the classroom.

### 5.5.1 Writing Skills and Dictation

Saber, the facilitator in the government programme, believes that students often lack 'writing skills' when they enrol in the adult literacy course. Whenever a new learner joins the class, he evaluates his literacy level by asking him to write on the board. He does not evaluate the new learners on skills related to reading, maths or the Qur'an

which are also part of the adult literacy curriculum. Here is an extract from my fieldnotes when a new student joined the class:

It's 7:20 in the morning. There are 19 ALLs in the classroom. One of the adult students (Sattar) enters the class with another person who doesn't seem to be a student of this class. Sattar tells the teacher that this person is Ahmad and he wants to come to this course. [Ahmad looks like he is in his late 20s)

Teacher: "Have you been to masjid or school?"

Ahmad: "Yes, I went to masjid but not school."

Teacher: "Ok, take the marker" [while pointing him to go to the board]

Ahmad: [holding the marker and waits for the teacher to tell him what to write]

Teacher: "Write Alef" (the first letter in Dari-Farsi)

Ahmad: [starts writing from Alef. He writes very slowly; not sure if he doesn't know how to write or if he is under a lot of pressure because he is writing in front of more than 30 people in the class. He could write only a few letters and then he stopped.]

Teacher: "That's fine, bring your notebook." [The teacher writes the first four letters of the alphabet in Ahmad's notebook and tells him to write three pages from this.]

Fieldnotes, Western Zone, 30/11/2020

Later on, in a conversation with Saber, I found that he assessed Ahmad's writing skills under the assumption that his prior attendance at the masjid would have provided him with knowledge of reading the alphabet. The teacher evaluates the literacy level of new learners primarily through their writing skills, but it raises the question of whether this alone is sufficient to assess their overall reading, writing, maths and Qur'an-reading abilities. Nonetheless, the teacher views writing as a crucial skill that learners should acquire. One of these skills is good handwriting. Saber encourages the ALLs to enhance their writing skills.

During one of his teaching sessions, Saber emphasised the significance of good handwriting and illustrated his message by translating an Arabic poem: "Good handwriting is wealth for the poor, joy for the wealthy, and power for a ruler." In another session, Saber shared an example from his job, where he records a trader's balance sheet by hand in a notebook. He emphasised the importance of neat and proper writing, highlighting that even a small mistake in writing numbers can lead to significant errors. He urged the ALLs to be careful and strive to write neatly. Additionally, he showed the students his index finger, which had a deep mark on the top. He explained that the mark was from holding a pen and writing all day as part of his job.

Throughout my observations, there was only one instance where Saber asked the class to applaud an ALL who had written on the board with exceptionally beautiful handwriting. This shows that he pays great attention to good handwriting. In response to the recognition, one of the adult learners stood up and took a picture of the writing on the board. While sitting down on his chair, he said "I'll show this to my son and friends".

In the above accounts, the facilitators emphasised the importance of good handwriting, equating it to wealth, joy, power and being literate. The recognition given to an adult learner with exceptional handwriting further underscored the value placed on this skill in the classroom. Through their emphasis, the facilitators strive to instil in their learners the significance of this skill as a core part of their literacy.

One day as I was observing the class, Ali started to write in his notebook while the ALF was working with another ALL on the board. Ali was copying his teacher's handwriting from his notebook. He requested that I compare his handwriting with that of his literacy teacher in an event in the classroom.

The facilitator was engaged in an argument with one of the ALLs who was requesting more challenging assignments. Meanwhile, Ali, who was sitting in front of me, turned his face towards me and placed his notebook on my desk. He asked, "How is my handwriting? Has it improved?" I glanced at his notebook. He was almost at the end of it. I picked up the first page and the

last page of his writing and told him, "Okay, compare them. Which one is better? The first page or this page? Do you notice the changes?" He smiled and replied, "You're right. This one (the last page) is much better. Thank you, teacher." He looked at his facilitator and then looked at me while having a big smile and continued "Is it like the teacher's handwriting?" I smiled and said, "you are getting there."

Fieldnotes, Western Zone, 28/09/2020

By seeking validation and asking about the improvement in his handwriting, Ali values good handwriting and is actively working on enhancing his writing skills in the context of calligraphy. This aligns with what the facilitator in the public literacy class was emphasising. As discussed earlier, good writing is also appreciated by the ALLs and the local people outside the classroom domain.

Classroom dictation, through which facilitators guide ALLs to master their writing skills, is a common activity practised daily in both public and private adult literacy classrooms. This practice receives great attention even in the absence of the ALF in the classroom domain. While ALLs practise dictation on the board individually as a form of class activity every day, it appears some of them are not satisfied. I have observed several instances where ALLs would come to class before the actual class time and would engage in informal dictation practice with each other. Here is a script from my fieldnote from the Azadi private centre:

It's 6:30 am when I entered the classroom. There are two ALLs in the classroom, but the facilitator is not there yet. Jabbar is standing on the whiteboard, writing with a black marker that he brought with him. Shams (wearing an orange scarf around his neck) is sitting on a bench and holds a literacy book (it's a Level 2 old literacy book published by the State Literacy Department). Shams reads from the book and Jabbar writes word by word on the board.

Fieldnotes, Western Zone, 05/08/2020

The above fieldnote extract shows a significant level of peer collaboration wherein ALLs support each other's literacy development. Additionally, through these accounts

we also see how highly the formal literacy activities, such as dictation, are valued and practised as forms of literacy learning. As I have discussed in the workplace and home domains sections, dictation and good handwriting have also been practised in these domains, which highlights the intersection of formal learning activities with informal spaces.

It is worth mentioning that, since the PLD cannot provide textbooks for every learner in their courses, Saber uses dictation as his main teaching method, teaching ALLs sentences and content from his memory. However, there were instances where the ALLs requested the ALFs in both public and private centres to provide them with content related to their needs in the workplace. For example, one ALL requested Saber to teach him how to write a tenancy contract because he owned a real estate agency; this will be discussed in the next chapter related to ALLs' agency and power.

### 5.5.2 Numeracy Practices in the Classroom

Numeracy is another practice that ALLs engaged with in both workplace and classroom domains. The ALFs in both centres taught basic maths problems (i.e., multiplication and subtraction.) The ALFs in both private and public classrooms would write problems on the whiteboard and would solve them, but very few ALLs would take part.

Whilst I was wondering about the reasons behind their disengagement, Saber's slight shift in his teaching methodology in one of the maths lessons provided me with the answer. My fieldnote extract from that day explains the scenario.

It's Tuesday; Saber asks ALLs to get ready for a maths day. The ALF starts the class by asking some questions: "What is addition? What is subtraction?" Some of the younger adults take part in answering, but the older adults are all quiet. The ALF writes on the board:

246 - 154 = ?

He tries subtracting the digits step by step, eliciting answers through questions: "If we subtract 4 from 6, what is the result?" When the ALF realises the ALLs aren't participating, he starts the process differently:

“Imagine you are going to the market. You have six Afghanis, and you buy two kilos of potatoes for four Afghanis; how much money is left for you?”

This time, I see older adults slowly take part. Rashid, the white beard ALL, turns to Firouz who is sitting next to him and says, “I usually buy four kilos; sons are lazy with shopping.”

Fieldnotes, Western Zone, 16/03/2021

There is a lot that could be unpacked and analysed in the above vignette. First of all, looking from the perspective of values attached to this exercise and literacy practice, it could be discussed that the strong response to real life maths underscores the value placed on practical numeracy as a key survival skill which is closely tied to ALLs’ sense of competence and respect within the family and community. As [Baker et al. \(2003\)](#) argue, we should not only consider the “behaviour that occurs when people ‘do’ mathematics”, but also “the broader cultural conceptions that give meaning to the event” (p. 12). In other words, through this in-class exercise, the ALF demonstrated a ‘context of knowledge’ rather than a ‘body of knowledge’, aligning with the ‘ideological model’ ([Wagner, Venezky & Street, 1999, p. 245](#)).

The above lesson was one of the most engaging lessons I have observed in this class. Towards the end of the class on the same day, the lesson went beyond a maths lesson. The ALLs, aside from answering all the questions, were talking about their shopping responsibilities and habits, managing money, recommending shopping centres to each other, all of which are often men’s duties within the household. I clearly observed how ALLs related the maths lesson to their everyday lives and were engaged deeply that they forgot they were actually learning maths.

It could also be discussed in the above scenario that the ALF gave power to learners by relating the lesson to contexts and materials more familiar to them. ALLs are fully engaged and willing to take part as they seem to have something to share and connect to; rather than being passive learners through decontextualised maths problems, as mentioned before. The above findings echo [Robinson-Pant’s \(2001\)](#) findings from Nepal, where facilitators who aligned numeracy to everyday shopping measures and published learner texts saw greater engagement and a visible shift in status and voice

among participants in the adult literacy classroom. In fact, in the above exercise, discussing around shopping responsibilities not only reinforced ALLs' roles as providers, but also allowed them to assert their agency, authority and expertise in front of their peers and the ALF.

### 5.5.3 Religious Literacies in the Classroom

As explained in the Methodology Chapter, Qur'an studies is one of the three subjects that ALFs should teach at public literacy courses. However, I did not observe the ALF in the public centres teaching Qur'an either; however, he said in his interview that he teaches occasionally. Teaching Qur'an is an optional subject at private literacy centres. Azadi did not include the Qur'an in the literacy course that I visited.

While I did not observe Saber teaching Qur'an to the ALLs during my observations, I did notice him drawing upon Qur'anic verses and *Hadith* to illustrate moral lessons or connect classroom content to learners' everyday experiences. Although these references are rooted in religious tradition, their use in the classroom context served a pedagogical and motivational purpose. The incorporation of religious narratives in classroom pedagogy not only shapes the nature of classroom literacy practices but also plays a significant role in shaping learners' identities, masculinities and senses of agency, a theme that will be explored in greater detail in the following chapter.

The classroom domain is a space where adult learners participate in formal and structured lessons centred on writing, numeracy and religious studies. Whilst the curriculum and facilitators' priorities define boundaries for classroom environment, the learners themselves also shape this space by bringing in their own requirements, priorities, needs and seeking practical skills relevant to their daily lives.

This contrast reflects the study design involving one public and one private centre (see Chapter 3). Although the public centre followed a MoE curriculum, the ALF exercised real autonomy, often reshaping lessons in response to learners' requests (this is further discussed in Chapter 7). In practice this meant flexible sequencing, added topics from everyday life and adjustments to pace. By contrast, the private centre worked to a fixed textbook. Because when learners registered, paid a fee and received a book, they were expected to bring and follow it to each class, which channelled

teaching toward the set units. Demographically, there were more older adults in the public centre than in the private centre. The reason could be because the private centre is an institute which provides additional and supporting school course for school students of all ages and older adults might find the classes in this centre mostly for younger adults. Despite these structural differences, learners in both centres brought workplace, home and religious experiences into the room, though the routes for doing so were more open in the public site.

## 5.6 Conclusion

The primary goal of this chapter was to explore which literacy practices are valued by the ALLs and their communities in various domains both inside and outside the adult literacy classroom. Furthermore, the chapter presented how specific literacy practices are enacted in each domain of ALLs' lives and how these practices are shaped by context, social expectations and individual agency.

I discussed that learners engaged in a range of literacy practices such as religious literacies, good handwriting, calligraphy, digital literacies as well as numeracy practices. These literacy and numeracy practices, whether in social or scholastic domains and whether formal or informal, indicate that ALLs are engaged in different types of literacies that vary in terms of context, focus, tools, materials and use.

The findings from this chapter also indicate a hierarchy of literacy practices, and that these practices are not equal: their value shifts by domain, audience and purpose. Across home, workplace, mosque and classroom, religious literacy practices (i.e., recitation, using religious words and phrases while speaking, memorisation, reading religious books, exchanging *hadith* and *ayah*, correct ritual phrasing) carry high symbolic status for ALLs and their communities, functioning as moral and social capital. Artistic handwriting or calligraphy indexes a schooled identity and is praised by ALFs and community members inside and outside class, a marker often read as 'being educated.' By contrast, workplace numeracy practices (i.e., counting money, measuring, costing, drafting contracts/receipts, dealing with digits on phones or other machines) are valued for utility on site yet hold lower prestige in classroom assessment and teaching. Taken together, the hierarchy of literacies identified here

reflects broader social values around respectability (e.g., literacy also includes public presentation), moral knowledge and practical competence.

This stratification also highlights some level of disconnect between values placed on literacy practices ALLs engaged with outside the classroom context and those taught in the classroom. ALFs and local norms reward neat scripts and correct forms which are the visible and technical surface of literacy, whereas ALLs in daily occupations prize content and functionality such as getting the numbers right, composing a legible contract, recording orders accurately. The result is a recurring tension: learners may be publicly celebrated for handwriting yet remain under-recognised for the numeracy and document work that sustains their livelihoods. In the Afghan context, where religious authority and schooled displays carry distinctive prestige, this hierarchy shapes participation, voice and what ‘counts’ as legitimate social practice. Across domains, literacy also appeared as a collaborative and mediated practice, where learning and meaning-making often depended on peers, family members, religious figures or digital tools that made text accessible. Besides supporting literacy learners, these mediators function as social mechanisms through which learners gain voice and power.

Across domains, literacy also appeared as a collaborative and mediated practice, where learning and meaning-making often depended on peers, family members, religious figures or digital tools that made text more accessible. These mediators supported literacy learning and also acted as social mechanisms through which learners gained voice and power. This underscores the view of literacy as a socially distributed practice rather than an individual possession.

Additionally, in this study, institutional context also matters. The public centre allowed flexible delivery shaped by learners’ requests, while the private centre adhered closely to a fixed textbook, influencing how classroom practices aligned with everyday literacies.

Recognising informal, workplace-based learning is an ongoing debate in the literature. The findings from this chapter also add to this debate, supporting [Street’s \(1984\)](#) and [McGrath’s \(2012\)](#) arguments that everyday literacies, although often invisible to formal education system, are central to people’s lives. Having identified which literacy

practices matter most to ALLs and their communities, I now turn in the following chapter to how these social practices shape ALLs' masculinities.

## Chapter 6

### Masculinities:

#### ‘The Adjustable Wrench’ and ‘Jack of All Trades’

##### 6.1 Introduction

The previous chapter explored everyday literacy practices on which adult literacy learners placed value and which were practised across domains such as workplace, home, religion and classroom. The chapter showed that ALLs engaged in a wide range of literacy practices, including religious literacies, digital literacies, calligraphy and handwriting as well as numeracy practices. The findings revealed that ALLs and their communities placed a high value on religious literacies and numeracy practices outside the classroom. However, literacy practices such as calligraphy, good handwriting, digital literacies and independent reading and writing were also widely practised and considered important in everyday life. These literacies are shaped by social roles, cultural expectations and individual agency. ALLs met their personal and community needs through informal networks and resources. The chapter highlighted that for these learners, literacy is rooted in social practices and is negotiated by learners with the ALF and peers across multiple domains and social institutions.

Keeping these literacy practices in mind, this chapter explores how ALLs seek to perform masculinities and how their identities are shaped by their literacy practices when interacting in different contexts. To analytically discuss these, the chapter is divided into two major sections. The first section discusses patterns of masculinity with which my participants engaged, and the second section explores how literate identities were negotiated by the ALLs as an element of masculinity in the various domains and social institutions. I shall end the chapter with exploring subordination among ALLs.

As elaborated in the framework chapter, I see identity “as multiple, shifting and constantly in the process of formation” and reformation ([McNess, Arthur, and Crossley](#),

2016, p. 21 & Baxter, 2016), and I view it as in action or performance (Butler, 1988). Masculinity as an identity, therefore, can be multiple and shifting. Depending on the context and audience, people might strategically choose which identity to perform (Goffman, 1978). Identity is also seen as “knowing who we are, knowing who others are, them knowing who we are, us knowing who they think we are and so on” (Jenkins, 2014, p. 5).

In this chapter, I look at how ALLs manage and show their masculinities within the wider conditions of poverty and low status that shape their lives. Most of the men in this study have little schooling, work in manual or insecure jobs and have limited literacy. Literate identity in Afghanistan is closely connected to respect and status. This makes the path to literacy for these men, who already hold subordinate positions, complex and challenging. This matters for my thesis because for these ALLs, it becomes a way to gain respect and confidence.

Taking Connell’s (1995) masculinities theory as the main lens, this chapter discusses ALLs’ identities in different domains. Additionally, I present the data considering *hegemonic* and *subordinate masculinities* (Connell, 2005) as performed across different social institutions and domains, and *internal hegemony* – the hierarchy of dominance within men – and *external hegemony* – the social ascendancy of men over women (Demetriou, 2001).

## 6.2 Patterns and Performances of Hegemonic Masculinity

Scholarly work often characterises Afghanistan as a patriarchal society where men hold power in many domains and social institutions such as politics, economics, education, business and so forth (Echavez et al., 2016). In Afghanistan, the combination of patriarchal, cultural, religious and militarised norms can be seen to have shaped hegemonic masculine identities, which are deeply embedded in social institutions and everyday practices. While the idea of hegemonic masculinity, as developed by Connell (2005), refers to the culturally exalted form of manhood that legitimises men’s dominant position over women or other men in society, in Afghanistan I have observed it to be manifested through expectations that men will be

providers, protectors and authority figures in both family and public life (Echavez et al., 2016; Mosawi, 2020).

Due to years of armed conflict, civil war, rapid regime change, internal displacement and poverty-driven migration, many people are deprived of education. In addition, certain cultural and traditional barriers have restricted women from having even a basic education, leading to an increased number of non-literate women in the country compared to men, which has placed women in a subordinate position in the communities.

### 6.2.1 Fatherhood and Birth Order

Fatherhood is not simply a role that men assume upon having children; it is a social position constructed and negotiated through everyday practices and social relations (Connell, 2005; Inhorn, 2012). In Afghanistan, where masculinity is tied closely to providing, protecting and leading, fatherhood becomes a key ground on which men perform and reshape their masculine identities. For many of the men in this study, fatherhood began early, sometimes before marriage or having children of their own. This often involved stepping into responsibilities traditionally associated with fathers; for example, supporting mothers, caring for younger siblings, managing household decisions, especially when fathers were absent, ill, or unable to provide. Rather than simply inheriting this role, these men navigated, adapted to and sometimes redefined what fatherhood meant for them in their specific contexts. The following section explores how participants narrated and enacted these experiences of fatherhood, highlighting the tensions, sacrifices and negotiations embedded in their daily lives.

As discussed earlier, some aspects of masculinities are culturally and religiously situated and constructed as hegemonic patterns in Afghan communities. These expectations are shaped not only by religious values but also by family hierarchy, local cultural norms and the long-term effects of conflict and economic insecurity, all of which demonstrate that masculinities in Afghanistan are produced through the intersection of multiple normative systems.

For instance, the man of the family is perceived as the breadwinner and provider of the household. There is an idiom in Dari-Farsi language “هر که نان داد فرمان داد.” (The one who

feeds, leads.) Thus, since 'he' economically supports the family, 'he' rules and decides for the family. For some participants, these expectations emerged well before biological fatherhood, particularly through family hierarchies and birth-order responsibilities.

Through this thesis, I found that one valuable aspect of using ethnographic approaches is that participants gradually became less concerned with boundaries or with whether I was an insider or outsider, perhaps because of the trust and rapport that builds over time. They began to speak more freely about the issues that truly matter to them or weigh on them. Thus, much of the data I gathered and will discuss in this section focuses on experiences of 'premature fatherhood', that is, taking on fatherly responsibilities before becoming a father in the biological sense, rather than on the narratives of men who became fathers through having children of their own.

Some of my participants negotiated and performed identities shaped by their positionality in their communities and the circumstances they were navigating. For instance, Zabi's father was addicted to hashish. As Zabi explains, what his father consumed was very expensive, so the father sold almost everything they had at home. He had been addicted for about 21 years. Zabi and his mother have taken him to an addiction centre more than eight times, and finally, he is clean now but still consumes marijuana. Zabi said,

A father is ... he works and brings bread home and sends his children to school for lessons. In my case, I had no father over my head to support us and let us study. I worked, my mother worked and let my brothers and sisters go to school ... I stayed illiterate, but I am happy for my brothers and sisters.

Interview, Western Zone, 13/12/2020

Although Zabi is still single, he has experienced fatherhood since he was a teenager, while his father was alive and living with them. With the support of his mother, Zabi took up these responsibilities because he found that his father was not in a state of health or mind to run the family. As he spoke about the hardships he went through, he did not seem happy about this long-lasting identity (being a father for more than 20 years: 'a man who works and lets the kids go to school'), but the situation he was in as the first

boy of the family, together with cultural expectations and pressure meant he stepped into this identity and all its responsibilities. It is interesting to see that he has held onto this identity for many years, mostly to keep the family running, care for them and ensure his siblings go to school and avoid 'illiteracy', as he stated. Being in the position of a 'father', Zabi sacrificed his own dream of being literate, a decision he appreciates now as he sees his siblings improving in education.

Fattah adapted a similar role at his home. He is the first son of his family, in his 20s and single, living with his parents and younger brothers and sisters. His father is getting old, and due to excessive labour work, he developed many different diseases such as kidney issues, high blood pressure and arthritis, which have prevented him from working for a long time. Fattah stated that he works in various jobs to support his family, and more importantly, to send his brothers and sisters to school.

The participants mentioned above did not intentionally choose to take on the role of the 'father' at this stage of their lives; rather, they had little choice – or perhaps they had other options but chose this one, as this is a strong hegemonic masculinity pattern highly recognised in the country. Rather than their internal desire and motivation, it is more the external forces, pressures and social expectations of older male child that shape how these young men perform and fulfil their masculine responsibilities in a certain way. The mother and the siblings are counted as the main sources of support for these young 'fathers.' They do not receive assistance from the government, charitable organisations, or NGOs. Families like these are very common in Afghanistan, and they must take on their responsibilities and survive on their own.

The above accounts show how hegemonic masculinity, especially the expectation to be a provider, is both shaped by and reproduced through family circumstances and broader social norms. Zabi's story is a clear example of 'agency under constraint'; his agency is exercised in accepting and fulfilling a role shaped by external forces, rather than by free personal choice. These accounts suggest a tension between normative masculine ideals of provision and participants' materially constrained lived realities, a tension explored further in the discussion chapter.

Age plays a significant role in shaping masculine identities, such as taking responsibilities as a father, among men in Afghanistan. However, in some cases, the provider role, which is the main quality of fatherhood, passes to the second son in order of age if the first son is not able or denies taking this role. For example, Mahmoud, the security guard who helps with all the departments at the sofa factory, said,

My father was working on people's farms, but his income was insufficient to cover all our expenses. I was only 12 (years old) when I went to work in Iran. I was the oldest son and had to help my father. You know, actually, my older brother was too lazy and his help was a little. Working on the land (as a farmer) was too heavy for me. But you know what, *Ustad Jan*? As I was pushing a wheelbarrow full of huge rocks to build a market in Iran, I fell down with the rocks. It's too heavy, and I couldn't hold it. Look at this (showing his right ankle, which had many scars); I was lucky the rocks didn't hit my head.

Fieldnote, Western Zone, 23/10/2020

The fieldnote highlights several aspects of masculinities and their role in shaping the experiences of the male participant. At the age of 12, Mahmoud felt the pressure to fulfil the traditional male responsibilities of supporting the family financially, performing the provider role.

Birth order thus intersects with gender, positioning older sons and sometimes the second son as the bearers of hegemonic masculine responsibility, while younger sons often remain in more subordinate roles. The transition into adulthood itself is marked by an increasing expectation to demonstrate physical strength, provide financially and act as a role model for siblings. In several cases, participants such as Zabi, Fattah and Mahmoud took on these adult masculine identities prematurely due to family necessity, highlighting how age and life stage mediate the experience and performance of masculinity. While birth order afforded these individuals hegemonic masculine roles, it also constrained their access to schooling and sometimes adult literacy, as paid work, caregiving and household mediation produced time poverty, irregular attendance and early withdrawal from programmes. These dynamics are deeply

embedded in cultural norms, with manhood often defined not only by gender but by age and social status within the family hierarchy.

This dynamic within the family, where the eldest or most responsible son takes on the provider role and other masculine duties as the father's influence declines, is a clear example of internal hegemonic masculinity, the hierarchy and dominance of certain masculinities among men themselves, as theorised by Connell and Demetriou.

In Mahmoud's account, there are different scenarios with regard to birth order and masculinity. He carried on the role of a provider, which is a pattern of hegemonic masculinity in most contexts; furthermore, while being a teenager, he cared for his father and his family and accepted the hardship to provide support.

Mahmoud connected his miserable experience in Iran to literacy; he continued, "If I had literacy when I was in Iran, I could have found desk jobs and wouldn't have to do labour work." He feels very regretful for not being literate because he believes that his illiteracy caused him to suffer for the rest of his life. A desk job in this context is not only about employment, but a marker for an alternative masculinity. For individuals like Mahmoud, desk-based work is aspirational, a form of masculinity I describe as the desire for and pursuit of a 'educated' identity. This mirrors what [Connell \(2005\)](#) explains as the hegemonic ideal.

In all the above cases, it was the eldest son or the second eldest of the family who remained non-literate and had to support the family economically by working longer hours or even by travelling to other countries for work, while also providing emotional and literacy support to his siblings, as discussed in the previous chapter on literacies (Chapter 5), and the family as a whole. This highlights how birth order, gender and age intersect to create different opportunities.

### 6.2.2 Physical Strength and Generosity

Hard work and showing physical and body strength are other patterns and qualities of hegemonic masculinities in Afghanistan. This chapter begins with two phrases, "Adjustable Wrench" and "Jack of All Trades". Culturally, among Farsi speakers, 'Adjustable Wrench' (*Achar Farance*) is a compliment given to individuals who are hard

workers and can handle multiple jobs. This is one of the identities Asqar was famous for in his workplace. He works as a cleaner at the Theology School at a public university. One day, when I visited Asqar, I saw him sitting in the office of the Deputy Head of the Theology School. I greeted the deputy; he was curious whether I was meeting him. I told him that Asqar was one of my participants in my PhD research project and that I was there to visit Asqar. He looked at Asqar, smiled and said, “You mean, the ‘*Achaar Farance*’ (adjustable wrench)? He continued, “Without him, I don’t know what we would do.” Asqar smiled and said, “I am doing my job, sir.” The deputy continued, “If we need photocopies, we call Asqar *Jan*; if we need tea for guests, we call him; if we need to send documents to other schools, we call him; to make it short, whenever we feel like we need some sort of help, we count on Asqar *Jan* and he is there.”

The Theology School offers some courses separately for day and night-shift students. Aside from all the mentioned tasks, Asqar is responsible for cleaning and ensuring that the classrooms and the offices are clean and tidy for the night shift. This is his main job. He has a colleague who helps him with cleaning, but Asqar handles all other tasks for teachers, administration authorities and staff.

Although there was a lot of pressure on him to make everyone happy at the school, he was doing his best to keep those compliments. For instance, one day, as he was walking towards the Chancellor’s office to deliver some documents, he kept calling his colleague to replace him in the Theology School. He said, “That’s not good, Jamil is not answering ... we should not leave the office unattended; the school head might need something.” He seemed very worried and began to run to deliver the documents and return to the school. Thus, with this attitude and behaviour, the ‘adjustable wrench’ as an identity fits him well, and he tried to hold on to it in his work domain by performing accordingly.

Similarly, the next phrase – *Hamakara* (Jack of All Trades) refers to a person with the ability and skills to do different tasks. Jabbar, the mechanic, has been enjoying this identity in both the home and work domains. However, he feels a bit pressured holding to this role, so he negotiated it as he explained while talking to a mobile seller (MS) who was in his store to have his bike fixed. Here is the conversation from my fieldnotes:

Jabbar: If your repair person can fix my mobile, I will give him a certificate.

MS: What's wrong with your mobile?

Jabbar: I think it has some sort of connection problem.

MS: OK, bring it over and let's see what we can do.

Jabbar: Look (pointing at some mobile chargers hanging on the wall), these are from friends who brought them to me to fix them. They tell me 'Jack of All Trades'. You know, in the literacy course, Haji (his father-in-law) said that Jabbar has a good hand with electrical equipment. Then, I was in trouble; anything like heaters, fans, recorders, and so on that were out of order, they'd give them to me to repair. That's too much. I told them OK, then you shouldn't charge me for the course fees. Even at home, neighbours would bring me many things to repair for them. Thanks to God, a few months ago I had an accident. I told everyone that after the accident, my head hurt, and I could not focus and forgot all my skills. It was all peaceful until these days our refrigerator at home stopped working. My younger brother told me to have a look at it. I said sorry, bro, my head doesn't work anymore. He tried a lot, but he couldn't fix it. I felt bad and told him to change the little board on the system. He brought it to the repair guy, and he said the same thing. Then, my brother told my family that his memory is back.

Fieldnote, Western Zone, 18/05/2021

In the above accounts, Jabbar worked hard to show his strength and talent to keep his reputation and status. Although he negotiated this identity (i.e., by making excuses after the accident), he still takes pride in it because he brought it up in the above conversation (i.e., by displaying the chargers and explaining how people in different contexts recognise him as such). The reason he showed resistance to this identity could be because he was not compensated for the labour and time he invested (i.e., he told the manager at the literacy course that they should waive the course fees). Thus, we can discuss that both Asqar and Jabbar seek confirmation and validation of their identities, but in different ways. While Jabbar looks to affirm his identity through

economic appreciation and incentives, Asqar enjoys the verbal compliment he receives (i.e., Jack of all trades) from the faculty members.

The accounts of hardworking and versatile men are strongly reflected in the Afghan masculinity literature. According to [Echavez et al. \(2016\)](#), being “nan avar” (breadwinner) is deeply tied to hard work, resourcefulness and the ability to manage multiple tasks for family and community (pp. 1–2, 44). Men who are dependable, able to “fulfil family needs at any cost,” and are seen as “brave and honourable” gain respect and authority in their social circles. In contrast, men who cannot fulfil these roles, or are perceived as lacking in strength or skills, are subject to shame, dishonour and the label “be-ghairat” (dishonourable) (p. 2, 44).

Furthermore, both Jabbar and Asqar show a great amount of generosity in their life domains through hard work and helping others in search of respect. They feel subordinate when they lack the abilities and skills to help others. This is in line with literature on leadership and masculinity, which argues that generosity and the ability to assist others are key traits for earning respect and authority as a leader (see, for example, [Lindisfarne, 1994](#); [Cornwall & Lindisfarne, 1994](#); and [Kandiyoti, 1988](#)). For instance, as discussed in the previous chapter, Jabbar joined the adult literacy course because he could not help people who approached him to read an address. He found himself in a subordinate position because, as a young man, he could not read an address. [Echavez et al. \(2016\)](#) also emphasise that Afghan men gain social status through generosity and helping others, which are traits tightly connected to honour and masculinity (pp. 1–2, 44).

Both Asqar and Jabbar are married and have children. As discussed above, aside from providing and protecting, men strive to keep up with other masculine ideals in various domains. For single adult males like Ali and Fattah, the ideals are even higher. For instance, after going through two unsuccessful marriages, Ali left his home and moved to the city to work and pay the bride price for a new wife. This is the third marriage because his ex-wives took the money and left him, as he explained. He cuts all unnecessary expenses to save money, which is especially hard for some tribes that demand a large bride price. Ali had to pay 400,000 Afghanis (4,000 GBP). He was trying

to save from his salary (80 GBP/month), which would take him years to accumulate the bride price. Thus, he worked both night and sometimes day shifts.

Overall, the above accounts from my fieldnotes highlight how traditional conceptions of hegemonic masculinity, centred around providing for the family and exhibiting physical strength, can create significant pressures and challenges for adults and young boys transitioning into manhood, especially in a resource-constrained context such as Afghanistan. Moreover, these men often strive to fit into this constrained framework, which demands personal sacrifices and risks, to confirm their masculine identities and fit into the social framework of hegemonic masculinity ideals.

In most cases from the above accounts, these sacrifices, such as forgoing their own education or undertaking dangerous or exhausting work at a younger age, are not merely burdens but active performances of masculine responsibility. As seen in other cultural contexts (see [Gardner & Osella, 2003](#)), acts of personal or religious giving by men serve as important routes to gaining status and recognition within the community. In this way, sacrifice itself becomes an important element of masculinity. Through this, men are ready to put the needs of their families or communities above their own interests to demonstrate their worthiness, responsibility and maturity.

### 6.3 Negotiating Literate Identities

Most of the ALLs in the literacy classes I observed were keen to demonstrate their literate identity and ability in writing with good handwriting or reading fluently in the classroom. However, while in domains outside the classroom, they showed their literate identity in different ways – often through dressing in a certain way, holding non-school books and sharing religious or other content with their network through SMS messages. Viewing the ALFs as authority figures in literacy, the ALLs put considerable effort into negotiating their literate identity with them.

For example, as discussed earlier in the chapter, although the facilitator perceives Fattah as a ‘low-literate’ individual, I observed him trying to prove his literate identity through his actions in the classroom domain on multiple occasions to the ALF. Here is an excerpt from my fieldnotes capturing one of these events:

There are 23 learners; *Ustad* Saber started the session with individual dictation on the board, as usual. Ali went first, finished writing on the board, and is now standing next to the teacher while the teacher writes at the top of his notebook. Two other ALLs are standing next to the board, waiting for the ALF to collect their notebooks. Fattah is sitting close to the board in the front row. Very interesting! He takes the notebook of the ALL standing close to the board and asks him to write. Fattah reads from the notebook while the other ALL writes. Fattah is taking the teacher's role. The ALF hasn't noticed yet. I'm curious to see his reaction. Fattah reads word by word. The ALL finishes writing one sentence. The ALF is done with Ali; he looks at the board and says, "Come here, bring your notebook." He ignores Fattah. Fattah smiles at the ALF and gives the notebook to the ALL to take to the teacher.

Fieldnote, Western Zone, 10/08/2020

In this account, Fattah tries to help his teacher, and I believe that more than simply helping, he is trying to demonstrate his ability to the ALF by reading and giving dictation. In other words, he is claiming his position as literate despite the ALF's resistance.

Nevertheless, he has been successful in proving himself to the ALF. I visited the same class about five months after the above incident, and I found Fattah actively giving dictation to the ALLs, which was appreciated by the ALF – a shift of power which will be discussed in the next chapter.

Ali also struggles to showcase his literate identity to me and his colleagues. For example, one day when I visited Ali at his workplace, I saw him writing in his notebook. I expressed that I was happy to see him writing. Jabbar, his literate colleague in his mid-30s, is responsible for the record book and comes only on the day shift. He said,

It'd be a wish come true to see Ali able to write. The trucks (municipality trucks) come every day for water ... three, four ... sometimes many in one day to get water from us and irrigate the parks and green areas around the city. If I am here, OK, but when I am not around, someone should record the truck's information in the record book. Ali is great; he is learning so quickly, and his

handwriting is not bad ... You know, I come early in the morning to wake him up so that he doesn't miss his literacy class.

Fieldnotes, Western Zone, 22/12/2020

Although Jabbar is not confident enough to give Ali the responsibility of recording the water trucks, Ali enthusiastically performs his authority as a literate person. When Jabbar finished talking, Ali brought the record book to me and flipped through the pages, showing me and said, "I swear to God, *Ustad*, this is nothing ... I can do it... see? ... here, Tuo ('you' in the singular form), write the driver's name, here, his truck's number plate; here is the day and time; and also the amount of water they fill the tanks ... Am I right?"

There are a couple of things to discuss in this short conversation. First, by demonstrating and showing me what goes where in the book, Ali wanted to prove his literate abilities. However, I notice that the type of literacy he is showcasing is different from what Jabbar was referring to. Jabbar thinks Ali still needs more practice in 'writing' (i.e., "It'd be my wish come true to see Ali being able to write"), but Ali demonstrates his reading abilities (i.e., by showing me different columns of the book).

For Ali, writing skills and abilities mean having 'good handwriting' – a literate identity admired by both ALFs and local communities, as discussed in the previous chapter. However, for Jabbar, accuracy in spelling seems to be more important. Jabbar acknowledges that Ali's handwriting is good, but he believes that it is not enough. Jabbar has studied up to high school and considers himself literate because he can write, read and manage the record book in his job.

He might have noticed Ali's writing abilities. For instance, on another day, Ali proudly showed me his contact list on his mobile phone and told me that he is now able to accurately record people's names and numbers. However, there were some spelling errors in the names he recorded. It appears that he writes the names based on their phonetic sounds – recording what he hears. For example, the letter 'ع' (U) in the name 'عثمان' (Usman) (the first name in Figure 11) sounds like 'الف' (A) with a hidden long vowel 'u' in Dari-Farsi, but it should be written as 'ع'. Jabbar might not appreciate seeing these simple spelling errors in an official record book.

*Figure 11. Ali's mobile phone contact list.*



Second, I believe the way he presented himself orally in this small group interaction (which included two of his colleagues, me and him) indicates that he is still not ready to interact with people (in this case the truck drivers) in a culturally appropriate manner in a Dari-Farsi speaking context. When talking to me, he used the pronoun 'Tuo', meaning 'you' in the singular form, instead of 'Shoma', which means 'you' in the plural but is often used for a singular listener to show politeness and respect (i.e., here, Tuo write the driver's name). Grammatically, there is nothing wrong with his sentence, but culturally he should have used 'Shoma' when addressing me, as I am older than he is, and he perceives me as a 'teacher.' Using the pronoun 'Tuo' to address a teacher is considered inappropriate in Dari-Farsi for a literate person. I am sure his colleagues might not view this as rudeness towards me, given that Dari-Farsi is Ali's second language, and he still needs to learn more about the linguocultural aspects of this language and the oral tradition of presenting yourself to others. This indicates that literacy is not simply about reading and writing; it also encompasses the social and cultural aspects of the text or language, as well as the values and uses embedded in the language people read, write, and use in their daily interactions. As [Papen \(2005\)](#)

states, “employers define what literacies are required for particular work-related tasks and specific professions” (p. 46). However, in this case, Ali’s formal literacy skills (i.e., good handwriting) do not seem to meet Jabbar’s expectations of the literacy required to record the book.

Finally, I also see the important role of literacy in recognising and validating the in-group hegemonic model of masculinity in this professional setting. Ali tries to push his masculine identity into a higher position in this group by displaying his literacy skills. He seems to feel bad about being unable to fill in the record book among his male colleagues. He struggles to get my confirmation of his literate identity and establish his status among his colleagues.

In the pursuit of hegemonic masculinity, Ali does not stop negotiating his literate identities. As discussed in Chapter 5, he uses his handwriting skills to reflect his literate abilities, which has been a strong motivator for him to practise writing more in various domains. For instance, once I saw him writing in his notebook: “This document is prepared in accordance with my full knowledge that Ali owes one million Afs from Jabbar and that Jabbar must pay this amount in cash to Ali on the due date.” He showed it to Jabbar, and when Jabbar read it, he looked at me and said, “He is just practising his writing; there is no money involved.” Ali smiled and replied, “I have the note as a witness written in my notebook.” The next day when I saw Ali, he started to laugh and said that Jabbar had called him at night and told him to tear up or clean that note. He mentioned that Jabbar was worried he might use this to claim money from him.

The way he structured the note was very academic and Jabbar himself was a bit shocked to see the note. He took it seriously and wanted Ali to delete the note because someone might use it as a claim from him. This shows that Ali is learning the power of words and has improved his writing skills in his second language which would gradually shape his literate identity in this domain.

On another occasion, Ali mentioned that he tried to open a literacy course in his village, but it was not successful. He blamed Arbab’s (the tribal leader in his village) illiteracy for this, saying, “I did all the paperwork from the city and completed the forms from the Literacy Department, but when I sent the papers to Arbab, he procrastinated; and then

I noticed that he didn't even know where to sign." The way he was explaining this to me was intended to demonstrate that his literacy skills are better than those of the Arbab.

It would be also interesting to discuss in this context how literacy is strongly connected to place and the shifting status of rural versus urban masculinities. In Ali's account, the city is not just a location but a marker of progress, modernity and access to institutional knowledge. These are qualities often associated with a more "advanced" or hegemonic masculine identity. By successfully handling paperwork and navigating bureaucratic processes in the city, Ali positions himself as someone who has acquired skills and status that are sometimes seen as lacking in rural contexts.

At the same time, his observation about Arbab's inability to sign the documents is not only a comment on one individual, but it also reflects broader social hierarchies in which rural masculinity is often constructed as subordinate; meaning that it is perceived as less literate, less worldly and less able to interact with formal institutions. In contrast, those who have moved between rural and urban spaces, or who can draw on urban literacies, may gain a sense of superiority or at least distinction.

These acts of comparison and the desire to show oneself as "better than the village chief," are part of how men like Ali negotiate both literate and masculine identities. They leverage their urban experiences and acquire skills to challenge the traditional authority of rural leaders and, by extension, they challenge the old hierarchies of masculinity that dominate village life. In this way, literacy becomes not only a practical skill but a resource for redefining status and claiming a new kind of masculine authority within and beyond the village.

Presenting a more 'educated self' in their masculine contexts and communities is what in this study, several ALLs attempted in different capacities. They negotiated and renegotiated these identities through literacy practices, using visible identifiers such as reading and writing texts and numbers across their social and academic domains. Some have, to some extent, been successful in convincing their audiences to acknowledge their literate identities, while others are still in the process of being recognised as literate individuals. However, they do not want to give up.

### 6.3.1 Religious Identity and Appearance

Religious identity, as a literate identity in Afghanistan, is not only constructed through knowledge, beliefs or ritual participation but it is also made visible and readable through appearance and performance in the individuals' communities. Certain visible signs, such as dress, grooming and language, were used by my participants as markers of religious identity, which are central to how others assign and recognise a religious masculine man. These visible signs have often been associated with religion because religious leaders, *imams* and *mullahs* (a prestigious religious title) are commonly seen in similar attire and use certain language, which links these styles to religious authority in everyday perception.

As stated above, Asqar has been assigned different identities in his workplace domain. For instance, one day, when I was walking with him on the university campus, the Admin Assistant of the Journalism School approached us and greeted Asqar, calling him "Mullah Asqar." 'Mullah' is used for a person with religious knowledge who usually leads the prayers in the Masjids. It is worth noting that the Taliban have currently attached a military connotation to this religious identity. For example, people refer to a member of the Taliban as 'Mullah Sahib' when they are not sure about the person's name. Similarly, in the former government, the word 'commander' had the same connotation. For instance, a soldier would appreciate being called 'Commander' even if he was not an actual commander. The same connotation applies to the word 'Mullah' in the Taliban regime.

Asqar was not a Mullah in the literal sense, nor was he a member of the Taliban military. I believe the journalism staff used the word 'Mullah' to show respect for him because Asqar's appearance displays that identity. Certain characteristics present him as a religious person (i.e. Mullah): he has a long beard, a shaved moustache, a hat on his head, a clean and tidy appearance, a prayer bead in his hand, and wears long traditional clothing. In fact, he is performing these identities through his appearance; although, it contrasts with the appearance of the university personnel, including teachers, staff and students, who typically wear Western-style dress (a button-down shirt, usually white, and black trousers) which is considered a male literate or

academic appearance in Afghanistan, except for some Theology faculties who wear traditional style. Similarly, government staff, doctors, nurses, and other staff members at both public and private academic institutions also wear Western clothing, indicating a male literate or educational identity. However, nowadays with the Taliban being in power, this dress code has changed; everyone is now supposed to dress traditionally in all contexts. They believe the previous Western-style dress represents a colonial culture and that should be banned.

Aside from his physical appearance, Asqar's choice of words and phrases (mostly Arabic) when interacting with university personnel highlights his religious identities. For instance, in the example above and in many other similar events I witnessed, he used expressions such as "Alhamdu Lellah" (thanks to Allah, in Arabic), "Insha Allah" (if Allah wills, in Arabic), "Estaqferullah" (I seek forgiveness from Allah, in Arabic) and "Khoda bozorge" (Allah is the greatest, in Farsi). The phrase "Insha Allah" is commonly used by almost everyone in Afghanistan, but utilising the other phrases and words precisely in the correct contexts requires religious knowledge. Asqar learned them during his Daawa training, and I am sure he acquires them now in his everyday interaction with the theology teachers and staff.

Furthermore, when we reached the chancellor's building on the same day, one of the chancellor's office staff greeted us, referring to Asqar as 'Sofi Asqar'. 'Sofi' also has a religious connotation. At first, I thought that perhaps, because Asqar works at the Theology School, people give him these religious literate identities. However, when I visited him in his workplace, I noticed that some staff members of the Theology School wear Western-style clothing and are called by their surnames. While working at the Theology School might contribute to these identities assigned to Asqar, my initial assumption about his appearance and usage of religious phrases seems stronger. He appreciates these identities and greets those who use them with respect. Although he is no longer giving speeches or going for Daawa to Pakistan (as was discussed in the previous chapter), he still embodies these religious literate identities, which he expresses through his physical appearance and certain characteristics that highlight these identities.

Further on the physical appearance, Fattah also dresses and makes his appearance to represent another religious persona. When I visited him in his workplace, one of the neighbouring shopkeepers called him “*Qari Jan*” (Dear *Qari*) in a friendly manner. He smiled and seemed pleased to be perceived as such. Fattah has long hair that reaches his shoulders and often wears a hat or a scarf on his head. He maintains a short beard. If people do not know him, *Qari* is the closest identity they could assign to him. A *Qari* is someone who recites the Qur’an, typically has a beautiful voice, and is regarded as a literate person in the religious domain. I believe that, aside from his appearance, the religious books he carries further influence how those around him perceive him as a *Qari*. He reads and exchanges books, which are mostly religious, and, as discussed in the previous chapter, he also exchanges religious SMSs with his friends and classmates. These interactions contribute to the accumulation of literacies that influence the shaping of his literate identity. Nonetheless, he said in the interview that he has only memorised a few small chapters to recite in his prayers and does not consider himself a *Qari* in the traditional sense. However, he seemed to appreciate the identity assigned to him as his bodily appearance shows.

In sum, religious identity and appearance in Afghanistan are not simply matters of personal piety and respect. They are social performances that help shape and signal a man’s status, agency and respectability. In the current context, as political and religious lines blur, these performances become even more significant, often defining who is seen as a ‘real man’ and who is not.

Although these masculine religious titles (i.e., *Qari*, *Sofi*, *Mullah*) are initially external markers of status, they gradually become internalised by individuals and begin to shape who they are as hegemonic masculine figures in their communities. These identities do not just grant respect within the religious domain; they pave the way for men to exercise agency and enact power in other domains such as the classroom and the home.

These findings suggest that Islamic masculinities in Afghanistan are neither singular nor politically neutral. While titles such as *Mullah*, *Qari* and *Sofi* draw legitimacy from religious traditions, their social meaning is shaped by broader cultural, political and historical contexts. Participants’ performances of religious masculinity reflected not

only Islamic principles but also local expectations regarding authority, respectability and manhood. Moreover, as demonstrated by the changing meanings attached to identities such as Mullah under different governments, certain interpretations of religious masculinity may become privileged through political authority and social institutions. In such contexts, religious masculinity can function not only as a source of respect and legitimacy but also as a mechanism through which alternative identities and interpretations are marginalised.

### 6.3.2 Literate Women and Masculinity at Home

When chatting about literacy in the home domain, my participants highlighted the importance of literacy for women in Afghanistan. For instance, Firouz said,

You see, the children go to preschool at the age of 6 or go to the first class when they are 7. They go to school or preschool for only a few hours a day. Then, where's the kid? You see, he/she is at home with the mother. The man is ... outside looking for a piece of bread. It's the mother who holds the other side of the pencil and helps the kids to learn and encourages them by saying dear son hold it like this or write it like this. As a new learner, it's hard to hold a pen (while having a big smile), but I have the experience. After the children go to other classes (higher levels), they have homework. The mother asks the child to show her the homework and what they learned. Some kids do their homework themselves ... some need reminders ... you see, a mother is a teacher at home for kids for life for everything.

Interview Excerpt, Western Zone, 23/11/2020

In the above excerpt, Firouz sees himself as a breadwinner and his wife as a housewife but also as a 'teacher'. By 'teacher,' he does not mean only a person who teaches lessons to children; as he said, "... mother is a teacher at home for kids for life for everything." He views his wife as the 'leader' of his household in most activities related to home and the education of the kids. As discussed in the previous chapter, his wife not only helps with the kids' homework and other schoolwork but also gives dictation to Firouz and corrects any mistakes he might make in his literacy lessons.

Additionally, he went on and proudly compared his educated wife to his brother's non-educated wife, who finished secondary school and is considered literate, describing how his wife is more successful in supporting and following up with their children's education. This sense of 'pride' in having an educated wife, and comparing his wife to other women, can itself be understood as a masculine performance, which, in fact, reinforces his own status within the family and community. At the same time, by expressing what his wife is able to accomplish through her literacy, Firouz indirectly signals his own limitations. Rather than diminishing his masculine identity, it appears that when his wife fills these literate roles at home, Firouz feels his position as breadwinner and family head is reinforced. In other words, his wife's literate agency strengthens, rather than threatens, his own sense of hegemonic masculinity.

Similarly, Zabi's mother manages the household budget while having only religious literacy – she did not go to school but can read the Qur'an. Zabi and his two younger brothers give their income to their mother to manage the expenses. Zabi said that when they were in urgent need of money to lease a house close to the city, his mother surprised them by offering some cash that she had saved. He noted that his mother divided their income, spending it on what was most needed and saving the rest for future expenses.

Outside my dataset, a widely circulated view in Afghanistan is that men benefit from marrying educated women, believing, as expressed in the Dari-Farsi phrase, that an educated wife is "a stick under their shoulder rather than a weight on their shoulders." In other words, educated women are commonly seen as partners who can actively contribute to household affairs, particularly in supporting their children's education. For men, having an educated wife can actually reinforce their masculine identity; within the community, it is often said that a man with an educated wife and a harmonious family is truly "the man." Even when the wife is more educated than her husband, the man is often expected to maintain authority and control within the household, thus preserving traditional patterns of masculinity. This dynamic is often the subject of humorous short video clips online, which playfully suggest that, despite these sayings, it is actually the women who rule inside the home.

Firouz's wife also manages the finances and budget of their home. Firouz proudly said, "Believe me, *Ustad*, as soon as I get home in the evening, Mohammed's mother counts and calculates my earnings for that day and takes the money. She's very careful that we spend the money wisely." It might not be so much related to her gender; rather, it could be her literate identity that places her in this position to gain agency in the household and take part in decision-making within the home domain (the impact of literacy on household decision-making is discussed in Chapter 7). Firouz would likely have a different view and might not have given this authority to his wife to be the finance manager and decision-maker if she were a non-literate woman like his brother's wife.

It is sometimes common for women to take care of the household's financing matters in Afghanistan. Usually, the husband is at work outside the house and while being at home, the wife recognises the needs and necessities of the family. If she is literate, she also manages the money and expenses. In this case, the husband works and brings the money home, and the wife manages and spends based on the needs of the household. [Echavez et al. \(2016\)](#) found that both men and women participants identified home management as a key responsibility for women, and this included financial, educational and emotional management of the household.

#### 6.4 Subordination and the Search for Respect

Being unable to read and write, some ALLs in my study felt subordinate and ashamed of their status as men. For instance, Fattah's experience led him to make dramatic decisions, as he explained in a lengthy conversation. He expressed that a few years ago, he attempted to move to Iran for work and to seek quality medical treatment. However, he ended up returning to Afghanistan after just one night because he found himself in a situation where he could not read the name of a street in front of a taxi driver in Iran. He said, "Can you imagine, a young and strong man standing in front of a huge signboard with only a three-letter word, unable to read it? That's a shame."

For Fattah, it was more than just a matter of literate and non-literate identities. He relates everything to his 'macho' and masculine identity by associating adjectives such

as ‘young’ and ‘strong’ with his masculine self (i.e., as a man) and then linking his lack of skills to reading a word to feelings of shame.

Fattah holds hegemonic and literate identities outside the classroom context; however, he is assigned some identities in the adult literacy classroom that contrast with those outside. I visited the adult literacy class almost every day during the beginning of the data collection process. After a few months, Fattah stopped attending class for several days. I was curious and asked him the reason in the interview. He said,

The literacy teacher is like ... how can I say... you know ... when we, for example, go and show our assignments to him and tell him to please give us more homework, he says “It’s enough for you; first learn this one and read it, enough for you”. You know, the other day, I felt that he thinks we don’t know anything, you know, as if we are at level zero starting with him. Although we know the lesson, the Farsi lesson, thanks to Allah, we [by ‘we’ he means himself] have no problem. I don’t know why he thinks we are stuck at zero. In fact, we are improving now. You cannot prescribe the same medicine for the same person every time; you should change it... Then he ... there’s one more thing, I don’t want to backbite him – I like him. For example, when he talks, we listen and respect him; he is our teacher. But when we want to ask a question, he immediately changes the topic and says, “Okay, enough; let's start the lesson.” He doesn’t want to listen to us ... He thinks we are completely illiterate and know nothing.

Interview Excerpt, Western Zone, 15/10/2020

The above excerpt shows that the ALF’s behaviour towards the ALLs suggests that he perceives them as low-literate (i.e., level zero) and ignorant (i.e., not knowing anything). He does not give them enough opportunities to ask questions and often ‘changes the topic’ when ALLs want to take part in the class. I have also observed many instances where the ALLs negotiated with the ALFs for more homework, but they faced the ALF’s resistance (this is discussed in the next chapter). This indicates the dynamics of power between the ALLs and the ALF (i.e., when they say, please give us more homework, he says, “It’s enough for you.”). Additionally, as discussed in Chapter 5, Fattah had studied

many books before attending the literacy course; his participation in this literacy course could be because he is looking for legitimization of his literate identity through this course. This is observed in his quest to be the assistant of the ALF, an area discussed in Chapter 7.

Additionally, although the ALLs hold many hegemonic masculine and literate identities outside the classroom context, when they enter the adult literacy classroom, they are all seen as non-literate or low-literate individuals who are here to be taught literacy skills. This is a marker of subordinate masculinity. While much of the discussion here focuses on religious literate identities, it is important to recognise that ALLs perform a range of literate identities outside the classroom. As discussed in the previous chapter, these include not only religious roles (such as being known as a Qari or Mullah), but also identities shaped by everyday numeracy practices (i.e., measuring and calculating in carpentry or copying and reading bikes' tag numbers), digital literacies (i.e., using smartphones for communication or operating a sophisticated copying machine) and home literacies (supporting children's education and managing household finances). These roles are valued in their communities and contribute to the ALLs' sense of themselves as capable and responsible men.

Furthermore, I see a strong conflict of identities. For instance, Fattah is perceived as a prestigious religious literate person (i.e., *Qari*) outside the classroom among his friends and neighbours. He also sees himself as a literate young man and a reader (i.e., he reads and exchanges books with his friends, as discussed in the previous chapter) and a teacher-student (i.e., helping the teacher with dictating), but he feels he is treated quite differently in the classroom by the ALF. In fact, he sees a non-literate identity as a subordinate identity and reacts strongly against it.

Moreover, if we take a closer look, we notice that each individual in the above accounts embraces these identities differently, depending on their social surroundings and communities. For instance, working at the Theology School, Asqar adopts religious identities (i.e., *Mullah and Sofi*); being close to the Masjid's Imam and exchanging religious books and SMS among his religious friends, Fattah gets hold of another religious identity (i.e., *Qari*); as a mechanic who fixes and repairs items, Jabbar adopts the identity of a Jack of All Trades. Thus, these identities are socially and culturally

situated and are shaped and reshaped as the ALLs practice and perform them more frequently.

Still, non-literacy, as discussed throughout this chapter, is experienced by men as a source of shame and diminished masculinity, prompting many to seek out literacy learning as a way to reclaim status and respect. These multiple, sometimes competing, literate identities are further complicated by broader political and social forces. For instance, the Taliban's promotion of religious over academic masculinities has led to ongoing contestation over what it means to be a literate man in contemporary Afghanistan.

Literacy in Afghanistan is deeply gendered, and approaches to literacy reflect, reinforce and sometimes challenge local ideals of masculinity. For men, religious literacy offers one of the most visible and respected forms of masculine capital. For instance, those able to lead prayers or interpret religious texts, like Asqar as discussed in the oral skills section of the Literacies Chapter, are accorded high status across social domains. In social gatherings and events where adults socialise, religious leaders and figures are offered special seats, often positioned at a higher level of the room or office.

However, most male adult literacy learners do not reach this level. For most of these individuals, religious literacies remain aspirational. Based on my professional experience as a lecturer and head of a professional development centre at a public university in western Afghanistan, engineering, economics and agriculture were commonly constructed as masculine fields, while literature and nursing were often marked as feminine. At home, although women are often positioned as the primary educators, many men in this study (for example, Fattah, Firouz, and Zabi) describe participating in or supporting their children's or siblings' educational activities, negotiating new forms of masculine responsibility.

Some ALLs see the entire literacy programme as subordinate and even feminine (e.g., Jabbar's case discussed below). For example, as discussed in Chapter 5 on Literacies, Jabbar strived to find methods and strategies to learn literacy quicker. He even reached

out to the administration office at Azadi about his slow progress. One day, I visited him in his shop and asked him if he was doing fine because he missed one class. He replied,

*Ustad Jan*, I really love learning and, you know, I always look for opportunities to learn (literacy). But sometimes ... you know ... I feel ashamed to hold my book under my arm, like a girl, and go to school at this age (in his 30s) (while touching his beard). To be honest with you, if I am late, I don't go to class because I don't want other shopkeepers to see me with literacy books.

Fieldnotes, Western Zone, 11/06/2021

The above account shows that ALLs see literacy learning as a feminine programme and being entitled 'low-literate' or 'zero-literate' exacerbates this subordinate feeling among ALLs. In fact, this is in line with Connell's concept of 'subordinate masculinity,' where certain forms of male identity are devalued in relation to the local hegemonic ideal (Connell, 2005). The stigma Jabbar expresses, (i.e., 'like a girl' and 'what other shopkeepers see') signals that adult learning, especially for older men, is perceived as a reversal of expected masculine trajectories, placing them in a position of social vulnerability. This perception can be tied particularly to school-based or basic literacy, a learning space where reading and writing are associated with children and women's education rather than with the religious, workplace or digital literacy practices that hold higher prestige among men. In contrast, Qur'anic reading and numeracy practices linked to trade are often seen as more legitimate and masculine forms of learning. Thus, the gendered valuation of literacy practices mirrors broader hierarchies of schooling in Afghan society.

Furthermore, this sense of shame is intensified by the public nature of learning and by peer surveillance. For Jabbar, carrying a book becomes a visible marker of difference from other men, and he navigates this stigma by sometimes missing his class to protect his reputation. Such experiences are echoed across the literature. For instance, Mosawi (2020) notes that Afghan men who are unable to perform expected masculine roles, including literacy and competence in public life, often feel dishonoured or experience social exclusion.

Overall, it could be concluded that adult literacy learning and schooling is not simply an educational activity but one that is deeply gendered. Participating in it as an older man can feel like an admission of failure or inferiority, which could reinforce subordinate masculinities and intersect with broader social anxieties about age, gender and public image.

#### 6.4.1 Infantilisation of ALLs

As stated earlier in the thesis, my participants are all male adults who manage their families in harsh economic conditions within a crisis-affected country. Growing up in these situations, they all hold hegemonic masculine identities in work, home and religious domains. However, I have observed and witnessed instances in which ALLs were treated like children in the adult literacy education context. For example, all the education policies and bylaws for primary education and adult literacy courses are the same. In other words, whatever restrictions are implemented in primary schools are also applied to adult literacy learners. Even nowadays as I write this thesis, with the Taliban in power, all schools and universities are closed to girls, but the girls' classes up to grade six remain open. Surprisingly, adult literacy classes, most of which are girls over 15 years old, are also running because they are treated as grade 4 students.

In another example, when the Head of the Literacy Department was explaining the shortage of literacy textbooks, he said,

We have a textbook collection management issue. The textbooks should be distributed in the beginning and collected at the end of the course; and should be used at least for three years. To solve this, we need a policy to ask the families of students to sign an agreement so that they return the books when the students finish the course.

Interview Excerpt, Western Zone, 07/06/2021

This is how the children's schools usually obtain consent from parents or guardians in Afghanistan: they ask them to sign a paper instead of their children. As seen in the above interview excerpt, the Head of the Literacy Department views adult literacy learners as children and prefers to sign agreements with their family members rather

than with them. Most, if not all, of the ALLs are adults who have children in their families, are decision-makers, have agency, and have been running their families and managing their households for years. They might have provided fingerprints or signed consent forms for their children at schools; however, in the literacy programme, they are treated as children in this respect.

Moreover, when observing the adult literacy classes, I noticed that sometimes the ALFs treated the ALLs like school children. Below are a couple of incidents recorded in my fieldnotes that reflect this type of identification.

**ALF's feedback:** The ALFs check the learners' writing assignments from their notebooks every day. Both ALFs use red pens and put a big checkmark in the middle of each page if there are no mistakes. The ALLs receive feedback when the ALFs spot a problem with their writing. For example, one day, as I was observing Saber's class, one of the ALLs, in his 20s, was sitting next to me. I noticed his notebook was filled with corrections in red pen. He closed his notebook immediately, and I could see on his face that he felt embarrassed. Utilising a red colour pen to correct mistakes in students' notebooks is a common practice in children's schools.

When Saber was asked about the reason for using a red pen, he said, "It's for the student to distinguish between my corrections and his writing." It was a normal practice for him and he did not see it as something that disturbed the ALLs' learning process. However, pedagogically, feedback and comments provided with red ink are associated with something wrong and create negative impressions for learners of any age, even when teachers include positive feedback written with a red pen (Schuster, 1998).

**Rewards and Sanctions:** Typically, in Afghanistan, if students at the children's schools do not do their homework, the teachers penalise them by assigning them additional homework or by hitting their hands with a wire, a stick, or a ruler. Both Ajmal and Saber ask the ALLs to write more if they do not complete their homework. Below are some examples from my fieldnotes that capture this theme.

### **A. Public Class**

One of the ALLs, in his late 40s, is at the board while the ALF gives dictation from his notebook. He writes one sentence about the geographical information of Afghanistan: "Iran is to the west of Afghanistan." He struggles

to write the next sentence about the location of Pakistan. The ALF asks him to come next to him and told the ALL to write two pages on the sentence he could not write on the board. The ALL smiles and says, "But I have already written one page from this sentence." The ALF replies, "Yes, but you are not ready for the new lesson. Go sit down. Next, please come up."

Fieldnote, Western Zone, 10/08/2020

## **B. Private Class**

The ALF is checking the ALLs' homework one by one. He sits next to Shams and asks for his homework. Shams says that he had forgotten his notebook. The ALF says, "How come? You don't forget your food and water, but you forget your homework?" Shams responds, "I've written it, but I was in a hurry and forgot to take my notebook." The ALF then says, "Next day, write 6 pages of the same homework and bring it with you." Shams's eyes widen and he says, "Six pages? That's a lot." The ALF replies, "If you don't, then it would be 12."

Fieldnote, Western Zone, 12/11/2020

I was curious to see Shams's (the school student) homework the next day. However, he did not come to the class for three days. I tried to explore whether his absence was a result of the sanction, but he did not want to share and said that he was busy. I think he did not like the punishment and missed class because of it, which is similar to a method of communicating dissent with a superior among men in Afghanistan. For example, if an adolescent, between the age of 16 to 20, disagrees with his father's decision on something that affects him, he might stay away from home for a couple of days to express his anger and disagreement. The ALF did not say anything to him when he returned after three days. Perhaps he had forgotten all about the punishment or maybe he realised Shams's anger through his absence and chose not to escalate the situation further.

Most children in the cities often do not have family and household responsibilities and usually do not work. If they miss or do not bring their homework, teachers see it as procrastination or neglect; therefore, they punish them with further homework and ask

the parents to follow up with the punishment so that the next time the student does not forget or ignore the homework. However, the ALLs are all breadwinners for their families and are very busy working throughout the day and sometimes on night shifts. The fact that they come to the class shows their commitment. Perhaps the problem lies elsewhere, and there might be other reasons for their lack of homework. For instance, in scenario 'A' above, the ALL might have been under stress when asked to write dictation on the board while the whole class (about 25 people) was looking at him. He wrote the sentence correctly in his notebook but could not write it on the board. He was surprised when the ALF asked him to rewrite the sentence (i.e., "but I have already written one page from this sentence.")

According to Jabbar, Ajmal, his teacher at the private centre, used to charge the ALLs money if they did not bring their homework. However, with Jabbar's intervention, the ALF changed his method of punishment (this is discussed further in Chapter 7).

**Raising a hand:** Asking for permission to enter or leave the class by raising a hand with the index finger sticking out is a common practice among children in schools in Afghanistan. Although some ALLs were confused about whether to do so, there were many instances where they raised their hands or knocked on the door to enter or leave the classroom. The ALLs in the public centre would come to the class even if there were only ten minutes left. For instance, on a very cold winter day, the classroom door was closed, and almost every five minutes, one ALL would knock and ask for permission to enter the classroom. The ALF would stop the lesson and allow the ALLs to come in. I found this very disturbing for the lesson and it made the room cold since there were no heating facilities. However, both the ALLs and ALFs accepted this as a normal method of entering or leaving the classroom. In another example, whenever Salam, the truck driver, was about to leave the classroom, he would raise his hand and ask for permission. He arrives early and leaves earlier than others because of his work.

My colleagues and I found in another research paper that most of the ALFs in Afghanistan come with a teaching background from children's schools ([Maleki et al., 2021](#)). The ALFs in public classes have also been teaching at primary and secondary schools. Although they have had short-term training programmes on how to teach adults, they still treat the ALLs as children in adult literacy classrooms.

Treating adult literacy learners as children within educational policies and frameworks highlights a disconnect between the ALLs' actual identities and the identities ascribed to them by the educational system, administrators, and facilitators. Although the parallels drawn between primary education and adult literacy programmes might not be visible to the ALLs, these routines can have the effect of positioning learners as child-like, which may undermine some learners' agency and experiences as adults and contribute to feelings of subordination.

## 6.5 Conclusion

Some identities and their patterns could be physically visible and audible, such as how people dress and speak; while others may be invisible, such as their faith and beliefs. However, the carriers of these identities choose how they want to showcase and perform their identities in different social contexts. In order to communicate and build up appropriate connections with the communities around them and to mirror the communities' perceptions and expectations of them, the ALLs in this study tried to align their appearance, body language and choice of words to connect with others and match community expectations.

This chapter explored the multifaceted nature of identities as they intersect with literacies, masculinities and gender in various domains. Asqar, Jabbar, Fattah and Ali's narratives illustrate how identities are not static but dynamic and shaped by social interactions, cultural and social contexts and individual experiences. This aligns with [Butler's \(1990\)](#) concept of gender performativity, which argues that gendered identities are constructed through repeated actions and practices that are recognised and accepted as the social norm.

The 'Adjustable Wrench' and 'Jack of All Trades' as masculine identities highlight the ways individuals wish to be recognised and valued within their communities, while also revealing the complexities and pressures that accompany these roles. In fact, I believe, when ALLs lack certain hegemonic masculinity patterns such as formal literacy, they try to seek recognition through alternative roles like 'Adjustable Wrench' or 'Jack of All Trades' within their communities. Additionally, identities such as 'Mullah,' 'Qari,' 'Jack of All Trades,' and 'Adjustable Wrench' reflect external perceptions of

masculinity based on cultural and social contributions. Moreover, the emergence of eldest sons' identities such as a breadwinner and a supporter in their families as their fathers' roles decline signifies the internal hegemonic masculinity within the family domain.

The experiences of Fattah, Mahmoud and Ali (i.e., prioritising their financial responsibilities over literacy and self-development) throughout this chapter show how ALLs often sacrifice their education and personal aspirations to keep up with these expectations of masculinity. The chapter also examined various hegemonic and subordinate masculine identities which were assigned to the ALLs. It emphasised how adult literacy learners are often perceived as children, reinforcing their subordinate masculinity status and undermining their masculine and literate identities.

This chapter has shown the various approaches ALLs seek to perform their masculinities, especially when positioned in subordinate roles (i.e., premature fatherhood role and being infantilised in the classroom). Many participants aspired to aspects of hegemonic masculinity as breadwinner, provider, or respected worker even when they face constraints related to level of literacy and social status. Throughout this process, the negotiation of a literate identity becomes an important factor. For these men, becoming or appearing literate is not only a practical resource but also a way to reshape how they are seen as capable, respected and masculine in various domains. The chapter has illustrated that the pursuit of literacy is related to ALLs' search for masculine recognition and that these performances are always situated within complex hierarchies and shifting expectations.

All in all, in addition to cultural, social and economic factors, religious and faith-based literacy practices also play a significant role in shaping the ALLs' literate identities in this study. They either performed these identities through dressing, speaking, or behaving in certain ways to be identified as religious persons such as Qari, Mullah and Sofi. This chapter also has shown that the literacy programmes examined in this study were not well adapted to male learners; at times, they infantilised and emasculated them through teaching practices or curriculum.

## Chapter 7

### Agency in Adult Literacy: Enablers and Constraints

#### 7.1 Introduction

The first empirical chapter (Chapter 5) explored highly valued everyday literacy practices in which my participants engaged across different domains such as home, work, religion and class through the lens of literacy as a social practice. In Chapter 6, utilising Connell's hegemonic masculinity framework, I examined how ALLs perform and negotiate different patterns of masculinity and their relationship to literacy practices, and use literacy to navigate respect, status and shift social roles.

Building on the theme of ALLs' everyday literacy practices, identities, and masculinities, the current chapter (Chapter 7) aims to examine how agency and power are performed, negotiated, constrained and enabled at different levels: policy and administrative level, facilitators' level and ALLs' level. I shall use Lukes' (1974) dimensions of power and Rowlands' (1995) various forms of power as analytical lenses in this chapter to guide the discussion.

The first dimension of power is the obvious one and talks about domination; it debates issues around questions like 'who wins?' and 'who decides?' (Lukes, 1974, 2004). In other words, it is the 'power over' others (Rowlands, 1995). Lukes' second dimension moves from the 'winner' to the 'agenda': what should be discussed, talked about and what should be quietly kept out of sight? This is what Rowlands recognises as 'power to', which is considered an important component of agency and empowerment (Rowlands, 1995). This dimension is the relevant model that leads to an institutionalised form of empowerment, where individuals are empowered through resistance, negotiation and willingness to make change (Kabeer, 1999; Rowlands, 1995; & Berger, 2005).

The third dimension is what Lukes puts more emphasis as the most important dimension to bring social change. In this dimension, people's underlying perceptions,

beliefs and even their sense of what is possible or desirable for them in specific contexts are shaped (Lukes, 1974). Rowlands sees this dimension through ‘power with’ and ‘power within’, which is exercised in a collective manner to benefit and care for all the group members. In this dimension – ‘power with’ – “dialogue, inclusion, negotiation and shared power” (p. 6) are the fundamental components that guide decision-making within groups and communities, such as family, classroom or colleagues at work (Rowlands, 1995).

In addition to drawing on different forms of power (power with, power within, power over, or power to) as lenses to analyse my data in this chapter, I also consider Kabeer’s (1999) conception of agency, defined as “the ability to define one’s goals and act upon them” (p. 438), which can “be operationalized as ‘decision-making’” (p. 438).

In most contexts, while men’s dominant roles can sometimes mean they restrict others, they also possess the capacity to make decisions, take responsibility and influence what happens in their families and communities. For example, a man may use his position not just to enforce rules but also to support his family, solve problems or help others in his community.

Therefore, instead of viewing men’s roles only in terms of domination and control (power over), we can also recognise that men have the ‘power to’ manage and change their own lives and influence the lives of those around them (Berger, 2005). It is clearly visible throughout this chapter that the ALLs often exercise this form of ‘power to’ through acts of negotiation, resistance and the pursuit of change, both in the classroom and workplace settings, and for individual or collective benefits. Rather than simply reinforcing existing structures, they use their agency to challenge norms, make decisions and work hard to provide better opportunities for themselves and others. In this way, following Lukes and Rowlands, I move beyond seeing men as merely holding power over others, and instead highlight how their positions and actions can serve as sites of resistance and transformation. This, in turn, can open up possibilities for change within their communities and everyday lives.

As Kabeer states, it is “the ability to make choices” that empowers a person; and “to be disempowered, therefore, implies to be denied choices” (Kabeer, 1999, p. 436).

People utilise their identities and power to negotiate ‘who decides and on what.’ Furthermore, as a dimension of agency, [Long and Long \(1992\)](#) introduce the ‘actor-oriented’ perspective which refers to enrolling a more powerful person in your project. This could include having someone help with literacy exercises, asking someone to interpret a religious text, or seeking assistance in understanding paperwork in a government or NGO office.

People perform identities both for themselves and as a way of managing impressions in social interactions ([Goffman, 1978](#)). In order to be actively involved in the process of constructing and negotiating their identities, which itself is an act of agency, individuals need to define and evaluate choices in their lives, even in the presence of opposition from others – agency in action ([Kabeer, 1999](#)). Thus, identity and agency are fundamentally interconnected.

The chapter begins with an exploration of how agency, power and decision-making are exercised, constrained or negotiated at the policy and administrative level. The analysis then continues at the facilitators’ level. Finally, the chapter explores the typologies and forms of everyday agency and power performed and negotiated among adult literacy learners in various domains and social institutions. The chapter concludes by discussing the key factors that constrain or enable agency at these different levels.

## 7.2 Policy and Administrative Level

Looking at agency and power from a structural and relational perspective, we can observe that these concepts are constructed and enacted across various social levels, beginning at the highest levels of policy. As discussed in the Context chapter (Chapter 2), adult literacy programme operates under the MoE, where all adult literacy policies and regulations mirror those of primary education for the first four years of schooling.

The main curriculum utilised by the government literacy centres, NGOs and some private sectors to provide literacy learning courses throughout Afghanistan is developed by the MoE with the help of UNESCO. Although this curriculum was developed during the Islamic Republic regime between 2001 and 2021, it is still used

under the Taliban regime, with slight changes that shift the focus more towards religious subjects.

As discussed in Chapter 2, there are three textbooks covering three different subjects in the adult literacy course: language (Dari-Farsi or Pashtu), maths and Qur'an. These books are taught in a nine-month course starting from March to December. Although the language textbook was originally developed based on models from other countries such as Iran, it has been revised in different editions a couple of times in an attempt to accommodate the needs of the learners and provide more culturally relevant content.

However, the textbooks are provided as a 'one size fits all' solution to accommodate the needs of all literacy learners, who come from a wide range of literacy levels, occupations, and cultural and social backgrounds from across the country. As a result, the content and focus are highly generalised. The Dari-Farsi language textbook, for instance, has units on home and family (i.e., cleanliness, helping each other, consulting, teaching children to pray), health (i.e., eating well, mother's milk, child vaccination, drugs and narcotics, sleep) among others.

In Chapter 5, I discussed that ALLs and their communities primarily valued informal literacy practices related to their everyday life such as how to write a house contract, record shopping or office work, or calculate digits with fractions. In contrast, the above discussion highlights how policymakers privilege standardised, formal or 'school' literacies, which do not often reflect or support the situated and socially constructed literacy practices that matter most to ALLs in their own contexts, as argued in social practice theory ([Street, 1984](#); [Barton & Hamilton, 1998](#)). This perspective reflects a top-down exercise of power, assuming that those in authority (i.e., MoE, UNESCO) define what is valuable and what needs to be learned, often disconnected from the diverse realities of adult learners. This echoes what [Lukes \(1974\)](#) calls the first dimension of power, where power is visible and exercised through observable decisions with clear winners and losers.

Moreover, it is important to note that since the majority of non-literate learners are women, these materials were originally developed with significant attention to women, as discussed in Chapters 1 and 2. The curriculum designers at the MoE and UNESCO

may have viewed women primarily through a deficit lens, assuming they lacked essential knowledge and skills. This gendered perspective not only shaped the content and focus of the textbooks but also reinforced particular assumptions about learners' identities and roles, especially when the same content is taught to men.

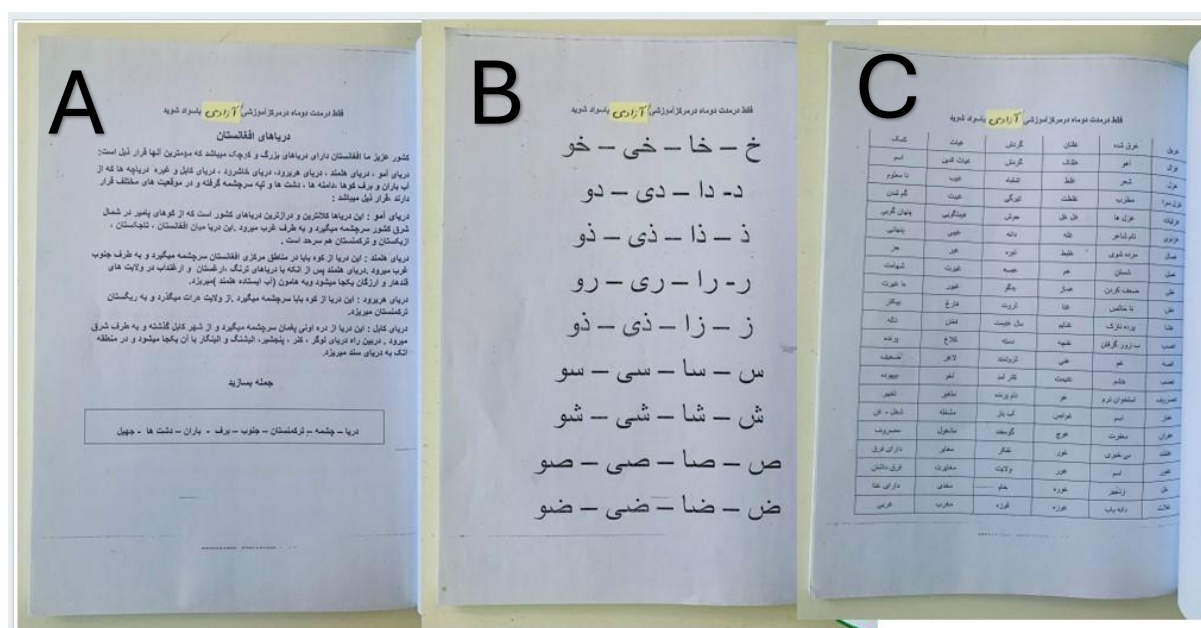
As discussed in the Masculinity chapter (Chapter 6), such assumptions influence how both male and female learners are positioned within literacy programmes, often overlooking the diverse ways in which men enact agency and construct masculinities in their everyday lives.

The private sector, in contrast, has the option to develop their own curriculum and implement what they find works for their learners. In these centres, the content is also determined by the administrators, who are considered the decision-makers for the learners. Because the selection of content and the focus of textbooks in these centres presented as flexible, administrators can choose what they believe is best for their learners. For example, the Azadi textbook covers very general topics ranging from religious topics (about Allah, the Prophet and his ethical behaviours and general ethical advice), geography (related to Afghanistan, its mountains, rivers and provinces) to topics covering parents' rights, wife's rights and ways to write an excuse letter at school (see Figure 12<sup>7</sup>). However, the majority of the topics covered in this book are religious and ethics related. The main focus of the book is on vocabulary; over half the book consists of word lists with synonyms and sample sentences printed in tables, but with no exercises or opportunities for practical application.

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<sup>7</sup> Figure 12. (A) Five paragraphs on Afghanistan's rivers with a vocabulary list from the text for sentence construction. (B) A list of letters showing their forms in different positions within a word. The header on every page states, "Become literate within two months at Azadi Learning Centre." (C) A table of miscellaneous vocabulary with a synonym listed next to each word.

Figure 12. Sample lessons from Azadi literacy textbook.



A general analysis of topics in each unit in both centres reveals that curriculum developers frequently view learners as individuals who ‘lack’ essential knowledge (the ‘deficit perspective’) and need to learn very basic skills and life knowledge such as eating, well-being, praying, sleeping and helping (as in the public centre textbook), as well as topics around ethics, geography and school-based letter writing (as seen in the private centre textbook). Notably, most of these topics have little relevance to adult learners’ everyday lives; for example, memorising geographical facts about Afghanistan. This approach positions ALLs not just as people in need of technical skills, but also as deficient in essential values and everyday competencies, reflecting a top-down, deficit-based model of curriculum design.

Overall, this deficit-based, standardised approach at the policy level reflects the exercise of ‘power over’ adult learners and facilitators (Rowlands, 1995; Kabeer, 1999; Berger, 2005). It structures not only what can be learned but also who is seen as capable of agency. The top-down framing of policy and curriculum often does not echo the lived realities and existing strengths of learners and facilitators, which can lead to limiting opportunities for meaningful participation, negotiation and adaptation. The implications of this deficit perspective are discussed further later in the chapter, with specific reference to moral lessons and the concept of liminality as an additional constraint on ALLs’ agency.

In the following section, I examine how ALFs, operating within these constraints, find ways to negotiate, adapt and at times resist policy, creating small but significant spaces for agency at the practitioner level.

### 7.3 Facilitators Level

ALFs in public centres must adhere to the regulations and policies dictated by the MoE. These centralised regulations define the boundaries within which both facilitators and learners operate, shaping how agency and power can be exercised, negotiated or constrained in everyday practices. In reality, as will be discussed, facilitators are not simply passive recipients of policy. They interpret, adapt and sometimes challenge these frameworks in response to the daily needs of their learners. This section examines the practical strategies, negotiations and acts of agency through which ALFs respond to, reshape, or resist the institutional constraints of the adult literacy programme and policies.

Instead of merely following the MoE's curriculum, Saber, from PLD, chooses different teaching materials based on the learner's level and interest. He rarely uses the official textbook; he only uses it for reading fluency exercises, and for writing short paragraphs on the board. Depending on the level of ALLs, he teaches content ranging from the alphabet to paragraphs, occasionally selecting content from school textbooks. It is worth mentioning that ALLs have a significant influence on the subjects ALFs choose to teach, an area explored later in this chapter.

Additionally, Saber places greater emphasis on language instruction over maths and Qur'an subjects. Although he mentioned in his interview that he teaches the Qur'an, I have not observed this during the 40 sessions I attended, probably because the Qur'an is widely taught in masjids throughout the country. He prioritises language and maths instruction, teaching maths only once a week, believing that ALLs generally dislike it, as discussed in Chapter 5 on literacy and numeracy practices.

The ALF at the public centre also recognises the importance of continuing the literacy course for the ALLs. Public adult literacy courses commence in spring (March 23<sup>rd</sup>) and end in December, with no sessions held from mid-December to March. However, Saber believes there should be no break in learning. He explained,

Students finished the course a few days ago, but I'm not giving their certificates until the end of winter. Because I have two reasons, you see *Ustad Jan*. First, the schools start in spring (March); if they have their certificates, they'll not come again and by next spring, they forget their lessons or might get involved with work and not study in spring. Second, there is less work during the winter because of the weather, so we have more students who have time to study. Why should we close the classroom door on them? You see, that's why I try to keep the class running even in winter, too.

Interview excerpt, Western Zone, 23/12/2020

Delaqa, the Head of PLD, is aware of his initiatives. He said, "If the students are happy and there is no complaint, we accept the ALF's voluntary teaching in the winter and will support him with heating and other necessary support if we can." These accounts illustrate the ALF's agency in determining what is best for learners, prioritising their needs over formal policy recommendations. This shows how facilitators can creatively interpret and bend regulations, which demonstrates active decision-making and the ALF's real dedication to literacy programmes.

Considering the needs of ALLs and the shortcoming of the MoE in providing textbooks for all the learners, both ALF and the local administrative staff demonstrate flexibility and initiative through using their authority to bring about change, which exemplifies 'power within' (Rowlands, 1995). Saber's actions reveal how he juggles options considering ALLs' needs to make strategic decisions about content and to keep the class going even during winter break. In this way, facilitators exercise agency through a series of decisions, large and small, which shape the learning experience and challenge the deficit assumptions embedded in top-down policy. This aligns with Kabeer's (1999) emphasis on agency as the capacity to define one's goals and act upon them, even within a landscape of constraint. This also mirrors Lukes' (1974) second dimension of power, where influence operates not only through visible decision-making but through the ability to shape agendas and outcomes within institutional limits.

Aside from the ALFs' demonstration of agency within the system, I also observed how they exercise their authority and agency within the classroom settings. Classroom control is a typical approach that schoolteachers at primary and secondary levels maintain to ensure students behave well and do not disturb lessons. The ALFs in this study applied similar methods to adult learners. The following are two examples recorded in my fieldnotes that show how ALFs in both private and public centres use school-like discipline, but also how their authority is constantly negotiated and sometimes challenged by the ALLs' own identities and priorities.

As usual, Ajmal asked the ALLs to read the text from their books in pairs. Shams is reading and Jabbar is following the line on the book that Shams holds. Shams finished reading. They are talking about the textbook. Jabbar says that he has other books, too. The ALF noticed they were talking and not reading from the book. He called on Jabbar and Shams and said, "Stop talking and read your lessons from the book."

Fieldnotes, Western Zone, 15/09/2020

Saber (ALF in the public centre) is giving dictation to one of the ALLs on the board. The rest of the class is quiet and looking at the board. Rashid (battery store owner), in his 50s, is talking to Basheer, in his 40s, about Basheer's handwriting. Suddenly, the ALF noticed and said, "Pay attention to the board, please. You can take your personal business outside the class; God bless you."

Fieldnotes, Western Zone, 10/10/2020

The above fieldnote extracts highlight a conflict of identities vis-à-vis learners' agency. Both the programme and the ALFs perceive ALLs as 'students', obedient to the rules, being quiet in the classroom, listening to the teacher and engaging in the lesson as prescribed. However, the ALLs, such as Shams, the ALL who is also a school student, and Jabbar, are grown men who come to class with tacit "funds of cultural knowledge" (Moll & colleagues, cited in [Rogers, 2008, p. 2](#)) and tacit "banks of skills" developed unconsciously and unintentionally ([Rogers, 2014, p. 48](#)). Side conversations and requests for relevant content are not simply disruptions but acts of agency; this is part

of the ongoing negotiation of power in the adult literacy classroom. ALLs actively participate in shaping what and how they learn by expressing their preferences, resisting irrelevant content and requesting lessons that reflect their real-life needs. At the same time, facilitators exercise their own agency by interpreting and adapting curricular requirements. Considering their learners' needs and priorities, sometimes ALFs bend regulations.

## 7.4 Learners Level

In adult literacy courses, facilitators use their authority to adapt the lessons in ways they believe will benefit their learners, as previously discussed. However, as I mentioned in Chapter 5, these adaptations by ALFs are often influenced by the requests, persistence and agency of ALLs themselves. The inherent authority of ALFs as educators with prestigious literate identities creates a power dynamic within this context. This makes them appear as knowledgeable figures and at times can lead to a reluctance among ALLs to challenge their teaching methods, curriculum choices or communicate their needs and concerns. Despite these dynamics, ALLs still play a significant role in shaping ALFs' decisions and classroom practices through their active participation, requests and resistance.

Institutional context also matters. In this study, the ALF in the public centre allowed flexible delivery shaped by learners' requests, while the private centre often adhered closely to a fixed textbook (except Jabbar, who brings other books to class), which influenced how classroom practices aligned with everyday literacies. This contrast shows that agency is not only exercised through individuals' persistence but also structured by institutional settings that open or restrict pedagogical flexibility.

Due to the shortage of budget, the MoE is not able to provide textbooks for all the literacy learners. Thus, Saber employs his own strategy to fill this gap. For instance, he writes texts from memory in the learners' notebooks as assignments for ALLs to copy. However, some ALLs request specific texts related to their occupation and interests or show resistance to content they find irrelevant. Ali (the generator guard), for example, reacted to a simple text the ALF wrote on one of the ALLs' notebooks. The text said, "Father brings pomegranate from the garden. Pomegranate has seeds. It is delicious."

When Ali heard this, he turned his face to me and quietly said, “What should I do with pomegranate? Everyone knows that pomegranate has seeds. Teach us something from Allah, something we learn; something that could help us in this and the next world.” Although he mentioned this to the ALF, no comment was made, but the ALF’s stern look indicated a form of reprimand.

On another occasion, an ALL who owned a letting agency asked the ALF to teach him how to write a letting contract. The ALF wrote three lines each day on the top of his notebook, allowing him to copy and practise. The ALL expressed his happiness and said, “Now, I know how to write a contract. God bless you, teacher.” Similarly, Karim, who ran a grocery shop in his area, requested the facilitator to teach him how to record purchases. The ALF wrote in Karim’s notebook: “Noorullah owes me 1000 Afghanis for his shopping on March 23. He bought milk, potato, onion, chicken, and tomato paste.” The ALF looked at me and said, “Karim asked me yesterday to teach him this kind of stuff because he is a shopkeeper and needs to learn how to record his business.”

Additionally, Hashem, the carpenter, requested maths problems after the language class, explaining he needed more practice for his work. The ALF indicated that the class was over, but Hashem insisted and received the problems in his notebook. This example demonstrates how ALLs use their agency in the classroom to challenge the facilitator’s stereotype that ALLs do not like maths.

In the above accounts, the ALF chose to base his lessons on assigning ALLs to write multiple times from the text he wrote in their notebooks. The ALLs in this process help the ALF in selecting what they think is beneficial for them. Equally, it may be that the atmosphere in the classroom, created by the ALF’s willingness to offer choices, encourages learners to step forward, exercise their agency, and assert control over what they wish to learn. This mutual dynamic highlights how agency is not simply an individual trait but is co-constructed through everyday classroom interactions and power relations. In this study, when ALFs created space for learner input, the ALLs became more engaged, negotiated more actively, and helped shape the learning experience around their own interests and needs.

The ALLs' negotiation does not end with content and the quantity of assignments and lessons. ALLs also influence the facilitators' instructional approaches and policies related to teaching and classroom discipline. For example, Jabbar mentioned in his interview that he suggested the ALF in Azadi change his teaching approach:

I talk a lot in class. We used to be six students – two females and four males the same age as mine – at the beginning of the course. One of the guys' literacy was very low. The teacher was teaching the same thing to all of us, and I felt bad for that guy who could not understand anything. You know, we are human and should understand each other. I told the teacher, "See Ustad Jan, what and how you teach is not good for me, not good for Shams, and not for Miss Fahima. You should teach us one by one. What you teach me is not for Shams, and what you teach Miss Farzaneh is not for me. You see, our lessons are not the same." Since then, he changed his style and started the class with high-level guys and other mates were waiting and once their lesson finished, the low-literacy guys' level started. Personally, I learned a lot with this method.

Interview Excerpt, Western Zone, 16/12/2020

Jabbar went further by questioning the overall literacy system at Azadi private centre. For instance, Jabbar felt he was learning slowly, so he decided to speak with the course manager about it. He explained:

The other day, *Ustad Jan*, I went to the office and told them that I cannot read texts from outside the textbook ... I said, "I'm here for more than six months but I am still not a self-reader." I also asked the teacher to teach me something to make me more of a self-reader. I told him I could not read and recognise the sounds properly.

Fieldnotes excerpt, Western Zone, 24/11/2020

Jabbar has challenged the ALF a couple of times for the materials taught and the teaching methodologies used. He raised these concerns in the office because he said the office had told him that he would be literate enough to read any text within a few months. However, he realised he could not read texts beyond the textbook prepared by

the centre. Thus, he requested the ALF to teach him from another book. During my visit to his workplace, I observed him reading all the necessary texts and numbers required for his job as a mechanic. He mentioned in a chat that he has a hard time reading his brother's books, which are for a dentist. I also see this as related to a masculine identity contestation, where he sees himself subordinate vis-à-vis his brother's literate identity in the home domain.

Additionally, Fattah, from the public centre, changed Saber's teaching method by insisting to be his assistant in giving dictation to ALLs. In the beginning, the ALF resisted and did not allow Fattah to assist with dictation, but eventually, he accepted it; Fattah began actively giving dictation from the ALLs' notebooks while the facilitator checked their notebooks and introduced new lessons for each individual.

Challenging an ALF's methods of teaching while still a literacy learner and without any teaching experience takes significant courage. However, Jabbar's and Fattah's advocacy reflects their understanding of their classmates' and ALF's needs and their desires for a more effective learning environment. In Jabbar's case, this act of advocacy not only illustrates his agency but also reveals how his identity as a senior learner – having been in the class from the beginning while others joined later – empowered him to drive change in classroom dynamics. The facilitator agreed with him and adapted his teaching methods accordingly. Through this, Jabbar also shows his accountability for what he pays: because he is paying for this class, he speaks up for better teaching.

In Fattah's case, as discussed in Chapters 5 and 6, he had read many books before joining the adult literacy course and has been recognised as a religiously literate individual (i.e., *Qari*) among his communities. Aside from his advocacy to legitimise his literate identity through this action, his action tremendously affected the classroom time. Now, as Fattah continues giving dictation to his peers, the ALF has more time to focus on checking the accuracy of the writing on the board and providing assignments for the learners.

While ALFs hold formal authority, the agency of ALLs can disrupt expected power dynamics. The examples of ALLs requesting specific content or teaching methods

illustrate how adult learners can assert their needs and preferences, thereby negotiating their own agency within the system.

Furthermore, as mentioned in the previous chapter, Jabbar inspired the ALF at the private centre to change his mind about the punishment strategies he used to employ for the ALLs. Below is Jabbar's explanation of the process:

The teacher was like when someone was not coming to the class, he would charge him 50 Afs. You know, I told the teacher, "Even if I sit here, and if Allah wishes, He will make it in a way so that I will gain that 50 Afs from elsewhere. And the same applies to you; even if you sit here and if He wishes, you will get that 50 from somewhere." So, I told him "The 50 Afs will not change my literacy skills if I give it to you or not. Maybe it'd serve you economically but there are no changes in my literacy. I'll pretend that I lost 50 Afs today. But you should fine us with literacy (writing or reading more)," ... you know teacher, some of our classmates don't even have enough money to pay that 50 Afs. One of them asked another student to pay for a couple of days instead of him and said he would pay back. He was so shy. He didn't want to leave the class, and he could not afford to pay. So, I told the teacher, "If you punish us with literacy, we'll learn more." Then, the office also agreed and said to punish them with six pages if they missed or did not bring a page of their homework.

Interview Excerpt, Western Zone, 16/12/2020

In the above account, Jabbar identified the negative consequence of the ALF's punishment method and effectively communicated it, not just for his self-interest, but by recognising the struggle of the whole class. While charging ALLs, when they missed their homework assignment was a policy dictated by the office, Jabbar's input led to a change in the approach. This shows ALLs' ability to influence policies and systems within the adult literacy centre. This pathway maps onto what Cornwall and Coelho call 'invited spaces' of participation, where subordinate groups can reshape procedures and decisions when they are able to enter the space, name the issue in collective terms, and negotiate with responsive officials (Cornwall & Coelho, 2007).

Furthermore, with regard to the ALLs' role in influencing classroom policies and regulations, I witnessed another interesting event in the public literacy classroom. As I mentioned before, there were about 30 ALLs and a few teenagers in this class. Whenever the ALF would call "Next, please," a learner would go to him with their notebook for dictation. Since the ALF did not specify a particular learner, sometimes it became crowded, leaving students unsure of who should go first. One day, one of the white-bearded ALLs noticed the confusion and suggested, "Brothers, how about we go to the teacher in the order we arrived in class? OK? This way everyone knows his turn. Thank you, dears." This suggestion became a collective decision and turned into the rule for the whole class.

The respect given to the elderly ALL in the above context reflects how age and seniority, as identities, are rooted in local norms in Afghanistan. His suggestion became a classroom policy and was respected by both the ALF and ALLs. The age-based authority is practised among both men and women. In this case, agency is negotiated through social structure (Kabeer, 1999) and the ALLs' identity plays a role in legitimising this power.

Furthermore, I observed ALLs influencing ALFs' policy on assignments. As discussed in Chapter 5, Saber believes ALLs should write a few pages every night (often three pages), but the focus should be on good handwriting. However, I observed ALLs negotiating the quantity of homework assignments by requesting more than three pages. In most cases, the ALF initially hesitated and resisted, but eventually he provided extra homework on top of what he had already assigned to them. For example, Zabi went to Saber, and he provided him with three pages of a writing assignment. Zabi said, "*Ustad*, please give me more." The ALF closed the notebook and gave it to Zabi and replied, "It's enough, it's enough." Zabi opened the notebook and put it on the ALF's desk and said, "No, no way, please; the nights are long, and I want to write more." The ALF looked at him, smiled and wrote some sentences on three more pages in Zabi's notebook.

In the above scenario, Zabi negotiates for more homework by explaining that he has free time during the long nights. Despite the ALF's initial resistance, Zabi persists until his request is granted. The ALF's smile suggests that his resistance is not effective and

that Zabi would not leave him unless he provided him with what he wants. In this instance, Zabi clearly defines his goals, makes a firm decision, acts upon them and does not give up until he achieves them – an example of agency in action (Kabeer, 1999).

I have frequently observed ALLs asserting their influence over the programme and ALFs, prompting changes in the ALFs' decisions. For example, when I visited Saber's class on a winter day, the main gate of the centre was closed.

It's 6:25 in the morning. Two ALLs are standing behind the main door of the literacy centre. They asked me if I had the key. I said "No." It's a bit chilly; slowly, more learners showed up. Now, we are about eight people. The ALF arrived (6:35am). It's also unexpected for him to see the door shut. He called the guard on the phone. The guard was about to come from his home, which is 30 minutes away from the centre, but he was feeling a lot of pain in his kidney. The ALF said that there would not be any class today and that the learners could go home. Interestingly, the ALLs did not leave and asked the ALF to give them homework in their notebooks on the sidewalk. Saber first resisted and said, "No, that's OK, I'll teach you tomorrow." But the ALLs did not leave. Instead, they came to the ALF with their notebooks and asked Saber to give them homework. They surrounded him with their notebooks in their hands (see Figure 13). So, Saber gave homework to all while standing on the sidewalk in the cold weather.

Fieldnotes, Western Zone, 16/01/2021

Figure 13. The ALLs stopped the ALF to teach them outside the classroom.



Additionally, the ALLs repeatedly requested that ALFs teach them specific topics after the class time was over. Some asked for language-related homework on a maths day, while others requested maths after the language lessons or extra lessons related to their occupations. These practices highlight the ALLs' agency as adults within the classroom setting.

The persistence of ALLs in requesting homework, even when classes are cancelled or time is up, demonstrates both collective and individual agency under constraint. Their refusal to leave and insistence on receiving assignments, which were successful, exemplifies the negotiation and contestation of authority in everyday practice. These excerpts highlight that ALLs are active participants shaping policy, content and procedures in the classroom domain.

The ALLs' active involvement can also be seen in their enthusiasm for learning literacy and their commitment to making the most of their time in the classroom. Unlike children who might be excited and pleased when a teacher is absent and may leave, ALLs actively seek out their teachers and are keen to use classroom time productively.

For example, the ALF at the private centre is from a village far from the city and spends the nights at the centre. One morning, when I arrived, there were eleven ALLs in the class. The session was supposed to start at 6:30 AM, but by 6:40, the ALF had not arrived. Jabbar said, “I think the teacher overslept and forgot about the class.” He asked one of the younger learners to go and wake the facilitator. The ALF arrived at 6:47, apologising for oversleeping and said because he went to bed late, he could not wake up earlier.

These adult learners felt a strong sense of responsibility and collective ownership over their learning, as shown in the above scenario. Their decision to find the facilitator, rather than leave, demonstrates their agency and commitment to making the most of their classroom experience and time. Such actions highlight how ALLs can play an active role in controlling and shaping the learning programme, ensuring that opportunities for study are not missed and that their educational goals remain a priority for them.

Comparing the public and private centres, I recognised that the strategies and approaches ALLs used to negotiate change in their favour differed subtly. As discussed in the previous chapter, learners at Azadi pay fees to attend the literacy class, while the public literacy centre offers classes free of charge. The accounts in this and earlier chapters reveal that ALLs in the private centre tended to approach the ALF and respond to the quality of the lessons more directly. For instance, Jabbar’s actions, going to the office to complain about the pace of the lessons, suggesting alternative teaching methods, and questioning the punishment strategies, illustrate a more assertive form of agency. This could be linked to a sense of entitlement and accountability that comes with paying fees: learners perceive themselves as clients seeking value for money.

By contrast, ALLs in the public centre approached the ALF with more caution, often using indirect means to influence change. Fattah’s persistent daily attempts to assist with dictation and demonstrate his literate identity, for example, show how agency here took the form of gradual persuasion and relationship-building rather than overt challenge. Others in the public centre avoided direct critique of the ALF’s methods, choosing instead to demonstrate competence or reliability to earn influence.

These contrasts suggest that the material conditions of the learning context, particularly the economic transaction of paying fees, reshape the social dynamics of power and voice. In the private centre, agency appeared as explicit negotiation, while in the public centre it operated through more subtle and relational strategies. This comparison underlines that agency is not only shaped by individual motivation but also by institutional setting and learners' perceived social position within it (Kabeer, 1999, 2024; Street, 1984; Rowlands, 1995).

Overall, the relationship between ALFs and ALLs is not one-sided. While the facilitators have the authority to set the curriculum and select the teaching material, ALLs influence these through their feedback, requests and persistent follow-up. This dynamic creates a space for negotiation and adaptation, which has led to the negotiation of power between ALLs and ALFs.

The accounts in this subsection underscore the relational and negotiated nature of power in the adult literacy classroom. The findings reveal how agency is exercised at the learner's level through both influencing teaching content and shaping teaching approaches and policies. For example, Jabbar's and Fattah's actions exemplify Rowlands' (1995) notion of 'power to' as they challenge existing practices and successfully advocate for alternative approaches, while also exercising 'power-with' by framing their advocacy to benefit all learners, not just themselves. The facilitator's responsiveness further reflects a dialogical and mutual relationship between teacher and learner, highlighting Kabeer's (1999) concept of the 'relational' dimension of agency, wherein learners' capacity to act is realised through negotiation and dialogue with institutional authority.

Moreover, these forms of agency have collective effects, as changes in policy or practice can benefit the broader group, particularly those facing financial or learning challenges (Rowlands, 1995; Berger, 2005). Agency is thus not solely an individual or top-down process. The elderly ALL's case in proposing a turn-taking system shows culturally recognised identities, such as age and seniority. This reflects social authority, which legitimises agency within the classroom. At the same time, considering Lukes' (1974) third dimension of power, we can see how taken-for-granted norms (e.g., showing respect to teachers or elders) shape what kinds of action learners

perceive as acceptable or possible. Even as learners negotiate and resist, these internalised assumptions define the boundaries of contestation and the subtle ways in which power continues to operate. Overall, these cases demonstrate that power in the adult literacy context is relational and negotiated within the social structure, rather than always being imposed from above (Kabeer, 1999). This makes the classroom a dynamic site where learners actively participate in shaping their educational experience.

#### 7.4.1 Agency in Workplace, Home and Religious Domains

Before joining adult literacy courses, ALLs have been managing their lives and deciding for their families, personal businesses and occupations for years. They continue to do so at different levels for their families, colleagues and co-workers. Being obedient to classroom policies and the ALFs' social position in the class have restricted their exercise of agency to some extent. However, domains outside the classroom provided more opportunities for them to exercise and negotiate their agency and power using their identities as males and often as literate figures.

For instance, as a security guard at a park in the centre of the city, Firouz experienced increased working hours during the fasting month (*Ramadan*) because people often leave their homes and hotel rooms and hang out in the parks after they break their fast in the evening. He missed a few literacy classes during this time. I visited him at his workplace and saw another person helping him at the park's gate. When I asked about the reason for his absence, he introduced the new person:

*Ustad Jan*, when it's not Ramadan, we usually close the park before it gets dark. People usually don't come after it gets dark. Now, in the *Ramadan* month ..., people mostly come to the park at night. It gets so crowded ... I cannot work both during the day and at night while I am fasting. I talked to my boss to add more people in different shifts, but he ignored me. This gentleman (tapping on the person's shoulder) is my personal worker. I pay him from my salary to help me a few hours so that I can sleep a little. The boss saw him, but he didn't say anything. I think he is happy as long as I don't ask him for money (smiling).

Whilst Firouz's employer did not agree to pay for extra help, he decided to hire someone he trusted to decrease his workload and pay the new person from his own pocket. When I asked him if he could afford this, he replied, "Money is not better than my health." Aside from showing his agency, his decision to pay from his income to this person and instead rest and stay healthy while he was in need of this money suggests that he carefully evaluates the pros and cons of each side. He prioritises his needs and is ready to sacrifice something to reach his goals.

I have also seen Firouz exercising his autonomy at work by deciding who should pay the entrance fee and who should be exempt from payment. The following fieldnote explains a situation of this kind.

It's 4pm on a beautiful sunny day and I am sitting on a chair with Firouz at the entrance of the park. A young man with a school bag and a book in his hand wants to enter the park. He puts his hand in his pocket to pay the fee, but Firouz tells him that he could enter without paying. The man thanked him and entered. Firouz turned his face to me and said "Poor students, where's your income? This guy is a university student. He comes to the park to study. I don't want to charge him for studying."

Since the park is located in the centre of a busy city, it serves people with cool shade on the green grass and under the beautiful silk trees. People, mostly those from other provinces, come to the park for leisure and stay away from the busy city life. University students also enjoy the green environment and come to study in the park. Firouz's decision not to charge students demonstrates his appreciation for education. Additionally, while Firouz holds a lower position of power compared to his boss, he demonstrates his agency and makes decisions on issues which are normally decided or guided by the park manager, such as hiring a co-worker and offering exemptions.

Firouz is a hardworking and trustworthy person who makes his employers trust him and give him more authority when he attempts to decide on issues related to his job. He narrated that when he was working on a large poultry farm in Iran, the owner asked him

to hire two trusted workers. Firouz encouraged his cousins to move from Afghanistan to Iran to work with him at the farm. He hired them and the owner was very happy with their work, as Firouz stated.

Although in the above accounts, the resources, such as manpower and funds, were initially not provided by his employers, he managed to find ways to make decisions that benefited him. However, he had the choice to either work all day and night or hire help at his own cost, as well as choose colleagues he trusted.

In another example, Fattah has changed occupations multiple times to find one that fits his schedule and priorities. He said he has been looking for a source of income that would support his family while allowing him to continue his literacy studies. He explained that he was a cook in a hotel and was paid well, but because he had to work and prepare breakfast for customers early in the morning and could not join the literacy course, he left that job. Now, he works as a vendor during the day and cleans a wedding hall in the evenings, giving him enough time to study and join the literacy class.

Working as a vendor, Fattah takes blankets, pillows and scarves from a merchant without paying, and brings them to the street market where many people come to buy things from vendors on the street. After he sells them, he brings the money back to the merchant and gets his commission from the sales. The prices are not fixed; he might sell a product at a lower price to one person and at a higher price to another. The merchant sets low prices on the items and then he decides how much he adds as a benefit. When I asked him how he decides on the prices for customers, he explained, “I know the market price, and I understand people when I see and talk to them ... I can see he/she has money or is a poor person. You know *Ustad Jan*, I don’t get a lot of benefits from poor people.”

He has been given the choice to sell the products at any price for profit. His business style, while considering customers’ affordability and prioritising people’s income over his own, shows his agency and socioeconomic understanding. Changing jobs to balance work and education highlights his agency in shaping his life circumstances. This adaptability demonstrates how some ALLs actively pursue opportunities that align with their educational goals and personal priorities.

Additionally, Asqar, the cleaner at the theology school, is involved in making serious decisions in his workplace at the university. One day, while I was visiting him at his workplace, I noticed a gadget that looked like a handgun in front of him. I asked him about it; he explained that it was a thermometer. He said, “This one, *Ustad Jan*, I use it to check the students’ temperature. If their temperature is higher than 38 (C), they are suspected of having COVID (-19). For the safety of everyone, I don’t let them enter the building if their temperature is high.” The data for this research project was collected during the COVID-19 pandemic, a very sensitive time. The university students returned after the quarantine, but strict measures were in place to prevent the spread of the virus. Students were checked before entering, and those with high temperatures were not allowed in. Keeping this situation in mind, Asqar, despite his limited literacy skills, makes decisions based on the reading from the thermometer whether the students can safely enter the Theology building. This illustrates how ALLs can occupy positions of influence and make critical decisions that could impact the well-being of others, thereby asserting their agency within the work domain.

Two of my ALL participants lead small groups of people in their workplaces. One is Hashem, who has dual roles: general manager and the representative of the sofa company owned by his uncle, as well as manager of one of the carpentry sections. There are three managers under Hashem’s supervision (a carpenter, a tailor, a painter), each leading different sections of the company. Hashem is responsible for ensuring that everyone knows their daily tasks and has all necessary equipment, tools and materials. He receives the order from his uncle regarding customer requests and then divides the work with Zabi, who manages the other carpentry section. After they complete the primary cutting and assembly, the pieces are sent to the painter, who finishes them, and then to the tailor for any necessary fabric work. Every morning, before starting his job, Hashem visits all the sections to ensure everything is in order and that his colleagues are ready to begin the day.

Hashem’s section is located in a corner facing the sun, which makes it very hot in summer. He works with two teenagers in this section. One day, I asked Hashem why he did not have a cooling system. He replied, “*Ustad Jan*, I don’t think it’s fair to have air conditioning in my section while other brothers have nothing. Allah doesn’t like it.” His

belief that "Allah doesn't like it" underscores a moral framework guiding his decisions, emphasising that his agency is informed by values of equity and communal well-being. This could be something he learned from his literacy class, where the facilitator often advises them on moral issues. Furthermore, his strong sense of fairness and empathy toward his colleagues is impressive.

Hashem is mostly involved in high-stakes decisions, such as approving workers' leave requests, ordering materials and equipment, and addressing customer complaints and inquiries. Although it is the owner who approves and makes the final decision, they are based on Hashem's recommendations. Being in a position of power yet choosing not to install a cooling system out of consideration for his colleagues demonstrates his care for them and reflects his sincere intentions, aligning with the notion of 'power with.'

The next participant, Zabi, leads four people at the same company. He manages another carpentry section, and one of his apprentices is older than he is, while the other three are younger, in their twenties. As discussed in the previous chapter, Zabi has been managing his family since he was a teenager. He is very calm and rarely gets angry. For instance, during my visit, one of the apprentices accidentally dropped a board while carrying it. The board was broken, but Zabi simply looked at him and said, "It's okay, clean it up and bring another one." They had to take another big board and cut it to the appropriate dimensions, which took about 20 minutes. I observed that the apprentice appeared a bit embarrassed but not scared. When this happened, initially, I expected Zabi to punish him, as such behaviour is common among employers in trades like carpenters, mechanics and drivers. However, he remained very calm. At first, I thought my presence might have influenced his decision to refrain from being harsh; however, the apprentice would likely have been fearful if Zabi had previously treated him poorly in similar situations.

Zabi has not formally studied anger management, conflict resolution, emotional intelligence, or leadership techniques; however, his background in managing stressful situations with his father and siblings might have prepared him for any potential tension, like the one above. This experience has enhanced his agency as an effective manager and leader in his workplace, enabling him to make sound decisions.

The experiences of Firouz, Fattah, Asqar, Hashem and Zabi in their workplace and home domains illustrate the multifaceted nature of agency among ALLs and what counts as everyday agency in contextual spaces. Each participant has choices to make, and each demonstrates a unique blend of decision-making skills, emotional intelligence and moral values that empower them to employ their agency in challenging circumstances. Through Kabeer's lens, these are instances of everyday, negotiated agency 'from below,' where learners use their own sense of judgement, care and values to make small but meaningful choices (Kabeer, 2024).

Firouz's ability to adapt to his workload during Ramadan and Fattah's strategic job changes highlight their determination to balance work, education and wellbeing, showcasing the sacrifices they are willing to make to reach their priorities and goals. All in all, aside from personal motivation, it is the community expectations and available opportunities that inform their decisions (see Street, 1984; Kabeer, 1999).

In the religious domain, ALLs show agency by choosing how, where and with whom they learn religious literacy (see Chapter 5, Section 5.1.2). For instance, Rashid (in Section 5.1.3.2, Digital Literacy) decided to invest in purchasing a smartpen from another country and use it to practise reading the Qur'an. This highlights what Kabeer (1999) and Rowlands (1995) call 'power to,' setting a goal and taking action to reach it, even outside the usual learning paths. Additionally, Asqar's choice to focus on speaking and giving religious talks, with help from his family, is another example of making decisions and adapting to what works best for him (see Literacy Chapter, Section 5.1.3.3).

In Chapter 5 (see Fieldnotes, Literacy Chapter 5.1.2), I discussed that men build understanding, share stories, listen to advice and help each other learn in masjids; this fits with Lukes' (1974) third dimension of power and Rowlands' (1995) theory of 'power with'. Still, the religious teachers in masjids often have the authority to decide what to teach and how. Although all the choices are available to them, they usually prefer to focus on reading and speaking rather than writing or maths. This can limit what learners can choose or do, showing 'power over' (i.e., by the facilitator) (see Section 7.6, Constraints in the current chapter).

Things that help agency in this domain include support from family and friends, having a place like the masjid to learn, and – when possible – digital tools to learn on their own (see Literacy Chapter, Digital Literacies, 5.2.2.2). Furthermore, the ALLs often appreciated being recognised as hegemonic masculine religious figures (i.e., as *Qari*, *Mullah* or *Sofi*), which can encourage them to employ their agency and enact their power in other domains, as well (see Chapter 6, Section 6.3). On the other hand, limits come from not having enough resources, the focus on just a few skills, and the way authority works in the masjid (see the current chapter, Section 7.6.1, Ethics and Moral Lessons as Constraints). These examples show that agency in the religious domain is something that is shaped with others and is affected by both support and limits in the community (see Chapter 4).

## 7.5 Literacies and Literate Identities as Enablers

Literacy and literate identity also play important roles in enabling agency and enacting power across all social institutions. I have discussed earlier in this chapter that ALLs negotiate their agency and power in the classroom through their literate identities to influence ALFs' perceptions of them, thereby changing their teaching methods and classroom policies (i.e., Fattah's case: insisting on helping his teacher; Jabbar's case: proposing alternative teaching methods and punishment strategies). Literacy has also shaped the formation of agency, and for some ALLs, it acts as an enabler for exercising their agency and power in other domains as well.

For example, in the workplace domain, Samad, the senior apprentice of Zabi, related Zabi's literacy skills to his role as a manager of the carpentry section and as a supporter of his family. When I asked him whether he enjoys working in this section with Zabi, he said, "In my eyes (meaning 'of course'), Zabi *Jan* is the best; he has literacy, brother. He's smart and handles all kinds of challenges. Look [pointing at one of Zabi's brothers], brother... all his brothers are skilled, work and go to school." Samad, in his mid-30s, cannot read or write. He mentioned that he did not have the chance to go to school when he was a child and now, he is too busy with life and work to join the literacy courses. For Samad, Zabi's literate identity plays a significant role in his decision-making, agency and success both at home and in the workplace. Although, as

discussed in the previous chapter, Zabi's life experiences and his mother's support made him who he is today, Samad acknowledges that Zabi deals with challenges at work and in personal life in a smart way because he attends literacy courses.

The role of literate identity as an enabler or resource for agency and power has also been evident in my fieldnotes data from the home domain. Although I have not visited any of my participants' homes, I have collected data from their narratives during interviews and conversations at their workplaces or in the classroom. Both Asqar and Firouz explained that their wives manage the financial matters at home. Firouz's wife completed secondary school and can read and write fluently, while Asqar's wife finished primary school but attended the masjid and is very fluent in writing and reading Dari-Farsi. As I mentioned before, Firouz related his wife's literacy skills to her success as an effective housewife and a great mother. Firouz explained that his wife collects his income every evening as soon as he arrives home from work, saves it and decides what to purchase for their home and family. He added, "The only time I interfere ... and to be honest, she consults me, of course, is on big things she plans to buy. For example, a cupboard or a fridge."

Overall, the above discussion emphasises that literate identity plays a crucial role in shaping agency within both professional and personal contexts, legitimising the actors' agency and position in these settings and social institutions. It highlights the interconnectedness of literacy, social dynamics and decision-making, while also acknowledging the broader life experiences that contribute to an individual's capacity to act and make choices (Kabeer, 1999).

## 7.6 Agency Constraints

Throughout this chapter, I have discussed incidents where ALLs exercised, negotiated and performed their agency and power in various domains and social institutions. While they sometimes struggled to hold onto their core identities, such as adult male learner, father, provider or decision-maker, and act upon them accordingly, they still made their way to find alternative choices through self-made strategies. In this subsection, I focus more closely on exploring what stops them: the constraints and barriers they face in exercising their agency and enacting their power, as well as the

strategies they use to overcome these barriers. To do this, I present constraints related to ethics and moral lessons, then explore how these constraints lead to a state of liminality in ALLs, followed by a brief discussion on the role of literacy in the context of constraints.

### 7.6.1 Ethics and Moral Lessons as Constraints

In Afghanistan, ethics and moral lessons are among the top informal agenda items that parents, grandparents and elders continuously teach children at home. These lessons are reinforced by religious teachers in masjids, as the primary site of education for most children, and by teachers at schools for children and teenagers. In the school settings, ethics and moral lessons are often taught through texts in the form of short stories and tales from ancient times, from which students are expected to derive lessons. Similarly, in masjids, learners and participants in prayers are taught and advised about good deeds, reminding them that performing good actions will be rewarded by God, while engaging in evil deeds will result in punishment. Although these lessons are taught and appreciated by people in different domains, extending them to the adult literacy class can be seen to hinder the agency and power of some adult learners. While such moral education is highly valued culturally, its application and extension in adult literacy settings can unintentionally constrain the agency and self-perceptions of adult learners.

Teaching morality through literacy is very common in Saber's class. For example, one day, after giving dictation exercises to a few students, the ALF in the public centre proceeded to start the actual lesson for all students. He wrote the letters 'J' (ج), 'Ch' (چ), 'H' (ح) and 'Kh' (خ) in Dari-Farsi on the board and then provided words that began with each of these letters. For the letter 'J', he wrote 'Jawan' (meaning 'young'). Following that, he began giving advice, saying:

A young Muslim man should avoid engaging in any illegal activities. He should not steal from others, nor should he consume alcohol or commit adultery. It is important for him to recognise the value of his youth and use it in positive ways. He should have good behaviour towards his fellow brothers and those around him.

Then, he wrote another word for 'J': '*Jahan*' (meaning 'world'). He said, "If we have the chance to travel around the world, it'd be great. For example, going to Hajj in Saudi." He continued by writing another example for the letter 'J': '*Jameyat*' (meaning 'community'). He explained, "A community is a group of people who share the same goals and values. You should promise to be good individuals within your community."

The ALF then moved on to the next letter, 'Ch'. One of the students provided an example, saying "*Chaqu*", which means 'knife'. However, the ALF did not write this example on the board and instead said, "A knife is meant to peel fruits, not to stab people in the stomach." He followed this statement with a short story, saying:

Once, a person asked an elderly man whether the '*Kaake*' (machismo) of the old times was the same as that of today. The old man replied, 'The ones back then were better.' The young person asked, 'How and in what ways?' The old man answered, 'In our time, a machismo or real man would take a knife but might only scratch their opponent's body with the tip of the blade. However, nowadays some so-called machismo (*Qorutak*) would stab someone and take out their intestines just for a motorcycle.'

The term '*Kaake*' refers to a man who helps and supports others (including both women and men) without any expectations in return. He is brave and heroic, always taking the side of the oppressed and would never say 'no' if asked to assist people. He is generous and would prioritise others' benefits and needs over his own. These are the characteristics of a *Kaake*, which have positive connotations among people.

In contrast, the narrator of the above statement uses the term '*Qorutak*' to refer to the machismo of the current time. *Qorutak* carries negative connotations; it refers to a person who shows off his masculinity and power by intimidating and harming those who are subordinate. During the data collection for this project, many gang groups around the cities referred to themselves as *Qorutak*. They dress differently, wearing large baggy pants and carrying knives to impose their will on others if needed.

The learner listened to the story without showing any reaction, simply looking at the ALF and attentively listening. The silence could be interpreted in different ways: it could be a tactical performance of respect, passive acceptance, or silent resistance. I do not think the ALL showed any attitude regarding the usage of the knife. It was the ALF who presented the scenarios and explained the good and evil usages of knives. He continued the lesson by providing more examples for other letters. However, whenever he repeated the word 'young', he would offer advice.

He strives to connect every lesson he teaches to moral values. Here is another excerpt from a session when I visited his class:

By 6:38am, there were five students in the classroom, and the teacher finally arrived. He tried to turn on the lights, but they did not work. One of the students used the torch on his mobile phone to provide light, and the teacher began the class by dictating from the learners' notebooks. Another student turned on another torch to help his peer (Shamim) write on the board. Shamim's homework was about the reason for revealing one of the Qur'an's chapters. This caught the teacher's gaze, and he turned his attention to the rest of the class and said, "Let me share with you a short story about Prophet Mohammad (peace and blessings be upon him). One day, while he was with his companions, two individuals approached him – a blind Muslim and a non-Muslim man. The Prophet greeted the non-Muslim man first, unintentionally causing the blind person to feel neglected due to his blindness. Subsequently, Allah revealed Surah 'Abasa' to the Prophet. This revelation led the Prophet to pay special attention to disabled individuals, particularly the blind man. Whenever the blind man would come to the Prophet, he would lower his scarf for him to sit. Now, let us reflect on the level of care and consideration we show towards the blind and handicapped members of our society."

Fieldnotes, Western Zone, 18/04/2021

Although the ALF was directly targeting the ALLs when advising on morality, the ALLs did not seem to take his advice personally. In fact, some even praised him. For instance, one day as I was observing the class, two white-bearded ALLs were sitting next to me. When the ALF gave an example from the Prophet about respecting parents and the elderly, one of the bearded ALLs looked at the other and said, “This is the real lesson! May Allah bless the teacher.” The other nodded in agreement and said, “Exactly, I swear you are right.”

I believe advice could be categorised into two different kinds: you can advise someone to do good things, or you can advise someone not to do bad things. The former focuses on positive attitudes, while the latter emphasises the negative. Most of this ALF’s advice was mostly deemed to focus on negative issues. By providing stories and tales of moral lessons and constantly giving examples of this kind to the adult learners, I believe he perceives the non-literate individuals, or in this context the ALLs, as individuals who need to be taught about morals and ethics. However, he explained in his interview that he tries to fill the gap:

These people, you see, they missed school because of the economy, family, culture or other life problems. School is the place where you learn knowledge, morals and cultural values. These poor people are busy in different occupations looking to feed their families. They missed these opportunities, and I try my best to teach them and cover these issues in my lessons.

Interview Excerpt, Western Zone, 23/02/2021

The ALF uses the phrase “these people” to refer to his learners, attributing all sorts of problems they have in life to their lack of schooling. He believes that school is “the place” where “these people” could learn moral lessons and ethics. However, he overlooks other domains and communities – such as family, home, mosques, workplace and sports centres – where they spend the majority of their daily time. Schools in Afghanistan operate for four to five hours, while students spend at least ten hours each day outside the school environment, interacting and learning moral, cultural, and ethical values.

As shown in the above account, the ALF's deficit perspective (i.e., believing that the ALLs are missing something) has led him to connect his lessons to ethics and morality. This view was also expressed by the ALF in the private sector when comparing literate and non-literate citizens. He said,

There is a huge difference between a literate and illiterate person... for example, if we consider their behaviour ... their way of talking is very different from other people - people who have literacy. We should do something to change them in all aspects, we should bring changes .... I mean in their behaviour, their talking, in addition to, for example, teaching them, we can make them literate, we need to bring changes in them. So that they can, for example ... using literacy ... they can bring even changes in their lives. When he/she is literate, maybe he will learn a *Hadith*, maybe he could be a role-model to the people around him and add to his/her general knowledge. Literacy can change their lives.

Interview Excerpt, Western Zone, 16/02/2021

The above ALF draws a line between 'we' (the literate people) and 'they' (the non-literate people) believing that 'they' (the ALLs) lack 'proper behaviour'. He sees himself as a person who can 'change' their behaviour in the adult literacy class. This reflects the "great divide" view of literacy versus illiteracy (Goody, 1968), which New Literacy Studies has critiqued for ignoring how literacy is embedded in social practice (Street, 1984).

The possible reason the ALFs are addressing these issues and assigning these identities to the ALLs in the class – while some ALLs appreciate it – is, from my personal observation, that the crime rate has dramatically gone up during the data collection for this project in Afghanistan. A couple of days before visiting Saber's class, Salam, a truck driver ALL, mentioned that while he was parking his truck on the road outside the classroom, someone stole his truck battery. There are many bicycles and motorbikes outside the classroom belonging to the ALLs, and the ALF was constantly checking from the door to ensure the bikes were in place. Afghanistan's prolonged insecurity and economic crisis have left many young people without work, and in my own

observation, incidents of crime have been becoming more frequent, particularly in urban areas.

Furthermore, I believe the ALFs' perceptions of ALLs could reflect the cultural belief in Afghanistan that 'illiteracy leads to poverty and poverty leads to crime'. This idea has roots in both religious and social discourses. For example, there is a well-known *Hadith* in which the Prophet prays, 'I seek refuge in Allah from poverty', which, as religious scholars explain, highlights the dangers of poverty as a source of moral and social vulnerability. Social science research has reported links between low literacy, limited educational opportunities and poverty in Afghanistan, and notes associations between poverty and some forms of crime and violence (Ebrahimi, 2010). Given data limitations and context-specific dynamics, I read this as correlation rather than a settled causal claim; further research is required to support this claim.

However, most of the adults in these literacy courses are economically independent – although they work in insecure and labour-demanding jobs – and some (i.e., Rashid and Jabbar) are wealthier than the ALFs. As discussed before, some ALLs, such as Asqar and Fattah, are perceived as religious figures outside the literacy classroom, role-modelling a pious person and preaching against criminality and evil actions.

The delivery of moral lessons through a deficit lens in the classroom to adult learners constrains their agency in several ways. For example, by positioning ALLs as lacking not only literacy but also proper ethics and morals, ALFs undermine learners' self-perceptions as competent moral actors. This view ignores the fact that ALLs are already socialised into rich ethical traditions through home, mosque and community. This 'othering' silences alternative moral frameworks and narrows the scope for negotiation and contestation among ALLs, who are already moral teachers in other domains. Yet, in the context of adult literacy classes, the space for such negotiation is defined by the ALF's authority and the structural reproduction of the 'deficit' discourse. However, the ALLs keep pushing back against the authority of the ALFs.

While some ALLs agree with or even praise the facilitator's moral lessons, this may be because they strategically act this way rather than genuinely internalising these lessons. Having said that, the lack of visible disagreement or contestation might not

necessarily indicate a lack of agency, but it does signal the constraining effects of hierarchical power relations that limit what can be said, performed or resisted within the classroom domain (Long & Long, 1992; Rowlands, 1995).

This scenario is also consistent with Lukes' (1974) third dimension, where naturalised norms shape what people perceive as reasonable or desirable. Since ALFs hold high social and cultural status in the Afghan community, their utterances, even when carrying deficit perspectives, infantilising tones and morally prescriptive messages, are often praised and accepted.

Additionally, regarding traits constraining ALLs' agency, I can also refer to constraints on agency that are caused by 'illiteracy'. Most of the scenarios in which ALLs faced challenges in exercising their agency and power with regard to literacy were discussed in both Chapter 5 (Literacy and Numeracy Practices) and Chapter 6 (Masculinities). In this section, I briefly cross-reference some of the most relevant episodes to discuss how 'illiteracy' acts as a constraint for these men.

In Chapter 5, I discussed how limited access to valued literacy practices in the workplace domain limited Ali's agency among his colleagues, when attempting to deal with the record book. I also discussed how Firouz's lack of confidence in debating or discussing issues with literate individuals reflects the ways in which certain forms of literacy are socially privileged. The feeling of shame and embarrassment as young men when unable to read texts or signboards led Fattah, Jabbar and Zabi to join the literacy course, as discussed in Chapter 5. Furthermore, I discussed that ALLs like Mahmoud (the security guard), even when their agency is performed through masculine roles, are constrained by limited literacy. For example, Mahmoud was offered a desk job, but he was unable to accept the position because he could not record names, a job-based literacy practice required for the work. Additionally, Chapter 6 (Section 6.1.1) provides further evidence of agency under constraint, particularly in the case of premature fatherhood, where roles are assumed out of necessity rather than merely having the options to choose. These accounts demonstrate how 'illiteracy' can directly restrict both employment opportunities, social mobility and participation in community life.

### 7.6.2 Constraints Leading to Liminality

Coming from domains such as home, work and religious communities, where these adults are decision-makers and respected, they sometimes experience confusion regarding their dual identities in the classroom. This is particularly evident when literacy practices and expectations from one domain overlap with those of another – what [Gee \(1990\)](#) calls ‘borderland’ between domains. At the same time, the classroom setup, with connected desks and benches designed for school children and limited space for adults, places ALLs in a ‘liminal’ situation with regard to their status outside the classroom compared to their status within it.

As discussed in Chapter 4, liminality refers to an uncertain, in-between state ([O’Reilly, 2019](#)). In my study, the ALLs often found themselves in a similar space, wondering whether to act like adults or like children/students. Thus, liminality in my study refers to situations where the learners were uncertain, confused and in a state of being lost on whether to act according to the norms of the classroom or the norms of their adult social roles.

For example, I observed Firouz, the doorkeeper at the park, a couple of times hesitating about whether to raise his hand to speak in class, or whether he should knock on the door and raise his hand and ask for permission when entering the classroom. Similarly, Rashid, an older ALL, kept raising and lowering his hand when he wanted to ask something of the ALF; I could see the confusion on his face as he kept switching between raising one finger and all five fingers.

These feelings of liminality arise because the classroom setting and the facilitator’s behaviour indicate a formal school environment – something the ALLs might be familiar with through TV programmes or visits to their children’s schools. On the other hand, their identities as fathers and adults conflict with their status in the classroom, hindering their agency. Being in domains outside the classroom, ALLs display their agency and power in different ways, often acting with confidence. However, once inside, they often feel compelled to behave like school students, which at times leads to confusion and a sense of being lost.

Adult learners move from formal programme routines to informal practices in several ways, including their diverse identities and the decision-making they engage in within the classroom. At some points, the ALLs find themselves in a state of liminality – not knowing whether to act or be formal or informal or whether to follow the formalities or informalities. They sometimes shift between these two modes, where formalities refer to actions adults take regardless of what is ‘good’ or ‘bad’. Below is a list of formal and informal activities within the classroom domain:

**Formalities:**

- ALLs raise their hands when they want to leave the classroom and ask for permission to do so. They do not leave unless the ALF grants their request.
- ALLs knock on the door and ask for permission to enter the classroom.
- ALLs sit in rows at desks similar to those of school children.
- ALLs are assigned punishments, such as writing multiple pages of assignments.
- ALLs are instructed to remain quiet and listen to the ALF.
- ALLs use a plural pronoun in Dari-Farsi to show respect when addressing a second-person singular.
- ALLs repeat the words as the ALF reads them, without the ALF asking them to do so.

**Informalities:**

- ALLs go to the board and organise the order of who goes first without the ALF’s intervention.
- ALLs stop ALFs outside the classroom for additional lessons.
- ALLs enter and leave the classroom anytime they wish.
- ALLs use a singular pronoun when addressing a second person singular.
- ALLs raise their feet close to the electric heater to warm them in front of the ALF, which is considered impolite for schoolchildren.

Another challenge related to the conflict of identities and power arises when the ALLs are unsuccessful in influencing the ALFs to address their needs and desires. For instance, Firouz missed a couple of the literacy sessions towards the end of my data collection period. When I visited him at his work, he stated:

Before, with teacher Usman, we were given letters to make words from them and then we were working on making many sentences in small groups. But now with this teacher (Saber), we only work on dictation on the board. I thought to myself that I could do this at home with my wife and kids.

Fieldnotes, Western Zone, 06/05/2021

Unlike Jabbar, who suggested alternative teaching methods to his facilitator, Firouz was not satisfied with the teaching methodologies that his facilitator was implementing and chose not to communicate this to his ALF. Thus, he left the class. In the above scenario, I believe this is a matter of identity conflict and power dynamics. It seems the previous facilitator made the ALLs responsible for their learning by putting them into groups and asking them to generate and write words from letters. This way, the ALLs were empowered by using their potential to make something new. This is exactly what they do outside the class; they are responsible for their life matters and make decisions in different domains of life. The current ALF, by contrast, seems to have taken this sense of agency from them which has led Firouz to leave the class and be quiet.

In summary, the experiences ALLs had of liminality, as discussed above, have roots in the tension between their established identities as decision-makers outside the classroom domain and the student roles they are expected to perform inside. This uncertain state and confusion, shaped by both formal structures and shifting classroom dynamics, often limits the ALLs' agency and sense of belonging in this new context.

## 7.7 Conclusion

Collectively, these narratives underscore the significant role of agency in shaping the lives of ALLs, revealing how their decision-making processes at different levels and

across various social institutions and domains are influenced not only by their status but also by the circumstances, ethical frameworks and lived experiences within their everyday contexts. This chapter emphasises the crucial role of literacies and literate identities as resources that influence the ALLs' agency, legitimising their decisions, social standing and the respect they command in their communities. Furthermore, this chapter also highlights the agency of ALFs and the choices available to them within the adult literacy programme. The ALFs' decisions are greatly influenced by – and sometimes limited to – the choices, needs and negotiations that ALLs present in the classroom.

Overall, the chapter shows that agency exists and operates at multiple levels with distinct constraints and possibilities at each level. These levels include policy, administrative, facilitator and learner domains. The analysis showed that agency within each level shapes and is shaped by other levels, which highlights the contextual and relational nature of agency. Furthermore, the chapter revealed the existence of different dimensions and forms of power (i.e., power over, power to, power within and power with) across these levels, and shows that power, in all its forms, is negotiated, resisted or enacted by ALLs, ALFs and policymakers.

Despite the presence of rigid top-down systems and policies in adult literacy programmes, some ALLs actively challenge classroom norms (e.g., elderly ALL proposing a turn-taking system), influence content (e.g., asking about how to write contracts and record shopping), adapt rules (e.g., proposing a punishment strategy), and request changes in teaching practices (e.g., proposing alternative teaching approaches). This illustrates everyday forms of resistance and micro-transformation within these systems. Furthermore, the chapter shows that factors such as curriculum rigidity, deficit perspectives, institutional hierarchies, internalised norms, ethics, moral lessons and liminality are major structural and everyday constraints on agency in the context of adult literacy in Afghanistan.

## Chapter 8

### Discussion and Conclusion

#### 8.1 Introduction

Initially, the main purpose of the thesis was to find out the ways some ALLs practise agency through their identity and decision-making in relation to literacy in different social contexts. However, as I entered the fieldwork and collected data, I observed more than just decisions and literacies. I recorded instances where the ALLs were engaged in various literacy practices in different domains or social institutions. I noticed that some literacy practices were valued more than others and that gender and masculinity emerged strongly throughout the data. Thus, I revised my research questions to focus more on the kind of literacy practices that were valued the most among ALLs and their communities in different domains and how these practices shape masculinity and inform agency and power among men.

An important aspect of my research is its focus on adult male literacy learners. These learners are often overlooked in both academic research and policy frameworks. As previously discussed, the majority of literacy programmes, policies and funding initiatives tend to prioritise women and girls, reflecting global and national efforts to address long-standing gender disparities in education in Afghanistan.

By centring this study on adult male learners, this research brings much-needed attention to a group whose literacy journeys are shaped by unique pressures, responsibilities, identities and social expectations. These men are often navigating complex intersections of work, family, cultural identities and masculinities, domains where literacy is not only a tool for communication but also a marker of competence, respectability, respect and authority.

Through an ethnographic exploration of their literacy practices across home, classroom, workplace and religious settings, this research interrogates how adult men perform, negotiate and contest masculinities in relation to their literacy learning. In doing so, the study sheds light on the ways in which literacy can become a site of

agency and empowerment, or conversely, a source of tension, shame, subordination or exclusion.

As discussed in the context chapter, ‘illiteracy’ among men is often associated with shame and diminished masculinity, prompting many to seek out literacy as a means to reclaim respect and status (Connell, 2005; Mosawi, 2020).

The context of education in Afghanistan is complex and deeply affected by political shifts and cultural expectations. Across the country’s turbulent history, successive regimes have implemented their own policies and priorities, significantly impacting the development, accessibility and quality of education (Samady, 2001; Barfield, 2010; Gregorian, 1969; Emadi, 2002). Among these changes, gender-related dynamics have often been most visible. For example, under the Taliban, education for girls and women was largely banned – and still is as I am writing this thesis, severely restricting their access to public life (Baiza, 2013; Human Rights Watch, 2001; Kandiyoti, 2007; Mosawi, 2023). In contrast, the Islamic Republic supported girls’ and women’s education for over twenty years, marking a period of expanded educational opportunity (UNESCO, 2022a; Ministry of Education, 2016; ANAF AE, 2013). During this time, policy documents, academic studies and international reports predominantly focused on addressing gender disparities by prioritising the education of women and girls (UNESCO, 2021; see also context chapter (Chapter 2, Sections 2.3 and 2.4). As discussed in Chapter 6, this policy emphasis contributed to the feminisation of literacy programmes, making male learners feel invisible or stigmatised and, at times, experiencing a sense of shame for participating in spaces perceived as feminine. While these efforts were essential, they also meant that adult male literacy learners have received comparatively little attention in research, policy and programming. As a result, there remains a significant gap in understanding the specific experiences and needs of adult men in literacy education. This thesis addresses that gap and contributes new perspectives to the literature on adult literacy in Afghanistan and beyond.

To address these gaps, I employed a one-year ethnographic approach, engaging closely with adult male literacy learners across various social domains. Ethnographic engagement, as described in the context and methodology chapters, enabled me to

build trust and to respect the ‘funds of cultural knowledge’ that men bring to literacy learning (Moll et al. cited in [Rogers, 2008](#); [Rogers, 2014](#)). This approach involved spending extended periods with participants, observing and participating in their classroom activities, visiting them at their workplaces and in masjid communities, and maintaining regular informal communication. Data were collected through detailed fieldnotes, semi-structured interviews, informal conversations and SMS messages, allowing for an in-depth and holistic understanding of the everyday realities of literacy and learning. The research was grounded in the belief that meaningful insights emerge from building trust, respecting local knowledge and engaging in sustained dialogue with participants.

As the research progressed, several key themes emerged, including the social nature of literacy, the construction and negotiation of masculinities, and the varied forms of *agency* and *power* enacted by adult learners. To analyse these themes, I drew on multiple theories and ideas such as the social practice theory of literacy ([Street, 1984](#)) which provided a foundation for understanding literacy as context-dependent and embedded in social life, [Connell’s \(1995, 2005\)](#) work on masculinities which offered tools to examine how men perform and contest masculine identities within and through literacy practices and theories of agency and power ([Kabeer, 1999](#); [Lukes, 1974/2005](#); [Rowlands, 1995; 1997](#)) which informed my analysis of how adult male learners exercise choice, make decisions, navigate constraints and create opportunities for themselves and others. I used these theories and ideas as analytical lenses for this study believing that literacy practices shape, inform and structure masculinities; masculinities, in turn, enable or constrain agency. The entire framework is encapsulated within power, which operates as an overarching force that structures access to and the legitimacy and valuation of particular literacy practices, masculinities and forms of agency.

In light of these analytical lenses, in the last three chapters (Chapters 5, 6 and 7), I have presented and discussed my findings on literacy, masculinity, agency and power, drawing on detailed ethnographic examples from participants in diverse settings. This chapter synthesises these findings, focusing on the research questions and objectives set out above. It begins with a brief outline of the findings from Chapters 5, 6 and 7,

then discusses the themes that emerged as conclusions from this study. The chapter concludes by reflecting on the significance of the research, presenting implications for policy and practice, and offering recommendations and reflections on limitations and future research.

## 8.2 Key Findings: Literacies, Masculinities, Agency and Power

### 8.2.2 Literacy Practices

Throughout this thesis, I have explored how various literacy practices are deeply embedded within the everyday lives of adult male learners. I have discussed how these literacies influence ALLs' identities – particularly their masculinities – and enable their agency and power. This section provides a synthesised discussion. The findings reveal that ALLs have been engaged in various literacy practices across their different domains of life. The findings also highlight that certain literacy practices were valued more frequently than others in domains outside the classroom. Among these, numeracy, religious and digital literacies, and calligraphy were most valued and held the greatest importance for both ALLs and their communities.

**Numeracy**, as discussed earlier in the thesis, in Afghanistan, as in many other contexts, is not traditionally associated with women and is instead perceived as a field more closely related to men. This gendered association is woven through Afghan society, where skills like maths, engineering and management are often seen as part of the male domain. As a result, numeracy is often undervalued within adult literacy curricula that focus on women and is positioned as a secondary or optional subject compared to language subject. This means that, in practice, numeracy is placed as an afterthought in many programmes, even though it is a vital skill for so many adults, like men, who rely heavily on numeracy in their work and family lives (see Chapter 5 for examples such as carpentry, vending and guarding bicycles and motorbikes in parks). My findings support this assumption, as many men in my research used numeracy constantly in their jobs and family life, whether measuring wood as a carpenter, running a small business or keeping track of household finances. Both public and private centres offer basic numeracy lessons to adult literacy learners as part of their curricula under the maths subject. However, compared to language subject,

numeracy, as [Gerger \(2018\)](#) notes, is often “left in the shadows, like a kind of poor cousin” (p. 44). It is usually taught only once a week and covers very basic levels, just as it is for young children in school. Interestingly, [Nirantar \(2007\)](#) makes the same observation for the Indian context, noting that adult numeracy is frequently treated the same way as children’s maths subject.

What really stands out in my study is the gap between classroom maths and the rich, practical numeracy skills adults actually use every day. In formal settings, maths is taught in a decontextualised, standardised way, often not connected with the rich and meaningful numeracy practices that adults use informally in their daily lives. Problems are typically presented out of context, making it difficult for ALLs to participate in classroom discussions or see the relevance to their own experiences. Yet, when facilitators linked maths problems to real-life situations, such as carpentry, selling goods at the market or household budgeting, learners were far more engaged and eager to participate. This echoes the social practice theory of literacy and numeracy ([Street, 1984; Barton and Hamilton, 1998](#)), which holds that literacy and numeracy as social practices are socially constructed, context-dependent and often acquired informally through experience rather than through formal schooling. Adult learners are not empty vessels but bring valuable, hands-on numeracy knowledge into the classroom, which is too often overlooked by standardised, top-down curricula.

Importantly, this thesis found that both literacy and numeracy played a significant role in shaping people’s identity and social positioning. As learners developed these skills, they gained greater respect and agency in various domains of life. For example, Asqar (the cleaner at the university) and Firouz’s wives used their numeracy abilities to manage complex household finances, showing confidence in budgeting, saving and making informed decisions. These everyday skills are learned out of necessity, at home, in markets, or at work, not in formal education. This finding is consistent with [Gerger’s \(2018\)](#) evaluation of a Senegalese adult numeracy programme, which demonstrated that adult numeracy education fosters not just technical skills but also enhances identity, social standing and agency. Both this thesis and Gerger’s work underscore the transformative potential of adult numeracy learning in building confidence and social capital.

Another key observation is that most activities and practices covered in formal curricula and textbooks are based on what practitioners and curriculum developers think ALLs need, rather than on what learners actually do or already know. As Ajmal, an ALF in a private centre, put it, “they don’t know ... we should teach them”, reflecting a deficit perspective that sees learners as lacking rather than possessing valuable knowledge. In line with the social practice model and the findings of [Nirantar \(2007\)](#), this thesis suggests that more effective and empowering literacy programmes should be based on “what people already know, determining what their existing literacy and numeracy practices are and building on that” ([Nirantar, 2007, p. 10](#)). When we start from what learners already do, whether it is running a market stall or building furniture, lessons become more useful and relevant. This approach values and integrates informal learning, drawing on learners’ real-life practices and experiences, which makes lessons more useful and relevant and validates learners’ identities.

Through this study, I found that numeracy is one of the most utilised and valued practices that ALLs engage with outside the classroom. The persistent question remains: why is there so little attention to this subject in adult literacy programmes? One reason may be that literacy programmes in Afghanistan have been predominantly designed for women, leading curriculum designers and practitioners to assume that, because women are rarely present in market or business contexts and are perceived as less involved with numeracy, numeracy should be less represented in the curriculum.

I would like to conclude in this section that adult numeracy is not just a technical subject, it is woven into people’s work, family life and sense of self. Drawing on the social practice perspective ([Street, 1984; Barton & Hamilton, 1998](#)) and supported by the work of [Rogers \(2014\)](#) and [McGrath \(2012\)](#), this thesis argues that adult numeracy should be recognised as a central, context-driven component of adult literacy education. By grounding curriculum in the lived realities and pre-existing knowledge of learners, and by integrating informal as well as formal learning, programmes can better foster identity, agency and meaningful participation in society. In this way, numeracy becomes not just a technical skill but a source of confidence, dignity and agency for

adult learners, connecting what happens in the classroom to the realities of everyday Afghan life.

**Religious literacy** is another kind of literacy practice that I observed in various domains. Since the majority of people in Afghanistan follow Islam as their main religion, Islamic traditions and ideology are deeply embedded in all domains of life (Kandiyoti, 2007; Marsden, 2008). In this context, where Islam shapes daily life, religious literacy means much more than just reading holy texts; it is intertwined with personal values, social status and collective identity (Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Street, 1984). In the Islamic tradition, there are numerous places where knowledge and education (either literacy, schooled or religious) are emphasised (Baiza, 2018). The findings highlight that religious literacy was used in the classroom primarily through the teaching and discussion of moral lessons, a practice often appreciated by adult learners. This echoes what Barton & Hamilton (1998) describe as ‘situated literacies,’ where reading and writing are embedded in specific cultural practices and moral frameworks.

Furthermore, religious literacy serves as a key marker of community recognition; individuals who are able to read, recite or interpret religious texts often gain respect and status within their communities (Echavez et al., 2016; Marsden, 2008). The findings also document the usage of religious literacy as a central aspect of personal identity, with participants drawing on their ability to engage with religious texts to define themselves as moral and respectable members of society. Brandt and Clinton (2002) argue that such ‘sponsored literacies’ often become resources for social positioning and legitimacy, especially in communities where religious authority is highly valued.

In classrooms, discussions around moral lessons were not just about religious obligation; they became spaces where men connected their learning to what it means to be a good son, father or neighbour. As Ahmed (1992) and Marsden (2008) have shown, Islamic literacy practices are deeply connected to the cultivation of ethical character and community belonging. These conversations often touched on honesty, respect, generosity and the responsibilities of manhood.

Religious literacy also helps men to feel rooted in their faith and community. [Street \(1984\)](#) emphasises that literacy practices often serve as anchors for belonging and identity, especially in societies where oral and written religious knowledge circulate together. It is a way of belonging, a shared language that connects them to their history and values. For many, being seen as religiously literate is an important part of their self-worth and how they want to be known in their families or in their workplace among their colleagues. It is not just about following tradition but about actively shaping their place in society and striving to live up to ideals of moral integrity and respectability.

In short, religious literacy in Afghanistan is about much more than reading. It serves as a source of dignity, belonging and moral grounding, echoing findings from [Barton & Hamilton \(1998\)](#), [Street \(1984\)](#), and [Marsden \(2008\)](#), and offers men a pathway to community respect, identity formation and the pursuit of a morally meaningful life.

**Digital literacy** is among other valued literacy practices that has recently been populated in Afghanistan. The 20 years of stable political situation during the Islamic Republic regime drew the attention of merchants to invest in telecommunication, providing mobile access and internet throughout the country. This availability encouraged people to use digital devices in their everyday lives for many purposes, such as business, communication, education and leisure activities. Similar to observations by [Warschauer \(2003\)](#) and [Selwyn \(2010\)](#), the spread of digital technology created new spaces for informal and self-directed learning that extend far beyond formal classroom boundaries.

Digital literacy has quietly become an essential part of daily life for many Afghan men, even if it is not always recognised in formal education. Men in this study regularly use smartphones and other digital tools to communicate, do business, and keep up with friends and family. I met participants who were confident using social media, messaging apps, smart pens and even digital copying machines at work, often picking up these skills informally or with help from others around them. These stories reflect what [Barton, Hamilton and Ivanic \(2000\)](#), [Barton and Hamilton \(1998\)](#) and [Street \(1984\)](#) describe as ‘situated literacies’, skills developed for real-life needs through everyday practice, not formal instruction.

What stands out is how digital literacy brings men together and helps them take part in wider social and religious life. Mobile phones make it easy for men to share poems, religious messages or motivational quotes with friends, or to join group chats that connect them to their work and faith communities. Fattah's (the vendor) experience shows this perfectly. He does not just forward any message he gets; instead, he checks with his religious teacher if he is unsure about a text, then decides which friends should receive it. This echoes findings by [Kell \(2011\)](#) and [Greenhow and Robelia \(2009\)](#) that digital communication can foster new forms of collaboration, belonging and critical engagement, especially when learners act as gatekeepers or mediators within their networks. In this way, digital literacies give men more agency, power and help them feel confident as active members of their community.

Despite their everyday use of technology, many men still see themselves as 'illiterate' because they do not always measure up to the formal textbook-based standard of literacy. This gap between what men can do and how they are seen, by themselves and by others, means digital literacy often goes unrecognised in adult education. [Barton and Lee \(2015\)](#) highlight that digital skills are often undervalued in traditional programmes, even though they are deeply practical and meaningful for learners. Recognising and building on these digital strengths in literacy programmes would not only validate what men already know, it would also make learning more relevant and empowering for their real lives.

The next literacy practice that is valued greatly, often in all domains, is **calligraphy** or beautiful handwriting. It stands out as a deeply valued skill among local people, particularly among ALLs in this study. For many adult learners, the ability to write in an elegant hand, especially using the traditional Nasta'liq script, is not just a technical accomplishment but a source of pride and a marker of respect in their families and communities. This echoes [Street's \(1984\)](#) argument that literacy is always socially situated and carries meanings far beyond functional skills. [Barton and Hamilton \(1998\)](#) also note that local communities attach their own values and practices to reading and writing, making certain forms, for instance, calligraphy in Afghanistan, essential markers of identity, belonging and power. In fact, it is common for both literate and non-

literate people to judge someone's education by the quality of their handwriting, reflecting how deeply embedded these values are in Afghan society.

At home, calligraphy is connected to family routines and relationships. Men in this study often seek out feedback from relatives, not just on the accuracy of their writing but on its beauty and style. Jabbar, the mechanic for instance, frequently asks his brother to evaluate his handwriting, while Zabi, the carpenter, enjoys checking his siblings' schoolwork and taking pride in their progress. This mutual attention to neatness and form creates a sense of shared achievement and strengthens family bonds. Such practices reveal that calligraphy is both a personal journey and a collective experience, supporting men's sense of identity and belonging.

In the classroom, good handwriting is openly celebrated and encouraged by facilitators. Teachers sometimes quote local proverbs about the power and value of beautiful writing, and learners who excel are recognised and held up as examples to others. Some students even take photos of their best work to share with family members, further extending the reach of their achievements. This classroom focus mirrors what [Brandt and Clinton \(2002\)](#) describe as the 'sponsorship' of literacy, where individuals and institutions support, value and spread certain practices. For Afghan men, calligraphy becomes a symbol not just of literacy, but of artistry, self-worth and social connection. The aesthetic dimension of literacy is a key finding of this thesis. Recognising its importance, my research highlights how everyday literacies like handwriting can become powerful sources of pride, agency and respect for adult learners in Afghanistan.

### 8.2.3 Infantilisation, Moral Lessons and School Model

My findings on the persistence of school-like practices in adult literacy in Afghanistan echo what [Robinson-Pant \(2001\)](#) identified in *Why Eat Green Cucumbers at the Time of Dying?*, where adult programmes in Nepal borrowed heavily from school models. My study similarly shows how these pedagogies travel into Afghan adult literacy: classroom routines, materials and authority structures all mirror schooling.

This was evident in policy documents (e.g., policies for primary education were equated with those for adult literacy programmes), pedagogy (quietening ALLs when

they tried to speak), teaching materials (the pomegranate lesson), the textbook's visuals and content (cartoon characters), routines (hand-raising, drilling, neat-copy work), sanctions (small cash fines for missed homework), and even the classroom settings (child-like seating and display practices). In both public and private centres, facilitators also centred their teaching around moral lessons. Interestingly, adult learners appreciated the moral guidance even as they were advised like children. This raises the question: how do these infantilising pedagogies fit with the notion of ALFs as moral guides?

As discussed in the data chapters, the religious literacy domain often intersects with other domains of ALLs' lives. Moral lessons and advice are commonly preached by religious leaders in masjids, where both adults and children are the audience. In that context, such preaching is accepted and valued. For many ALLs who had little or only early schooling, this may shape their view of what a teacher is—a figure who teaches not only knowledge but also conduct (i.e., honesty, patience, fairness). This helps explain why some learners affirmed the teacher's moral talk: it aligned with their familiar image of authority.

At the same time, moralising in a literacy class carries a different weight. Unlike in the masjid, where guidance is part of worship, or at home, where parents advise children, adult learners come to literacy classes to gain practical skills. When facilitators shift from teaching literacy to advising on right and wrong, they reproduce parental and religious tones that belong elsewhere. This not only blurs the purpose of the lesson but also deepens the sense of infantilisation. Learners may recognise and respect the teacher's moral authority, yet the act itself repositions them as dependents rather than autonomous adults.

To sum up, while [Robinson-Pant](#) highlighted the persistence of school models in adult literacy learning, my findings extend this discussion by revealing how these pedagogies intersect with gendered expectations and moral authority, which, I argue, shape men's experiences of literacy as both learning and moral discipline.

#### 8.2.4 Literacy and the Construction of Masculinities

Furthermore, the findings from this thesis reveal that ALLs' engagement challenges dominant hegemonic masculinity discourses (Connell, 2005) that associate male power solely with economic provision and public dominance. Many studies in the context of Afghanistan recognise and discuss masculine patterns such as militarised and aggressive masculinity (WILPF, 2022; Ahmadi & Stanikzai, 2018), honour related to protecting the chastity and reputation of female relatives (Mosawi, 2020; Azarbaijani-Moghaddam, 2009), breadwinner and provider (Echavez et al., 2016; Mosawi, 2020), protector as well as authority figure (Echavez et al., 2016; Mosawi, 2020; Ahmadi & Stanikzai, 2018). Crews (2020) describes how Hazara Shi'a men in Kabul enact piety through rituals such as chest-beating and public mourning, which can be read as performances of religious manhood.

My research adds premature fatherhood and other forms of religious masculinities to this list. These masculinities are usually grounded in care (a key contribution of this study to the field, presented later in this chapter), responsibility and learning, which are shaped and reshaped within domains such as the classroom, home, workplace and wider social institutions.

#### 8.2.5 Literacy in Relation to Agency and Power

This study also draws on the idea of 'power to' as described by Kabeer (1999) and Rowlands (1995), referring to the ability to act, make choices and influence outcomes, which, in this study, was central to the experiences of ALLs. I observed this in the ways participants adjusted routines, brought their own priorities into classroom discussions, asserted themselves in group settings and decided on matters beyond their usual authority. Even when social norms or structures were restrictive, men found ways to express agency and reshape their roles and relationships. Rather than seeing power only as 'power over' others, these examples show how power can also be about enabling action and opening up new possibilities. In what follows, I illustrate how these forms of power were enacted by adult male literacy learners across classroom, workplace and community settings.

The findings of this study demonstrate the different ways adult male literacy learners use literacy as a resource for agency and power. In many moments, I saw men making choices not just for themselves but for those around them, showing how literacy can support both personal decisions and collective action. Take Firouz, for example, who chose to hire and pay his own assistant during Ramadan so he could manage his health and workload. This is a good example of what [Kabeer \(1999\)](#) calls ‘power to’, the ability to set goals and act on them, even when the options are limited. In class, learners like Zabi and Hashem were not afraid to speak up for extra homework or for lessons that matched their daily needs. Sometimes, the group of learners would come together and ask for lessons or assignments outside the usual timetable. This kind of teamwork reflects [Rowlands’ \(1995\)](#) idea of ‘power with’, where people act together and negotiate as a group to shape their learning.

At the same time, the findings reveal that ALLs are very keen to develop their literate identities both among their peers in the classroom and in the wider community. Yet, they often face challenges in having these identities recognised by others. For instance, Ali, the generator guard, wanted to record truck information at work but his boss did not authorise it, doubting his literacy skills and holding him back from taking on new responsibilities. This lack of recognition can become a real obstacle, making it harder for ALLs to use their agency fully in different domains of their lives. Learners like Ali and Fattah put great effort into shaping their literate identities, Ali took pride in his handwriting and sought feedback from teachers and classmates, while Fattah, respected as ‘Qari’ for his religious literacy, became an assistant in class, helping with dictation and taking on a leadership role.

Although many learners negotiate their agency in the classroom, helping to choose materials, shape teaching methods or make classroom rules, they still encounter hurdles that limit their freedom. When ALLs attend adult literacy classes, they bring a wealth of life experience and practical know-how from various backgrounds. However, entering the formal structure of a classroom can feel quite different and at times unsettling, especially for those used to learning informally. The move from everyday learning to more structured lessons sometimes puts learners in a position where they

feel uncertain or in-between, not fully students nor simply adults but somewhere in transition.

The way in which facilitators and the wider system perceive and treat ALLs has a major impact on supporting or constraining their agency. Many men in the study disliked being treated like children or labelled as ‘illiterate’ or ‘low-literate’. This experience made it harder for them to speak up or feel respected in class. For example, Fattah felt his facilitator was not really listening to the learners, Ali found the classroom content too childish, and Jabbar argued that monetary fines for missing homework were not meaningful for adults. Yet, there were also moments when learners challenged classroom routines and teacher authority. Jabbar persuaded the teacher to replace monetary fines with extra writing tasks, a change that helped everyone learn more. Fattah stepped up as a teaching assistant, taking on responsibility and supporting his peers. These examples show both ‘power to’ and ‘power with’, as described by [Rowlands \(1995\)](#).

This study supports the ideas that literacy is about agency, about building relationships and about finding ways for men to make a real difference in their own lives and the lives of others. These findings show that agency and power are always negotiated, sometimes blocked and sometimes enabled, depending on the recognition and support ALLs receive in both classroom and community life.

### 8.3 Revisiting Theory in Light of the Findings

My aim in this section is to bridge theoretical insights with empirical findings that I presented in the data chapters and summarised in the above section. This way, I offer a critical reflection on how the lived experiences of my participants speak back to established theories of literacy, masculinities, agency and power. This synthesis underscores the complexity of how adult men engage with literacy practices, negotiate them and assign meaning to them within diverse real-world contexts. After conducting an ethnographic study in Cheshmeh village in North-east of Iran, Brian [Street \(1984\)](#) found that, besides the formal literacy that ALLs were taught in the classroom, they engaged in other literacy practices outside the classroom domain. [Street’s \(1984\)](#) work, *Literacy in Theory and Practice*, fundamentally shifted the way literacy was

conceptualised in academic research. As discussed in Chapter 4, by introducing the ‘ideological model’ of literacy, Street challenged the ‘autonomous model’, which sees literacy as a neutral, context-free set of cognitive skills. Through the ‘ideological model’, he argued that literacy is always social, cultural and deeply embedded in context. Based on his ethnographic study in Cheshmeh village, Street demonstrates that people do not simply apply a universal set of skills but practise a variety of literacies which vary from school, religious (maktab) and commercial literacy practices; each of these literacy practices is shaped by specific social domains and purposes, he stresses.

Street’s argument resonates strongly with the findings of my own research in Afghanistan. My research findings also situate literacy within the everyday lives of ALLs, uncovering how these men engage with and value different literacy practices (i.e., religious, digital, numeracy and informal workplace literacy practices) not only within formal educational settings but also across home, work and religious domains. Similar to Street’s research, this thesis found that these practices are not simply ‘skills’ to be acquired, but social practices negotiated in relation to context, power, identity and community needs and expectations.

Throughout my analysis, I explicitly drew on [Street \(1984\)](#) and the NLS to frame my analysis, moving beyond deficit or ‘great divide’ perspectives that cast Afghan men as lacking or ‘blind’ if they were not schooled in formal education. Instead, this thesis foregrounds the multiplicity and fluidity of literacy, emphasising ‘what people do with literacy’ in real-life and context-dependent situations.

The findings in this thesis also extend Street’s critique of ‘reification’, the risk of treating diverse literacies as separate technical skills detached from context, by showing how Afghan men’s everyday practices blur the binaries between ‘formal’ and ‘informal,’ ‘religious’ and ‘secular,’ ‘work-based’ and ‘school-based’ literacies. Furthermore, the overall finding of this ethnographic research is that literacy for these men is both a marker of status and a resource for negotiating masculinity and agency in patriarchal and post-conflict Afghanistan. Thus, I argue that literacy is always socially situated, plural and connected to issues of power, gender and identity. Through this argument, I challenge both policy and popular discourses that view Afghan men’s literacy only

through a deficit lens, or as a technical skill to be ‘caught up.’ Instead, I highlight the social and cultural potential of literacy to empower, enable agency and redefine masculine identities within the constraints and opportunities of Afghan society.

With regard to theories of masculinities, the findings from this study also extend [Connell’s \(2005\)](#) and [Demetriou’s \(2001\)](#) concepts and theories by situating their ideas within the unique cultural, political and educational landscape of Afghanistan’s adult literacy programmes.

[Connell \(2005\)](#) describes hegemonic masculinity as the culturally exalted form of manhood that legitimises the dominance of men over women and marginalised men. In Western contexts, this often centres on ideals of individual achievement, authority and physical prowess, which Connell discusses the way these ideals are reinforced in education, sport and the workplace. However, this thesis reveals that in Afghanistan, hegemonic masculinity is reinterpreted and negotiated through the lens of literacy, religion, age, economic provision and local community status.

For instance, my findings show that men, even when young or unmarried, assume premature fatherhood roles as providers and protectors, embodying the breadwinner ideal in the absence or incapacity of their own fathers. This is a deeply Afghan interpretation of hegemonic masculinity, shaped by conflict, migration and economic hardship. Another example is religious masculinities, through which hegemonic status is often presented; for example, being called ‘Mullah,’ ‘Qari’ or ‘Sofi’, and through mastery of religious literacies, which blends spiritual authority with masculine respectability.

However, it is important not to treat these religious masculinities as reflecting a singular or uncontested Islamic masculine ideal. A useful distinction can be made between *Islamic masculinities* as normative masculine ideals associated with religious and moral expectations, and *Muslim masculinities* as the lived and negotiated masculinities of Muslim men in specific social and material contexts ([Aslam, 2012](#)). This distinction helps illuminate the tension between idealised expectations of provision, sacrifice, piety and authority, and the constrained realities many participants navigated. Furthermore, these ideals are not politically or socially neutral.

In the Afghan context, interpretations of Islam and gender have at times been institutionalised through governance and broader social structures in ways that privilege certain gendered norms while marginalising alternative understandings and shaping educational access (see Chapter 2). As [Peletz \(2021\)](#) argues, Muslim masculinities are plural yet hierarchically organised, with certain forms gaining hegemonic legitimacy over others. In this study, religious literacy and provider masculinity often functioned as such socially valued forms, while men unable to embody them risked marginalisation or diminished masculine status.

Furthermore, I can refer to literacy itself as masculine capital in the context of my participants. My findings show that achieving literate status is itself considered a masculine accomplishment, especially in the face of the feminisation of literacy programmes. Men negotiate their masculinity by seeking respect and social status through both religious and secular literacies.

This thesis also documents that men who cannot fulfil breadwinner or literate roles due to unemployment, ‘illiteracy’ or family hierarchy often feel emasculated and subordinate or stigmatised. This reflects Connell’s assertion that masculinity is not a single and stable identity but a hierarchy, shaped by social, cultural and economic forces.

Additionally, [Demetriou’s \(2001\)](#) external hegemony is clearly visible in Afghanistan, where patriarchal norms continue to position men as authority figures over women, as shown in my contextual analysis of gender, power and literacy policy in Chapters 1 and 2. Additionally, my data from Afghanistan offers a nuanced illustration of internal hegemony. For instance, in family and workplace settings, the eldest or most responsible son is expected to assume the provider role, even at the cost of his own education or well-being (i.e., cases of Zabi, Fattah and Mahmoud); despite lower literacy they have more responsibility in the family. This son may hold dominance over younger brothers, even while being subordinate to the father or older male kin. The hierarchy among men can also be viewed in Ali’s case in his workplace, where his lack of literate identity made him subordinate compared to his other colleagues.

The findings from this research further extend Demetriou's argument by showing how internal and external hegemonies are not static, they are constantly negotiated and contested through literacy practices, economic migration and the shifting demands of post-conflict Afghan society. For instance, men may compensate for lost economic or social power by seeking legitimacy and agency through new literate identities, or by renegotiating masculine respect in religious or workplace domains.

My ethnographic data highlight that adult learners make daily choices that reflect their agency, such as negotiating the content of lessons with facilitators, deciding to attend literacy classes despite social stigma or choosing to prioritise family, work or religious obligations. For example, when Firouz decides to hire and pay his own assistant during Ramadan or exempts students from park fees, and when Ali decides to choose his wife by his own rather than have his father choose for him, they are exercising 'power to' acting on their own priorities and values.

Additionally, ALLs frequently challenged, negotiated or resisted the authority of facilitators and policy in the literacy programme. Jabbar's insistence on changes in teaching style and his advocacy for alternative disciplinary approaches in class, and Fattah's insistence on helping the ALF are clear examples of both "power to" and "power with", using collective voice to reshape classroom practice for everyone's benefit.

This thesis also found that at points ALLs used their agency even under constraint. These findings reflect Kabeer's argument that agency is most visible when individuals face constraints and must make meaningful choices within them. Whether it is the eldest son stepping into the provider role or learners creatively adapting official literacy practices to suit their real-life needs, these men show how agency is not just about having options but about actively negotiating and navigating social expectations, economic pressures and institutional limitations.

The other element of agency that my findings also support is the relational and collective notions. This study asserts that agency is not only individual but also collective, seen in how learners co-construct classroom rules, advocate for more relevant homework or assist each other with workplace or religious literacies. These

instances illustrate Rowlands' 'power with,' showing that agency is strengthened through social relationships and group negotiation, not just personal autonomy.

Additionally, the thesis found that ALLs re-negotiated masculinity through Agency. My adult male participants used literacy as a resource for renegotiating their masculine identities. They sought new forms of respect, legitimacy and power in community, work and religious settings by this negotiation. In so doing, they exercise agency not just in personal advancement, but in re-shaping how masculinity itself is defined in their context.

In summary, by foregrounding the ways ALLs define their goals, act upon them, negotiate with institutional power, and mobilise collective action, this study brings Kabeer's agency frameworks into sharp focus. It shows that agency, in the context of Afghanistan, is enacted through everyday acts of decision-making, resistance, negotiation and mutual support, often in the face of substantial constraints. These empirical insights enrich and extend these theories, demonstrating the lived realities of agency in contexts of literacy, masculinity and power.

## 8.4 Revisiting the Gaps: Contributions of this Study

At the first stage when I began this research, I identified significant gaps in the existing literature and policy regarding adult male literacy learners, particularly in low-resource and conflict-affected zones like the context of Afghanistan. This section revisits these gaps, explicitly highlighting how my findings contribute new insights into the intersection of literacy, masculinities, agency and power. By addressing the overlooked roles and experiences of adult men within feminised literacy programmes, this study provides a deeper, more nuanced understanding of how literacy serves as both a challenge and an opportunity for identity formation and agency.

### 8.4.1 Visibility, Feminisation and Agency

This study directly responds to the neglect of adult male literacy learners' experiences and literacy practices in Afghan scholarship. While much existing research and policy has rightly focused on improving access for women and girls in the country, the unique experiences, motivations and barriers faced by adult men have remained largely

invisible. By centring my analysis on male learners, I document their diverse backgrounds, daily challenges and aspirations, whether as premature breadwinners, migrants or community members navigating social change. This work thus brings to light the stories, identities and needs of men who have often been marginalised within both literacy programmes and the wider literature.

Additionally, this study demonstrates that literacy programmes in Afghanistan are constructed and often perceived as feminised domains, particularly in policy discourses that prioritise women, in programme designs by NGOs, and even by male learners themselves who view participation as undermining their masculine identity. This perception has grown stronger after years of donor and government prioritisation of female participation and access to basic education, of which literacy programmes are a part. I showed how this feminisation shapes men's engagement, leading to feelings of discomfort, shame or subordination for some, but also providing opportunities for reimagining and legitimising masculine identities through new literate roles among their colleagues and communities. By analysing men's perceptions around stigma and their strategies for reclaiming respect, my study offers an in-depth account of masculinity within settings that are not traditionally associated with male empowerment, extending global theories of masculinity to a low-resource and conflict-affected context.

Rather than seeing men as simply dominant or passive, my findings bring to life the many ways in which Afghan men actively shape their own paths at home, at work, in religious contexts and in the classroom. Building on the ideas of [Kabeer \(1999\)](#), [Lukes \(1974\)](#) and [Rowlands \(1995\)](#), I show how men's agency unfolds in small, everyday choices, in moments of negotiation and sometimes even gentle resistance, as they adapt to the challenges around them. Even when choices are limited by social or cultural expectations, men still find ways to make decisions that matter to them and those around them, whether their family members, their peers or colleagues at work. This study highlights how agency is built through relationships, dialogue and ongoing negotiation, painting a more complex and hopeful picture of Afghan male literacy learners than is often seen in the literature framed around deficit perspectives.

Looking through literacy domains, my thesis challenges the common stereotypes that label adult Afghan men as “illiterate,” “blind” or simply passive recipients of educational support. By spending quality time alongside men in their daily lives, I have seen how they are engaged with various literacy practices, from reading religious texts and handling numbers at work to navigating digital tools. This study also demonstrates how literacy as a resource helps men challenge dominant stereotypes. For example, taking dictation from their wives, handing over money and manoeuvring digital devices. These skills and practices are woven into their roles in the community and their sense of who they are. Instead of focusing only on what men supposedly lack, my research highlights how they make smart, strategic choices and draw on their own strengths. I argue that it is time for literacy policies and programmes to move away from deficit thinking and instead recognise and build on the knowledge, resourcefulness and agency that men already bring to class.

Kabeer’s theorisation of agency emerges largely from studies of women in South Asia, and policy debates often assume that men already possess agency in patriarchal contexts, leaving men’s agency relatively under-analysed. This study extends Kabeer’s resources–agency–achievements schema to adult male literacy learners in Afghanistan. It demonstrates agentic practices that are situational, relational and contingent on access to religious, social and informational resources. Men exercise ‘power to’ and ‘power with’ rather than only power over by negotiating classroom routines, reworking household authority, coordinating peer support and redefining provider roles in conditions of insecurity and non-literacy stigma (Kabeer, 1999; Rowlands, 1997; Lukes, 1974). By showing how literacy is mobilised to secure respectability, navigate precarious labour markets and contest marginalising labels, the study reframes agency as a gendered accomplishment for men as well, challenging a literature that has often centred women or treated men as default beneficiaries or obstacles (Andersen & Kooij, 2007; Fiedrich & Jellema, 2003; MoE, 2007, 2010, 2016; UNESCO, 2021a).

### 8.4.2 Domains as Intersecting and Gendered

One of the central contributions of this study is to extend [Barton and Hamilton's \(1998, 2000\)](#) concept of literacy domains. Building on their recognition that domains are socially organised and patterned by institutions, power and gender relations (see [Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Hamilton, 2012](#)), my findings demonstrate that domains not only overlap and intersect, but are actively gendered through differential access, expectations and valuation across home, work and religious settings. The religious domain, in particular, emerged as a powerful influence across other domains of literacy. Facilitators in literacy classes drew on Qur'anic texts and religious stories to teach moral lessons, thereby importing the authority of the religious domain into the educational setting. This aligns with [Street's \(1995\)](#) argument that literacy practices cannot be understood apart from cultural and ideological contexts. In the workplace, adult male learners used religious language, attire and dress codes to perform respectability and masculinity, illustrating how the religious domain provides symbolic resources that extend into the economic sphere. Similarly, at home, men often assumed the role of mediators of religious texts for family members, consolidating both literacy authority and gendered authority.

These intersections show that domains cannot be treated as discrete containers of specific practices. Instead, they are porous, with practices, symbols and discourses travelling between them. This echoes findings in other adult literacy studies that highlight the permeability of domains (e.g. [Ormerod & Ivanič, 2000](#)), but my analysis extends this by showing how these overlaps are not value-neutral. They are infused with gendered expectations. The mosque domain privileges men's access and recitation; the workplace associates literacy with male economic responsibility; the classroom domain is shaped by stigma attached to men's learning; and the home positions male literacy as authoritative over others.

By foregrounding these dynamics, this study contributes to debates on literacy and masculinity. [Connell's \(2005\)](#) account of institutions as substantively gendered is helpful here: just as institutions are gendered, so too are literacy domains. This dimension was less explicit in Barton and Hamilton's early formulation of domains,

which recognised power relations without foregrounding how domains are structured through gendered norms. Later work, particularly [Hamilton, Barton and Ivanič \(1994\)](#) and policy analyses by [Hamilton \(2011, 2012\)](#) and [Hamilton and Hillier \(2006\)](#), engages more directly with gendered dynamics. My findings therefore extend the domains concept by showing that literacy sites are actively gendered spaces, in the Afghan case, where masculinities are produced, reinforced and sometimes contested.

#### 8.4.3 Caring Masculinities

In the Afghan context, men often see themselves first and foremost as providers. Yet provision extends beyond food and material resources. The men in this study provided care for their siblings, families and peers across different domains of life. Their stories show that masculinity did not only mean domination and holding power or treating others as subordinate. They also exercised care in ways that were deeply masculine: through sacrifice, respect and a strong sense of responsibility.

Much existing scholarship on Afghan masculinities highlights violence, aggressiveness and heroism, often portraying men mainly through dominance and control ([Ahmadi & Stanikzai, 2018](#); [Echavez, Mosawi, & Pilongo, 2016](#); [Wimpelmann, Hakimi, & Saadat, 2021](#)) – the main components of hegemonic masculinities ([Connell, 2005](#)). My findings add care to this repertoire, showing how adult male learners practised caring masculinities in everyday life. They not only embraced ideals of being a ‘good man’, a ‘good father’ or a ‘good brother’, but also took on roles of provision, protection, mentoring peers, ethical responsibility in religious spaces and small acts of service tied to literacy learning. These are forms of “power with” and “power within” rather than power over others.

This perspective resonates with [Elliott’s \(2016\)](#) framework of caring masculinities, which stresses men’s rejection of domination and the integration of values such as interdependence and relationality into masculine identities, and with [Wojnicka and de Boise’s \(2025\)](#) argument that care should be understood as part of wider social processes, not just individual acts. By showing how gentleness, duty, relational responsibility and sacrifice were woven into literacy practices, my study challenges deficit portrayals of Afghan men. Literacy emerges not only as a skill set but as an

everyday infrastructure for cultivating caring masculinities, even in a patriarchal society where men are often portrayed narrowly through dominance and control.

Beyond care, men negotiated multiple masculinities within adult literacy programmes widely perceived as feminised. The findings from this thesis conclude that men engage with and negotiate different forms of masculine identities such as fatherhood, breadwinner, provider, hardworking, physical strength, religious masculinity, subordinate masculinities, etc. within Afghan society, often using literacy and literate identity as a resource or a tool to move between or contest these patterns.

In a society where men are expected to provide and lead, many adult male literacy learners in Afghanistan find themselves in a contradictory position. Their lack of literacy puts them at a disadvantage, often leaving them feeling subordinate within their families and communities. I discussed that literacy has become associated with femininity; men entering these programmes are aware of this. Some even describe the classes and the nature of holding literacy books and commuting to the literacy class as feminised, yet they still attend. For many, joining a feminised programme feels less damaging than remaining in a position where they are seen as ‘ignorant’ or ‘incapable.’

Still, this choice is not straightforward. The very system they turn to for empowerment can work against them. Some men feel treated like children in class, expected to absorb basic moral lessons as though they know nothing. As shown in Chapter 7, texts about fruit or hygiene seem patronising to learners who already manage households or lead teams at work. These experiences challenge their sense of self as adult men and as learners. Although attending the course can be an act of courage or resistance, the structure of the programmes (i.e., what is taught, how it is taught and how men are seen by facilitators) can quietly push them back.

These men are not passive. They are constantly trying to find ways to make literacy meaningful. They ask for lessons that reflect their lives, such as how to write a letting contract or keep business records. Some take on leadership roles in class. Others use their literacy outside class to claim new roles in the family or community. Still, it is clear that their journey to become literate is not just about learning to read and write. It is also about negotiating who they are, and how they are seen, as men. As [Connell \(2005\)](#)

and Kabeer (1999) argue, identity and agency are shaped through power. These men are navigating a system that can help but also hinder them. In doing so, they show how power, masculinity and literacy are all deeply entangled in their lives.

## 8.5 Beyond Motivation

As discussed in the data chapters, the classes are officially closed during the winter months. There is no heating, light and electricity are rarely provided, the ALF is not paid for his teaching during this season and the ALLs do not receive any certificate for their studies during the winter. Attending class in darkness and at  $-10^{\circ}\text{C}$ , and a facilitator cycling long distances without winter pay, do not read as motivation alone but as agency under constraint and collective continuity. Following Kabeer, these acts mobilise material, human and social resources to pursue chosen goals despite structural limits (Kabeer, 1999). Considering Lukes' third dimension of power, these scenes show how power shapes what is treated as normal and what counts as real learning, so winter closures and unrecorded attendance appear natural rather than contested (Lukes, 2005). Rowlands' ideas of 'power within' and 'power with' make this actionable, since shifting taken-for-granted norms needs inner change, including self-awareness and confidence, as well as collective action to set new shared expectations (Rowlands, 1997).

From a social-practice view of literacy, learners and facilitators are not merely attending a programme but co-producing the conditions for learning by pooling torches, layering against cold, reorganising time and space and sustaining routines; this care and infrastructural labour is constitutive of learning rather than peripheral to it (Street, 1984). Accordingly, continuity, mutual support and the embodied costs of participation should be treated as outcomes, which shifts responsibility from individual motivation toward institutional recognition and resourcing of the practices that keep education alive in crisis.

## 8.6 Implications for Participatory Approaches in Adult Literacy

In light of my findings, it is clear that adult literacy programmes and policies in Afghanistan should consider the specific needs and realities of male learners, as well as what is already in place for women. Literacy programmes should not simply copy a

one-size-fits-all curriculum for use everywhere in the country. Instead, they should be designed with a real understanding of Afghan men's everyday lives, whether that means working long hours, juggling family responsibilities or dealing with cultural pressures. Lessons should include materials, stories and examples men can relate to, so learning feels relevant and not just abstract or imposed.

Often, being a man brings its own pressures, hopes and barriers, especially in learning environments that may feel feminised, infantilised or unfamiliar. Programmes can do more to create space for men to talk about their identities, needs and aspirations as men. When men's experiences are acknowledged openly, it helps legitimise their feelings and makes it easier for them to participate fully and confidently. This approach can help programmes open up more masculine topics and domains for discussion and create new forms of masculinity, especially in today's context, where women are once again debarred from the public sphere. As discussed earlier, many ALLs already use reading, writing, numbers and technology every day, at work, in religious practice or at home, often in creative and informal ways. Rather than dismissing these skills, programmes should look for ways to recognise and build on what men already know. For example, this could mean including workplace and real-life scenarios in lessons, such as linking maths lessons to the actual situations ALLs encounter or encouraging men to share their own strategies for managing daily tasks.

It is also important to note that most adult literacy facilitators have a sense of their own identity, which shapes how they see their role as teachers, as well as their perception of learners as decision makers ([UNESCO, 2018](#)). Involving ALLs in decisions about their learning programmes is important for several reasons. Traditional approaches, where the teacher is seen as the one with knowledge and learners are seen as passive recipients, are still common in Afghanistan, but this is being questioned worldwide. [Paulo Freire \(1983\)](#) called this the 'banking education' model and argued for a more collaborative and developmental approach, where the teacher assists the learner's growth.

Constructivist understandings of adult education stress that new learning should build on learners' prior and current experiences ([Langshaw, 2012](#); [Merriam et al, 2007](#)). 'Andragogical didactics' also highlights the importance of adult learners' experience in

shaping effective teaching (Broek, 2015). All ALLs have been, and still are, decision makers in their families, workplaces and communities, so decision-making is part of the experience they bring to class (Merriam et al, 2007). They come to the classroom with ‘funds of cultural knowledge’ (Moll et al, cited in Rogers, 2008) and ‘banks of skills’ developed over time (Rogers, 2014). It would be illogical to deny them the opportunity to use these skills when learning to read and write as adults.

Ideas about lifelong and continuing education show that learning does not stop at the end of the class. ALLs will keep learning and will need decision-making skills in the future (Aspin, 2007). Theories of development also argue that real social change is participatory, with all learners, including ALLs, involved in making decisions about content, method and objectives (Bell et al, 1990). As Chambers (1997) writes, when people become personally empowered through participation, they can change roles, relationships and learning in meaningful ways for positive social change. Campbell (1994) describes participatory adult literacy as involving students actively in one or more aspects of their programme, helping them become real partners in their own education.

## 8.7 Research Significance and Implications for Inclusive Adult Literacy

The implications of this research are both theoretical and practical. Theoretically, it contributes to a deeper understanding of how masculinities are constructed through everyday literacy practices, particularly among men who have been marginalised by dominant narratives of educational success. Practically, the findings call for a more inclusive approach to adult literacy policy and provision, especially one that recognises and responds to the needs, aspirations and identities of male learners, rather than assuming a one-size-fits-all model. It challenges educators, policymakers and service providers to reconsider how they engage with men in literacy contexts and to create spaces that are not only accessible but also affirming of diverse masculine identities and agency.

This study was conducted under the Islamic Republic (2001–2021), when international support enabled some expansion of male and female access to literacy. Since the regime change in August 2021, the situation has altered dramatically: girls and women

are now systematically deprived of secondary and higher education, and many adult literacy programmes for women have closed. Although policy priorities have shifted, the adult literacy curricula and textbooks remain substantially the same and continue to be used under the current regime, with only minor adjustments to emphasis. My data therefore reflects a different political era, yet it remains relevant: it documents how literacy shaped men's identities and agency during the Republic and provides a baseline for analysing what has been lost, as well as how men's literacies may now be reshaped in a new gender order.

Moreover, recognising the mismatch between the kinds of literacy practices valued by ALLs and their communities outside the classroom, as identified in this thesis, points to the need for more relevant and responsive programming in this field. This awareness can help ALFs and programme designers to develop literacies, practices and materials that are better aligned with the lived experiences of ALLs. By taking account of the social domains in which ALLs engage, facilitators can offer instructional materials and support that yield greater benefits for all adult literacy learners.

ALLs in this study used independent literacy practices such as reading circles with their peers and friends. These informal, peer-led activities created opportunities for collaborative learning, social interaction and the development of confidence outside the classroom setting. Recognising the value of such independent initiatives, it would be beneficial for adult literacy programme designers to incorporate more interactive and participatory approaches into their provision. Encouraging ALFs to facilitate reading circles or similar group-based activities within the classroom could foster a more engaging and supportive learning environment. This not only builds on learners' existing strengths and preferences but also helps cultivate a sense of community and shared responsibility for learning, which are central to adult education. By drawing on practices that ALLs already find meaningful and effective, programme designers and facilitators can make adult literacy provision more relevant, motivating and sustainable for learners. Overall, I conclude that informal literacies such as those practised in workplace, at home or in other social spaces, are valued by ALLs and individuals outside classroom context and these literacies deserve greater recognition in policy and pedagogy.

## 8.8 Methodological Reflections

Reflecting on my fieldwork, it became clear that my own identity and background shaped not only the questions I asked, but also how participants saw me and what they expected from our interactions. Through this research, I found that the identities and positionalities of the researcher are not only important for the researcher's own reflexivity but also for how participants understand and engage with the research process. My participants were very curious about my roles. At the beginning, as discussed in Chapter 5, they were told that a university teacher would join their class to observe and take notes for his research project on adult literacy. As they became more comfortable with me, they started asking questions about my teaching background and expertise.

For instance, as discussed in Chapter 5, Jabbar, the mechanic, asked me about strategies and methods that could help him become a more fluent reader. Rashid, who owns a battery shop, asked me about my reading preferences and then he followed his questions by requesting a personalised reading list. Ali, the generator-house guard, requested me to connect him with NGOs after he learned about my previous work experience and later asked for help contacting a doctor for a child in his village in need of urgent medical care.

These observations reveal a broader pattern that runs throughout my research: adult male literacy learners in Afghanistan, though often framed by policy and programme discourse as lacking or passive, consistently demonstrate resourcefulness and agency. Their ability to mobilise relationships, including with outsiders like myself, and make use of any available resources, speaks to a more nuanced understanding of agency. In line with [Kabeer's \(1999, 2005\)](#) framework, agency here is not only about making decisions but also about identifying goals and creatively acting upon them, even in highly constrained and low-resource circumstances.

Midway through the study, a change in my circumstances made me read my notes differently. Living parts of what participants were facing in a new context, I broadened my interpretation and treated ordinary acts as evidence. For instance, when the power failed, learners pooled their torches in the early morning darkness so they could read.

That told me more than any measure of motivation or discipline: adult men were co-producing the basics of a classroom when the institution did not provide it to them. When teaching moved to the pavement outside a locked centre, it was not a feel-good agency vignette but a collective refusal of administrative exclusion. These scenes pushed me to widen what counts as data. The method stayed in place; the reading became plainer and closer to what people were doing.

These experiences highlight the importance of reflexivity and the ways in which ethnographic research is co-constructed, underscoring both the possibilities and limitations that come with being an insider-outsider in the field.

## 8.9 Final Thoughts and Reflections

As I conclude this research, I offer my final reflections on the insights I gained from examining how adult literacy shapes masculinities and empowers agency among Afghan male learners. This study highlights not only the importance of recognising men's experiences in literacy programmes but also the profound impact that inclusive and culturally relevant approaches can have on their lives. My personal journey as a researcher has reinforced my commitment to advocating for literacy as a transformative force that holds the potential to reshape identities, power dynamics, and community well-being in meaningful and lasting ways.

I would like to end by saying that the evidence supports three practical moves: align adult curricula with situated workplace and religious literacies; institutionalise learner input into content and assessment; recognise caring masculinities in programme aims and monitoring.

As a person with no professional background in adult literacy, I was motivated to begin my research journey in this field starting with a research workshop. This journey took me to spend a one year and two-week intensive period with my participants in their classroom, workplaces, masjids and community gathering, while learning how they use and practise various literacies in different domains and how these literacy practices were valued by the ALLs and their communities. I learned that every individual depending on their occupation and context, pays different values to these literacies and that are often in search of finding ways to legitimise their identity as men.

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