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Resilience Amid Barriers: Narratives of Disability Inclusion in Afghan Higher Education Institutions

Mohammad Idrees Naeemy, Hiroki Yoneda

Abstract

Background/purpose. Students with disabilities (SwDs) remain significantly underrepresented in Afghan higher education institutions (HEIs), facing barriers linked to inaccessible infrastructure, inadequate accommodations, and entrenched social stigma. While global frameworks such as the CRPD emphasize inclusive higher education (HE), limited empirical evidence exists from conflict-affected and low-resource contexts like Afghanistan. This study explores how SwDs experience HE and how their narratives illuminate both resilience and systemic barriers.

Materials/methods. Using a qualitative narrative analysis approach, 26 SwDs (17 with physical or locomotor impairments, eight with visual impairments, and one with a hearing impairment) from diverse universities and provinces across Afghanistan were interviewed. Semi-structured interviews were conducted in Pashto and Dari, transcribed, translated into English, and analyzed inductively with MAXQDA. Thematic narrative analysis focused on how participants positioned themselves, navigated institutional barriers, and constructed their identities in academic and social environments.

Results. The narratives revealed five interrelated themes: reconstructing identity through education, navigating institutional barriers, societal influences on disability narratives, turning points in educational journeys, and aspirations alongside employment challenges. Participants emphasized education as both a refuge and a tool of empowerment, but also reported pervasive structural obstacles, including inaccessible campuses, limited access to assistive technologies, and unsupportive attitudes. Concerns about post-graduation employment underscored broader systemic exclusion.

Conclusion. This study was conducted recently following a major political transition in Afghanistan, when educational access—particularly for women—had become increasingly restricted. The findings thus represent both lived experiences and a historical snapshot of inclusion before such access was curtailed. Findings highlight that inclusion in Afghan HEIs remains largely aspirational, constrained by infrastructural, institutional, and societal barriers. Genuine inclusion requires systemic change and strong policy implementation at the Ministry of Higher Education (MoHE). Findings of this study reinforce the importance of a rights-based approach to inclusive education, aligning with the principles of the CRPD and SDG4.

1. Introduction

The ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) in 2006 marked an important step in recognizing the rights of persons with disabilities (PwDs) in education, including higher education (HE) (United Nations, 2006). However, translating these commitments into national legislation, policy, and institutional practice has been uneven and slow, particularly in low-resource and conflict-affected contexts such as Afghanistan. Despite global progress toward inclusive education, students with disabilities (SwDs) in higher education institutions (HEIs) continue to face systemic barriers ranging from inaccessible infrastructure and limited assistive resources to entrenched social stigma and unsupportive institutional cultures. (Naeemy & Yoneda, 2025b).

In Afghanistan, the HE system reflects both historical legacies and contemporary crises. Since the establishment of Kabul University in 1946, HE has been central to national development, but decades of political instability, conflict, and sociocultural inequalities have severely undermined quality and access. (Andishmand, 2011; Hayward, 2015; Roof, 2018). The recent "suspension" of HE for female students (Saif, 2023) highlights the fragility of two decades' gains. Moreover, persistent challenges, including ethnic, gender, geographical, and regional inequalities, have created conditions where SwDs remain marginalized within academic spaces. Although school-level educational services for PwDs began formally in the 1960s with initiatives such as the Kabul Blind Organization, which was followed by enrollment of some high school graduates into HEIs, progress has been fragmented, focusing mainly on physical, visual, and hearing impairments (Forogh et al., 2017; Joya et al., 2017; Miles, 2002). Following the 2021 political transition, Afghanistan's HE landscape has undergone profound change. While symbolic gestures—such as celebrating the International Day of Persons with Disabilities at universities and limited SwD enrollment—suggest nominal recognition of SwDs' inclusion, these remain superficial and unsupported by policy or institutional frameworks. The "suspension" of HE for women has further deepened inequality, leaving female SwDs doubly marginalized and excluded from educational and professional participation (UNESCO, 2025).

Against this backdrop, this study examines the lived experiences of SwDs in Afghan HEIs. Building on prior research, targeted faculty perceptions (Naeemy & Yoneda, 2024), it foregrounds student voices to explore how they experience enrollment, classroom participation, and accommodations, while also reflecting on societal attitudes toward disability. Grounded in the social model of disability (Oliver, 1990; Shakespeare, 2013) and disability rights perspectives (Barnes & Mercer, 2010; Neufeldt, 1995), this study focuses on how Afghan SwDs experience and negotiate barriers in HE. By employing narrative analysis, the study provides nuanced insights into how SwDs reconstruct their identities, navigate institutional barriers, and aspire toward professional futures despite systemic and societal obstacles.

The significance of this research lies in its contribution to both scholarship and practice: it documents SwDs' resilience in the face of adversity, highlights the persistent inequities in Afghan HE, and underscores the urgent need for reforms in infrastructure, pedagogy, and policy. The study concludes that while HE can serve as a transformative force for empowerment and social mobility, Afghan HEIs remain far from inclusive. Without systemic reforms, SwDs will continue to rely on personal resilience rather than institutional support to succeed.

2. Literature Review

The global movement toward expanding access to HE is not new. While inclusive education initially focused on younger learners, it has increasingly been extended to HE as more SwDs complete earlier stages of schooling (Moriña, 2017). The discourse on inclusion has evolved from integration—where SwDs are physically placed in mainstream classrooms—to genuine inclusion that requires institutional transformation and attitudinal change (Ainscow, 2005; Moriña, 2017). Inclusive HE aims

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to ensure equal access to learning opportunities and resources for all students, irrespective of ability or background, by creating environments that support diverse needs and foster equitable participation (Moriña, 2017; Svendby, 2024). This shift aligns closely with Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4), which emphasizes inclusive and equitable quality education for all, particularly disadvantaged and underrepresented groups (United Nations, 2015).

Globally, research demonstrates that HE not only enhances employability and social integration for SwDs (Jameel, 2011) but also contributes to dignity and quality of life, making meaningful inclusion imperative (Bartolo et al., 2025; Kunnath & Mathew, 2019; McKinney & Swartz, 2022; Moriña et al., 2020). However, inequalities persist—especially in developing countries, where limited resources and inadequate institutional frameworks hinder the participation of SwDs. Studies from India, Namibia, Uganda, Egypt, Indonesia, and Malaysia reveal persistent gaps in policies, facilities, and faculty preparedness, often resulting in integration rather than genuine inclusion. (Barida et al., 2020; Emong & Eron, 2016; Hugo, 2012; Jameel, 2011; J. E. Lord & Stein, 2018; Yusof et al., 2020). Despite these challenges, evidence consistently underscores the transformative role of HE in reducing poverty, increasing employment, and enabling active citizenship. (Bellacicco & Pavone, 2020; Chaudhry et al., 2010; Ezebuilo & Nwosu, 2014).

Another critical dimension highlighted in the literature is the importance of amplifying students' voices. Scholars emphasize that SwDs' lived experiences provide essential insights into the effectiveness of inclusive practices and should inform both academic research and policymaking. (Barnes, 2007; Carey, 2013; Hutcheon & Wolbring, 2012). Lane (2017) Also concluded that researching the experiences of SwDs, and enabling them to speak for themselves, provides new and important insights into what it means to be disabled and to participate in HE. Ensuring such participation is vital for the legitimacy and sustainability of inclusive reforms. Yet, in conflict-affected and low-resource settings such as Afghanistan, empirical evidence capturing these perspectives remains limited, underscoring the need for context-specific research.

Afghanistan's HE system has a complex trajectory shaped by both modernization efforts and recurrent instability. Modern institutions of higher learning emerged in the 1930s, culminating in the establishment of the first university, Kabul University, in 1946 (Andishmand, 2011). Since then, progress has been repeatedly disrupted by political upheavals and conflict, with disparities in access compounded by gender, ethnic, and regional inequalities. (Hayward, 2015; Roof, 2018). The recent "suspension" of higher secondary and HE for female students represents a profound regression in access and equity (Saif, 2023). Recent evidence also highlights the marginalization of SwDs in Afghan HEIs. A nationwide survey of 167 institutions, with responses from 24 HEIs across 15 provinces, found that SwDs comprise only 0.17% of the student body, concentrated mainly in the capital, Kabul. Most had physical, hearing, speech, or visual impairments, with visually and hearing-impaired students often limited to disciplines like Literature and Fine Arts. While a few private HEIs provided basic accommodations, most lacked disability support units, accessibility training, or exam arrangements, with 71% offering no special provisions for SwDs. (Study 2 in unpublished PhD Dissertation of the first Author, 2025). Similar challenges have been reported in South Asian, Middle Eastern and African contexts, where limited accessibility, societal stigma, and resource constraints mirror those found in Afghanistan (Emong & Eron, 2016; Hugo, 2012; Naeemy & Yoneda, 2025b; Yusof et al., 2020). These results underscore the urgent need for evidence-based research to advocate for required inclusive policies, financial support, and dedicated services.

Understanding the experiences of SwDs in HE requires engagement with multiple theoretical perspectives. The social model of disability (Oliver, 1990; Shakespeare, 2013) reframes disability as a product of environmental and attitudinal barriers rather than individual impairment, highlighting the role of institutions in either enabling or constraining participation. Within HE, this model has been widely applied to analyze exclusionary pedagogies, inaccessible infrastructure, and the

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marginalization of SwDs (Moriña, 2017; Tinklin & Hall, 1999). Complementing this, transformative learning theory (Cranton, 2023; Mezirow, 1992) explains how education facilitates self-reflection and empowerment, allowing SwDs to reconstruct identity and agency by challenging internalized limitations and social stigma. Stigma theory (Goffman, 1974; Link & Phelan, 2001) further illuminates how negative labeling and prejudice shape SwDs' social experiences, while social capital theory (Bourdieu, 1986; Putnam, 2000) emphasizes the value of supportive relationships and community networks in fostering inclusion and resilience. Together, these frameworks provide a comprehensive lens for understanding how SwDs negotiate structural inequities, resist social marginalization, and cultivate empowerment within HE contexts.

Overall, the literature also shows that access alone does not ensure inclusion. Genuine participation requires policy reform, institutional restructuring, faculty training, and systematic accommodations (Naeemy & Yoneda, 2025b). While global research emphasizes the transformative potential of HE, Afghan studies reveal severe gaps in equity and support. This study addresses these gaps by centering the voices of Afghan SwDs, offering insights into how they navigate barriers, reconstruct identities, and pursue futures within a fragile HE system.

3. Methodology

This study employed a qualitative narrative analysis to explore the lived experiences of 26 students with physical/locomotor, visual, and hearing impairments enrolled HEIs across Afghanistan. Due to the limited or absence of an identification mechanism of students with developmental, intellectual, mental, and health impairments in Afghan HEIs, only those with physical, visual, and hearing impairments were included.

Narrative analysis moves beyond surface-level data collection by interpreting the themes, metaphors, and structures of participants' stories. (Josselson & Hammack, 2021), offering deeper insights into their perceptions of disability, identity, and resilience. By foregrounding their voices, the study provides a counter-narrative to the often-overlooked reality of disability in Afghan academia.

A purposeful sampling strategy (Palinkas et al., 2015) was adopted to ensure diverse representation across gender, disability type, university, academic program, school background, and geographic region. The research team contacted HEIs and faculty members who had previously reported the presence of SwDs in their institutions to recruit SwDs for this study. Twenty-three interviews were conducted face-to-face, two online, and one with the assistance of a sign language interpreter. Interviews were held in accessible and comfortable locations such as deans' offices, libraries, dormitories, university parks, and cafeterias.

Ethical approval was granted by the Research Ethics Committee of the Institute of Human Sciences at the University of Tsukuba (Issue # Tsukuba2023-160A). Voluntary participation, informed consent for audio recording, and a clear explanation of research participation and withdrawal procedures were provided in accordance with established research ethics protocols. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with open-ended questions covering core themes:

- participants' prior school experiences,
- personal perceptions of disability,
- societal attitudes toward disability, and
- available accommodations and challenges in enrollment, classroom participation, assessments, and extracurricular activities in HEIs.

Each interview lasted approximately 30-60 minutes. Fifteen participants were interviewed in Pashto and eleven in Dari. All interviews were translated into English by the first author. To minimize

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semantic shifts, translations were cross-checked by bilingual reviewers, familiar with the cultural context, and participant consent ensured the accuracy of representation. The first author is fluent in Afghanistan's national languages (Pashto and Dari) as well as English and has four years of experience in special education and rehabilitation in the country. This background facilitated rapport-building and interpretation of narratives, while reflexive attention was maintained to minimize bias and preserve participants' voices. Interviews were inductively coded and analyzed using MAXQDA 24 (Rädiker & Kuckartz, 2020). The coding process involved multiple readings and inductive theme generation using MAXQDA. Codes were grouped into preliminary categories, which evolved into five major themes through iterative comparison. To ensure analytical rigor, emerging themes were reviewed against the raw data and refined collaboratively to maintain internal consistency and credibility. Narrative analysis was applied to examine how participants positioned themselves within their personal and social environments and constructed their identities through storytelling. This approach illuminated the ways students made sense of their experiences within broader social, cultural, and institutional contexts.

4. Results

The narratives of 26 SwDs in Afghan HEIs provide critical insights into the educational experiences of PwDs in Afghanistan. The participants included 17 students with physical or locomotor impairments, eight with visual impairments, and one with hearing impairment. Only two participants were women—one with a hearing impairment and the other with a visual impairment—while the remainder were men. Ages ranged from the early to late twenties, reflecting that some SwDs started their education later than typical demographic of Afghan university students. Participants came from ten provinces, representing both urban and rural districts across the eastern, southern, and central regions of the country. They studied in disciplines such as Education, Political Science, Law, Social Sciences, Human Sciences, Medical Sciences, and Islamic Studies. Except for two institutions—no students were interviewed from University E and no lecturers from University G—participants were drawn from the same universities as those in prior study of faculty perception. Table 1 summarizes detailed information about the participants in this study.

Table 1. Details About Participants in this Study

No	University	Status	Gender	Faculty (Department)	Age	Original Place	Disability/Impairment details by SwDs
1	University A	4th-year student	Male	Education (Chemistry)	23	Wardak	Congenital right lower limb dysmorphia
2	University A	4th-year student	Male	Education (Biology)	23	Laghman	Lower limb dysmorphia due to polio
3	University A	4th-year student	Male	Education (Chemistry)	24	Ghazni	Right hand cut in accident + stuttering
4	University A	Graduated two years ago	Male	Agriculture (Agronomy)	26	Nangarhar	Locomotor and speech problems due to cerebral palsy

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No	University	Status	Gender	Faculty (Department)	Age	Original Place	Disability/Impairment details by SwDs
5	University A	1st-year student	Male	Human Sciences (Journalism)	20	Nangarhar	Lower limb paralysis/muscular dystrophy use crutches
6	University B	4th-year student	Male	Education (Psychology & Pedagogy)	24	Nangarhar	Congenital joint malformations/body dysmorphia; Two siblings with the same impairment
7	University B	2nd-year student	Male	Education (Pashto Literature)	20	Nangarhar	Right leg amputee due to unexploded ordnance (UXO)
8	University B	4th-year student	Male	Education (Chemistry)	24	Laghman	Congenital body dysmorphia
9	University B	3rd year student	Male	Political Sciences & Law (Diplomacy & Administration)	20	Nangarhar	Congenitally absolutely blind; Two siblings with the same problem
10	University B	4th-year student	Male	Education (Mathematics)	24	Kapisa	Body dysmorphia - short stature
11	University B	4th-year student	Male	Education (Mathematics)	24	Nangarhar	Left hand cut - left-handed
12	University B	1st-year student	Male	Agriculture (Plant Protection)	25	Logar	Lower limb paralysis/muscular dystrophy wheelchair dependent
13	University B	5th-year student	Male	Medicine (Curative Medicine)	24	Oruzgan	Difficulty in walking due to untreated clubfoot
14	University C	Graduated six months ago	Male	Languages & Literature (Dari Literature)	27	Ghazni	Absolutely blind congenital
15	University C	1st-year student	Male	Social Studies (Geography)	25	Bamiyan	Lower limb paralysis

No	University	Status	Gender	Faculty (Department)	Age	Original Place	Disability/Impairment details by SwDs
16	University C	2nd-year student	Male	Psychology (Counseling)	26	Ghazni	Cerebral palsy
17	University C	Graduated six months ago	Male	Political Sciences & Law (Diplomacy & Administration)	26	Wardak	Absolutely blind since 12 due to war
18	University C	Graduated six months ago	Male	Political Sciences & Law (Diplomacy & Administration)	27	Kabul	Absolutely blind since 14 due to explosion
19	University C	2nd-year student	Male	Shariah (Islamic Education)	29	Wardak	Absolutely blind and lost right hand since 9 due to UXO
20	University C	Graduated six months ago	Male	Political Sciences & Law (International Relations)	25	Kabul	Congenitally blind
21	University D	Graduated two years ago	Female	Special Education (Psychology & Education of Hearing Impairment)	28	Kabul	Hearing impairment
22	University D	1st-year student	Male	Literature and Languages (Russian Language)	20	Panjshir	Lower limb paralysis
23	University D	4th-year student	Male	Computer Science (IT)	22	Kabul	Paralysis
24	University F	3rd-year student	Female	Shariah (Islamic Education)	23	Kabul	Congenitally absolutely blind
25	University G	Graduated one year ago	Male	Political Science (Diplomacy & Administration)	31	Laghman	Congenitally absolutely blind
26	University G	6th-year student	Male	Medicine (Curative Medicine)	26	Nangarhar	Progressive muscular dystrophy

These narratives illuminate students' transformative journeys, challenges, and aspirations, revealing the interplay of personal resilience, societal perceptions, and systemic barriers. From the analysis, five key themes emerged:

1. Reconstructing Identity Through Education – Education as both refuge and resistance to stigma.

2. Navigating Institutional Barriers – Persistent inaccessibility despite strong motivation.

3. Societal Influences on Disability Narratives – Culture and language shaping inclusion.

4. Turning Points in Educational Journeys – Pivotal moments reshaping confidence and aspirations.

5. Aspirations and Employment Challenges – Education fostering hope amid anxiety about the future.

The following paragraphs elaborate on these themes, illustrating how SwDs in Afghan HEIs navigate educational pathways shaped by resilience, systemic barriers, and evolving aspirations.

4.1. Reconstructing Identity Through Education

SwDs described their educational journeys as transformative processes that enable them to overcome internalized stigma and reconstruct a positive self-identity. For many, disability imposes certain limitations but does not define their worth or capabilities. A student with visual impairment from University G stated, *"Disability is a limitation, but it does not mean inability. A person can do anything. It is not that someone without a hand, legs, or eyesight is incapable of achieving something."*

Similarly, a student with hearing impairment emphasized, *"Disability is a condition where a person cannot function in the same way as others for their entire life, but they still can work differently from others."* These reflections demonstrate how education empowers SwDs to redefine societal narratives and advocate for their potential.

4.1.1. Societal Stigma and the Role of Language

SwDs often begin their journeys by grappling with societal stigma and damaging perceptions. In Afghanistan, disabilities are frequently equated with helplessness. Student 1 from University A noted, *"Many people suffer from [disability], and they get upset or anxious because of their disability."* Such views highlight the internalization of societal misconceptions, which many SwDs actively reject.

Language plays a significant role in shaping perceptions. Student 1 from University A explained, *"People usually call us 'mayub,' but we are not 'mayub,' we are 'malul' (disabled). 'Mayub' is for those with bad behavior, like thieves."* This distinction reflects a widespread misunderstanding of disabilities and the emotional impact of derogatory terms. Despite efforts to raise awareness, as Student 2 noted, *"No matter how much awareness you give them, they keep using these terms like 'mayub' or 'lame.' They don't change."* These linguistic barriers underscore the ongoing struggle to dismantle stigma.

The negative impact of societal perceptions extends beyond language. Student 8 from University B described how societal expectations reinforce stereotypes about incapability: *"Society often sees us as weak or incapable of working or studying."* These perceptions contribute to the internalization of stigma, which many SwDs must overcome to reconstruct their identities.

4.1.2. Education as a Tool for Empowerment

Education serves as a critical platform for SwDs to challenge misconceptions and rebuild self-esteem. A student from University G remarked, *"Sometimes I see my disability as a hidden blessing because I have focused more on my studies and capacity building due to it."*

For others, transformative events catalyze their commitment to education. A student from University A shared, *"Before my hand was cut in an accident, I had no interest in education. But after that, I turned towards it with full force."* These accounts underscore education's dual role as a vehicle for personal growth and a means to redefine societal narratives about disability.

For many SwDs, education serves as a powerful tool to challenge societal misconceptions and reshape perceptions. Academic achievements not only empower SwDs on an individual level but also serve as a public demonstration of their capabilities. Student 4 from University C explained, *"When people see someone with a disability succeeding in education, their attitudes begin to change. They start believing that disability is not inability."*

Student 2 from University G echoed this sentiment, stating, *"We have to show society through our success that we are capable of contributing meaningfully."* These narratives highlight the dual role of education as both a tool for personal empowerment and a vehicle for societal transformation. By succeeding in educational spaces, SwDs challenge stereotypes, paving the way for future generations to experience greater inclusion.

4.1.3. Family Support and Identity Reconstruction

Family support emerges as a cornerstone in SwDs' efforts to navigate challenges and pursue education. A student from University A shared, *"My father always told me that education is important, and since I wouldn't be able to do physical labor due to my disability, I should focus on studying."* Similarly, a student from University C emphasized, *"My family has always supported me, telling me that education is the only way I can create a better future."* These affirmations foster resilience and determination among SwDs.

Despite persistent societal stigma, SwDs exhibit remarkable resilience. They redefine adversity as an opportunity for growth and continually challenge societal misconceptions. Student 3 from University A reflected, *"In life, you face challenges, and when you don't experience hardship, you don't grow stronger."* This sentiment underscores the strength and adaptability of SwDs as they navigate the complexities of identity reconstruction.

The narratives of SwDs illustrate how education serves as a transformative force, enabling them to counter societal stigma and reconstruct a positive self-identity. By providing opportunities for personal growth and academic success, education empowers SwDs to redefine societal narratives and advocate for inclusiveness.

4.2. Navigating Institutional Barriers

SwDs face systemic barriers in Afghan HEIs, including inaccessible infrastructure, insufficient learning resources, and a lack of formal support systems. These challenges perpetuate feelings of exclusion and force SwDs to rely on personal resilience and informal networks.

4.2.1. Physical and Structural Inaccessibility

The absence of basic accommodations, such as ramps, elevators, and accessible restrooms, creates significant accessibility challenges. A student from University B described, *"My entrance exam was held on the third floor of the faculty… It was very difficult for me, and I had to rely on classmates to help me navigate the stairs."*

Similarly, inadequate dormitories exacerbate difficulties. A student from University C shared, *"The restrooms in the dormitories are not suitable for students with disabilities. It's difficult to move around even within the university."* These barriers highlight the urgent need for inclusive infrastructure or universal design.

Transportation challenges further exacerbate these barriers. Students often struggle to commute to campus or navigate within the university. As Student 2 from University G explained, *"There are no accessible transport services for students with disabilities, and even within the university, it's difficult to move around. Everything feels like an obstacle.*

4.2.2. Learning Resource Deficits

The lack of assistive technologies and tailored learning resources further hinders SwDs' academic experiences. A student with visual impairment from University C explained, *"There were no Braille books or audio materials provided by the university. I had to rely on my own recordings of the lectures and take notes at home."*

Outdated technologies compound these issues. A student from the same institution stated, *"We had computers, but they were outdated, and the curriculum did not meet our needs. It felt like the system wasn't designed for people like us."* These deficits in learning resources underscore the systemic neglect of SwDs' educational requirements, leaving them to find alternative ways to cope with academic demands.

4.2.3. Institutional Neglect

SwDs frequently encounter neglect from institutions, including an absence of formal support systems and faculty training. A student from University G noted, *"There's no department or support system in place for students with disabilities. Teachers don't inquire about our needs, and we have to manage everything ourselves."*

Even where individual faculty members are supportive, these instances are inconsistent. A student from University C shared, *"Some teachers were very supportive, but many times I was told to manage on my own."* One student with physical impairment shared his experience during an exam: *"I told the teacher, 'I can't write; what should I do?' He said, 'What do I care? Write however you can...'"* This anecdote highlights the lack of empathy from educators and how institutional neglect exacerbates the challenges SwDs face in academic environments. The absence of specialized training for faculty members further compounds the problem, as educators often lack the knowledge and skills to accommodate students with diverse needs. This systemic gap leaves SwDs feeling isolated and underserved, with many relying on personal resilience to overcome institutional neglect.

Despite these barriers, SwDs demonstrate remarkable resilience and adaptability. They approach institutional challenges with determination and resourcefulness, finding ways to navigate the obstacles in their educational journeys. Student 6 from University D reflected on their persistence, stating, *"In life, you face challenges, and when you don't experience hardship, you don't grow stronger. Even here at the university, we have three floors. My class is on the third floor, so it was difficult to go up, but I managed."*

This resilience highlights the strength of SwDs in overcoming systemic neglect, but it also underscores the inequities they face. Instead of relying solely on personal determination, SwDs should have access to institutional support and inclusive policies that enable them to succeed without unnecessary struggles.

4.2.4. Recommendations for Inclusive Practices

The experiences of SwDs reveal an urgent need for systemic reforms to address the institutional barriers they face. Key recommendations by SwDs include:

- Improving Physical Accessibility such as Installing ramps, elevators, and accessible restrooms across campuses. And ensuring examination rooms and dormitories are designed to accommodate SwDs.

- Enhancing Learning Resources, for instance, providing Braille books, updated computers, and assistive technologies tailored to the needs of SwDs and designing curricula that include accessible formats and materials.

- Establishing Support Systems such as Creating dedicated departments to address the specific needs of SwDs and offering career guidance and mentorship programs to facilitate transitions into HE and the workforce.

- Implementing professional development programs to equip educators with the skills and knowledge to support SwDs effectively.

- Introducing affordable and accessible transport services for SwDs to ensure equitable access to education.

The above narratives of SwDs in Afghan HEIs underscore the profound impact of institutional barriers on their academic experiences and overall well-being. While students demonstrate exceptional resilience in navigating these challenges, the lack of inclusive policies and infrastructure highlights systemic failures that must be addressed. By implementing targeted reforms, HEIs can create an environment where SwDs can thrive academically and socially, free from the inequities that currently hinder their progress.

4.3. Societal Influences on Disability Narratives

Societal attitudes, often shaped by stigma and misconceptions, play a pivotal role in the experiences of SwDs. As student 3 from University D stated, *"There are many types of disabilities—mental, physical, sensory. But disability isn't as bad as some might think. A mental disability is more challenging because it becomes a burden on society."* Although this statement highlights a sense of resilience and rejects the notion that all disabilities inherently limit individual potential or societal contributions, it also inadvertently reinforces a negative stereotype about mental disabilities. This duality indicates an internalized societal bias, which is not uncommon among marginalized groups. This also reflects a common societal narrative in Afghanistan and other countries where mental health issues are less understood and more heavily stigmatized. SwDs repeatedly encounter harmful stereotypes, pity, and low expectations that influence how they are treated and perceived within their communities.

One student with physical impairment describes a particularly hurtful experience at a family event, *"I once went to a wedding at a hotel. One of my relatives told my father, 'Why did you bring your lame child to the wedding?' That person recently passed away, and I said, 'May God does not forgive him.' When I got older, I decided that forgiveness was better. I said, 'Never mind, may God forgive him and grant him paradise."* This account underscores the emotional scars caused by societal stigma and insensitive comments. It illustrates how hurtful language, and actions leave lasting impacts on SwDs' self-esteem and identity formation.

Although language is one of the most pervasive tools through which societal stigma is reinforced, societal perceptions often reinforce low expectations for SwDs. Student 8 from University B noted, *"Society often sees us as weak or incapable of working or studying."* These misconceptions create significant emotional and psychological burdens, as SwDs are forced to navigate not only physical and institutional barriers but also societal skepticism about their abilities.

4.3.1. Urban and Rural Disparities

Students highlighted a contrast between urban and rural attitudes. Urban areas, influenced by awareness campaigns and exposure to diverse perspectives, often exhibit more inclusive attitudes. Student 1 from University B observed, *"Uneducated people in rural areas often use hurtful language, whereas urban residents tend to be more inclusive."* A female student from University F highlighted a

gradual shift in urban attitudes, stating, *"Those who perceive that a person with visual impairment can also be useful like any sighted person have very good behavior... The perception is changing, especially in recent years."* These shifts are attributed to the increasing visibility of SwDs in educational and professional settings and to targeted awareness efforts that challenge longstanding stereotypes.

However, in rural areas, where exposure to inclusive narratives is limited, discriminatory behaviors and misconceptions remain deeply entrenched. Students from these regions face greater challenges in advocating for their rights and accessing opportunities.

4.3.2. Pity and Excessive Sympathy

Beyond outright stigma, many SwDs encounter pity and excessive sympathy, which can be equally alienating. These interactions often reduce SwDs to objects of curiosity or compassion rather than recognizing their individuality and potential. A student hearing impairment described the discomfort of being stared at in public spaces, noting, *"People would look at us in wonder, unsure how to interact. It was more curiosity and pity than anything else."*

One student describes comments he has received *"People would tell me that a blind person should just stay at home, not go to school or try to achieve anything."* This example on one hand demonstrates how societal attitudes can discourage SwDs from pursuing education. On other hand it exemplifies how societal pity can be alienating and demotivating for SwDs, reflecting the need for societal change. Such attitudes, though seemingly well-meaning, reinforce a sense of "*otherness*" and exclusion. This alienation can be particularly harmful when it translates into patronizing behaviors that deny SwDs agency and autonomy.

4.3.3. Calls for Awareness and Respect

A recurring theme in students' narratives is the urgent need for comprehensive awareness campaigns to address societal misconceptions and foster respect. Student 5 from University D remarked, *"People should not treat us with pity as if we are beggars. They should treat us as human beings, so we don't feel disabled."* Similarly, another student emphasized, *"Society needs to understand that disability means fighting against hardships, not being weak."*

These statements highlight the importance of shifting societal attitudes from pity and judgment to respect and inclusion. Awareness campaigns that celebrate the achievements and contributions of SwDs, rather than focusing solely on their challenges, have the potential to dismantle harmful stereotypes and foster a culture of equality.

Societal attitudes toward disability have a profound impact on the lives of SwDs, shaping how they are perceived and how they perceive themselves. While harmful language, pity, and low expectations remain pervasive, education and awareness campaigns are emerging as powerful tools to challenge these narratives.

4.4. Turning Points in Educational Journeys

For many SwDs, their educational journeys are punctuated by significant turning points that reshape their confidence, aspirations, and resilience. These moments, often rooted in personal, academic, or social milestones, serve as critical junctures in their narratives, reinforcing their determination to succeed against systemic and societal odds.

4.4.1. Family and Peer Support: A Pillar of Strength

Family, teachers, and peers play vital roles in enabling SwDs to navigate the barriers they face in HE. The encouragement and practical support offered by these social networks often prove pivotal. Student 2 from University B shared how their family stepped in during difficult times: *"My cousins*

and brothers helped me, or sometimes my classmates would assist." This assistance ranged from physical help navigating inaccessible infrastructure to emotional support during challenging academic periods.

Similarly, teachers who demonstrate empathy and understanding can have a profound impact. Student 6 from University B reflected on this dynamic, saying, *"The teacher is like a parent." Whatever they do is in our best interest."* For many students, educators' belief and investment provide the motivation needed to persevere.

Peer relationships also play a critical role in fostering a sense of inclusion and normalcy. One student shared how their friends treated them without any differentiation: *"My friends treated me as if I were completely healthy. They would joke with me just like before, pushing me around, and that stayed the same. I've never felt weak or different. That's my good memory."* These experiences highlight how positive social interactions can counterbalance the exclusion and stigma often faced by SwDs.

A student from the Faculty of Medicine shares how his disability has affected his self-esteem despite his academic success, *"When I encounter situations that require physical strength, and I cannot fulfill those needs myself, it becomes a source of frustration and sadness for me."* This reflection demonstrates the internal struggles SwDs face, even when achieving academic milestones, emphasizing the importance of peer and family encouragement in overcoming these feelings.

4.4.2. Academic Success as a Defining Moment

For SwDs, academic achievements represent pivotal turning points that validate their efforts and reinforce their self-confidence. These moments serve as powerful counter-narratives to societal stereotypes about disability. Student 1 from University A recalled, *"When I passed my first semester with good grades, I knew I could do it."* Similarly, Student 4 from University C described the transformative impact of gaining university admission: *"When I succeeded in entering University B, it was like a dream come true. I had always wanted to study and benefit my country, and getting into university was a realization of that dream."*

These achievements demonstrate the resilience and determination of SwDs in pursuing their education despite significant systemic and societal challenges. Academic milestones often serve not only as personal triumphs but also as public proof of their capabilities, challenging prevailing misconceptions.

4.4.3. Public Recognition and Skill Building

Beyond academic achievements, public recognition and the acquisition of practical skills serve as transformative moments in SwDs' journeys. Student 7 from University B recounted their experience of presenting their thesis: *"When I presented my thesis, even those who doubted me started to see my potential."* Such moments of acknowledgment provide SwDs with a sense of validation and encourage them to strive for greater accomplishments.

For students with visual impairments, vocational and life skills training, particularly in special schools, equips them with the tools needed to navigate challenges independently. Student 6 from University C explained, *"Our school taught us mobility training, which was crucial for us. It made me feel that I could move forward in life, no matter the barriers."* These opportunities not only build confidence but also highlight the importance of tailored education and support in empowering SwDs to achieve their goals.

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4.4.4. Personal Resilience and Transformative Events

Many students identify moments of personal resilience as turning points in their educational journeys. For some, traumatic events became catalysts for change, motivating them to pursue education with renewed determination. Student 2 from University D, who sustained a severe injury, reflected on the struggles and triumphs of their journey: *"After being shot and losing my ability to walk, I thought my life was over. But returning to school and continuing my education became my way of proving that I could still achieve something."* These narratives demonstrate the resilience of SwDs, who persist in their educational pursuits despite overwhelming odds.

4.4.5. Empowerment Through Advocacy

For many SwDs, turning points also involve advocating for themselves or others within the system. Student 5 from University C described their experience of challenging systemic neglect: *"I took the special entrance exam for the blind and scored the highest marks, but because the Ministry of Higher Education did not have a proper process in place for us, they delayed my entry."* Such advocacy efforts reflect the dual challenges faced by SwDs: overcoming personal barriers while pushing for systemic reforms to create equitable opportunities for others.

The educational journeys of SwDs are defined by a series of turning points that blend personal resilience, academic success, and the support of family, peers, and educators. These moments underscore the importance of creating inclusive educational environments where SwDs can thrive. By addressing systemic gaps and celebrating their achievements, institutions can play a pivotal role in empowering SwDs to achieve their full potential and contribute meaningfully to society.

4.5. Aspirations and Employment Challenges

As SwDs near the completion of their educational journeys, they face a crossroads of aspirations and uncertainties. Education has instilled hope and determination, yet societal and systemic barriers continue to cast shadows over their ambitions, particularly in the realm of employment and social inclusion. The narratives of these students reveal a dual focus: striving for personal success while advocating for structural changes to foster greater equity and opportunity.

4.5.1. Unemployment after Higher Education

For many SwDs, education represents not only a tool for personal growth but also a means to challenge societal expectations. It becomes a pathway for intellectual and professional contributions, offering an avenue to overcome societal limitations. Student 1 from University A shared their aspirations, stating, *"I come here with hopes that after graduating, I will secure a job... we cannot do physical labor due to our disability."* This sentiment underscores the critical role of education in shaping their aspirations for meaningful and fulfilling careers.

The emotional toll of unemployment is immense, as students feel they are a burden on their families if they are not employed after graduation. One recently graduated student with visual impairment stated, *"It's hard not being able to help my family financially. I studied and worked hard, but without a job, I feel like a burden. The pressure is immense, especially when I know I'm capable of working but can't find opportunities."* This highlights the compounded impact of systemic neglect, where the lack of inclusive employment policies perpetuates cycles of exclusion and dependency. Another recent graduate adds, "*My family supported me throughout my education, and now I can't even give back because I can't find a job. It's a huge source of stress for all of us."* This narrative highlights the financial and emotional toll of unemployment on SwDs and their families, emphasizing the pressure to contribute.

The desire to contribute meaningfully to society and inspire others is a recurring theme. Student 4 from University D expressed their goal to serve as a role model: *"I want to become a lecturer and*

show that people with disabilities are just as capable of shaping the future." Similarly, students with visual impairments emphasized their hope to leverage their unique perspectives in advocacy and inclusion. One student stated, *"If given a chance, I would love to work with organizations that support people like us."*

4.5.2. Employment Barriers and Systemic Skepticism

Despite their ambitions, many SwDs encounter systemic skepticism and discrimination in the job market. These barriers undermine their ability to achieve financial independence and contribute to their families and communities. Student 4 from University C lamented, *"I applied to many places, including the Ministry of... and the... Society, but the officials we met did not trust us enough to give us a job."* This mistrust, rooted in societal biases, often overshadows the qualifications and skills of SwDs, leaving them excluded from professional opportunities.

Student 5 from University C expresses *"Despite the fact that I have the skills in the areas where I should work and there are positions available, they don't trust me..."* This narrative emphasizes employers' mistrust, reinforcing the theme of systemic skepticism about SwDs' abilities.

One student with visual impairment argues, *"The workplaces are not designed for people like us. There are no accessible tools or technology, and we have to find our own way to adapt..."* This anecdote elaborates on the lack of workplace accommodations, tying it to the challenges SwDs face in maintaining productivity and challenging stereotypes.

4.5.3. Entrepreneurship and Advocacy: Creating Opportunities

Faced with limited formal opportunities, some SwDs turn to entrepreneurship or alternative careers to create their own pathways to success. A student with visual impairment shared their innovative approach, stating, *"I have worked in media with different radio stations and continued to pursue teaching. Even though there is no formal support, I made opportunities for myself."* Such entrepreneurial efforts not only showcase the resilience and determination of SwDs but also highlight the gaps in institutional and societal support.

Advocacy is another avenue through which SwDs strive to effect change. Many students view their success as a means to pave the way for future generations of SwDs. Student 2 from University G passionately stated, *"We don't need pity. We need opportunities to show that we are capable."* These stories illustrate how SwDs are not only navigating systemic barriers but also actively working to dismantle them through advocacy and leadership.

4.5.4. Addressing Structural Gaps

The transition from education to employment reveals critical structural gaps that hinder SwDs from realizing their full potential. Students frequently highlighted the absence of formal career guidance, inclusive workplace policies, and targeted support for SwDs. Student 3 from University A observed, *"There's no department to help people like us find jobs or prepare for employment. We are left to figure everything out on our own."*

Key structural issues highlighted by SwDs include:

- Many organizations lack the physical and technological infrastructure to accommodate SwDs, such as ramps, adaptive tools, or sign language interpreters.
- While national laws may mandate employment quotas for SwDs, enforcement remains inconsistent. Students expressed frustration over the lack of mechanisms to hold institutions accountable.
- The absence of career counseling or mentorship programs leaves SwDs unprepared to navigate the job market.

- These gaps reinforce systemic inequities, limiting the opportunities available to SwDs and perpetuating cycles of exclusion.

Students emphasize the need for systemic reforms to bridge the gap between education and employment. Their recommendations include:

- Establish dedicated departments to assist SwDs in finding jobs and building professional skills.
- Develop mentorship initiatives connecting SwDs with professionals in their fields of interest.
- Implement workplace accommodations such as ramps, adaptive technologies, and inclusive hiring practices.
- Provide sign language interpreters and other support systems for SwDs in professional environments.
- Strengthen the implementation of employment quotas for SwDs as mandated by national laws.
- Conduct public campaigns to challenge stereotypes about disability and highlight the capabilities and contributions of SwDs.
- Encourage employers to recognize the value of diversity and inclusion in the workplace.

The narratives of SwDs in Afghanistan reveal a complex interplay of resilience, systemic barriers, and societal attitudes. While education emerges as a transformative force, systemic reforms are urgently needed to address institutional neglect, societal stigma, and employment inequities. By fostering inclusive policies and practices, Afghan HEIs and society can empower SwDs to realize their potential and contribute meaningfully to their communities.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study on the experiences of SwDs in Afghan HEIs provide critical insights into how they conceptualize disability, navigate inclusion and exclusion, confront employment anxieties, and articulate aspirations for reform. Grounded in the social model of disability (Oliver, 1990; Shakespeare, 2013) and disability-rights perspectives (Barnes & Mercer, 2010; United Nations, 2006), the analysis reveals that Afghan SwDs view disability not only as an individual deficit but as a condition shaped by environmental, attitudinal, and structural barriers. Their narratives illuminate the resilience required to overcome these barriers and the fragility of institutional and societal support within Afghanistan's evolving educational landscape.

In Afghanistan, SwDs are typically educated either in special vocational schools or in regular classrooms following a preparatory phase in special-education settings (Naeemy & Yoneda, 2025a). SwDs' narratives highlighted that while special schools provide basic functional skills, they often lack advanced learning resources, leaving students unprepared for HE. Conversely, regular schools promote social integration but remain ill-equipped to accommodate diverse learning needs. The Afghan experience exemplifies challenges faced in many low-resource contexts, where inclusive education remains an aspiration constrained by systemic limitations such as inaccessible infrastructure, shortage of trained teachers, and lack of adaptive learning materials. As Barton (1997) argued, education systems frequently marginalize SwDs by failing to adapt structures to their needs. A critique echoed in later analyses of developing-country policies (Hayes & Bulat, 2017). True inclusion thus requires more than access; it demands systemic reform of pedagogy, facilities, and institutional culture (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011).

5.1. Reconstructing Identity Through Education

Education emerged as a transformative arena where SwDs redefined their identities and challenged deep-rooted stigma. In line with transformative learning theory (Cranton, 2023; Mezirow, 1992), participants described HE as a process of self-redefinition—moving from dependency to self-advocacy and empowerment. For many, pursuing HE was more than academic advancement; it represented an act of resistance and empowerment (Charlton, 2012; Freire, 1970), allowing them to counter social narratives that equate disability with incapacity. Through participation in academic spaces, students cultivated a renewed sense of agency and purpose, positioning education as a means of self-liberation and collective advocacy.

Many Afghan students, especially those with physical impairments, argue that although disability imposes limitations, it should not define an individual's capabilities or worth. This understanding of disability by Afghan SwDs resonates with Shakespeare's (2013) articulation of the social model of disability that distinguishes between impairment (physical limitations) and disability (social barriers created by the environment). This process of identity reconstruction aligns with global findings that portray disability as both personal and social, shaped by interaction between impairment and context (Hammel et al., 2015; Imrie, 1997; Shakespeare, 2013). Shakespeare claims that despite efforts to create a more accessible and inclusive world, certain impairments will always carry residual disadvantages (Shakespeare, 2013). Afghan SwDs framed their academic success as proof of capability, transforming stigma into motivation. In this sense, education served as what Freire (1970) called a “practice of freedom,” enabling critical reflection and self-realization. Such experiences demonstrate the potential of HE to generate empowerment through learning, solidarity, and critical awareness—core dimensions of transformative learning and empowerment theories.

5.2. Navigating Institutional Barriers

Students’ narratives revealed that Afghan HEIs remain structurally and attitudinally unprepared to accommodate disability. Participants described persistent challenges across all stages of academic life—from inaccessible entrance examinations to navigating campus buildings lacking ramps, elevators, or adapted furniture. Limited access to Braille materials, sign language interpretation, and assistive technologies compounded these barriers. Such conditions exemplify what the social model of disability identifies as exclusion created by institutional design rather than individual limitation (Oliver, 1990; Shakespeare, 2013). The absence of enabling environments, not impairments themselves, constrained participation and academic success.

Similar patterns have been observed globally. Studies in both high- and low-income contexts confirm that inclusive HE requires structural reform rather than token access (Barton, 1997; Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011). Nearly two decades ago, Riddell et al. (2005) revealed that SwDs in the UK often struggled with physical barriers, insufficient learning materials, and a lack of institutional support (Riddell et al., 2005). Although improvements have since been made in the UK, these challenges persist in Afghanistan and other developing countries such as Bangladesh, India, Iran, Kazakhstan, Pakistan and so on (Arora, 2023; Ashraf & Rahat, 2023; Mamun et al., 2024; Naeemy & Yoneda, 2025b; Pandey, 2021).

When teachers are untrained or lack an awareness of the needs of SwDs, as in Afghanistan (Naeemy & Yoneda, 2024, 2025a), the educational experience becomes considerably more challenging for SwDs. Faculty preparedness emerged as a particularly critical yet neglected component. When teachers lack training in inclusive pedagogy, they may inadvertently perpetuate exclusion by failing to adapt teaching methods or assessment formats (Carballo et al., 2021; Fuller et al., 2004). Participants reported relying heavily on peer assistance to bridge accessibility gaps—a coping strategy that highlights the compensatory role of social capital (Bourdieu, 1986; Putnam,

2000). This phenomenon of turning to informal peer support was evident in narratives of Afghan SwDs.

The absence of formal disability support structures further exacerbates these inequalities. Disability Service Units (DSUs) which are proven effective in other countries, could help coordinate accommodations, tutoring, and accessible learning materials (Mbuvha, 2019). Sustainable inclusion also depends on dedicated funding and financial aid programs. Insufficient funding often hinders the provision of necessary support services. Progressive funding models, such as disability scholarships and support programs, are essential in ensuring equal participation and success for SwDs in HE (Chiwandire & Vincent, 2020). Without such institutional frameworks, Afghan HEIs risk reproducing a cycle of dependency and exclusion, where inclusion relies on individual resilience rather than systemic responsibility.

5.3. Societal Influences on Disability Narratives

SwDs' perceptions of disability are deeply shaped by Afghanistan's cultural norms, linguistic expressions, and religious interpretations. Participants emphasized the negative impact of stigmatizing terminology—particularly the term *Mayub* ("defective")—which reflects entrenched societal attitudes that frame disability as deficiency. The derogatory names used to refer to PwDs reflect their marginalized social standing, as these labels reinforce their perception as lesser forms of humanity (Dlodlo & Moyo, 2022). By labeling individuals as "defective," society reinforces a harmful stigma that diminishes self-esteem and limits the opportunities available to SwDs. Such labeling exemplifies what stigma theory (Goffman, 1974; Link & Phelan, 2001) describes as the "spoiled identity," wherein individuals are devalued and socially excluded based on perceived difference. These findings mirror broader evidence that stigma and negative attitudes can lead to social exclusion and discrimination and limit PwDs' participation in education, employment, and community life (Babik & Gardner, 2021; Dlodlo & Moyo, 2022; Green, 2007).

At the same time, participants drew resilience from family, peers, and teachers who offered moral, academic, and logistical support. This relational support functions as social capital (Bourdieu, 1986; Putnam, 2000), providing SwDs with access to encouragement, advocacy, and essential resources. Similar studies have shown that social networks foster persistence and belonging, especially in contexts lacking formal institutional support (Ahmed et al., 2022; Ahmmed, 2013). In Afghanistan, where systemic supports remain weak, these informal relationships often substitute for institutional accommodations, helping students navigate barriers that universities fail to address.

However, reliance on personal networks underscores systemic inequity: when inclusion depends on social goodwill rather than institutional design, access becomes inconsistent and exclusion persists. Research on peer mentoring and community-based support programs (Cargiulo & Blaskowitz, 2022). highlights their potential but also their limitations—they cannot replace formal, rights-based mechanisms of support. Building inclusive HE therefore requires both cultural changes to reduce stigma and structural reform to institutionalize support, ensuring that equality is not contingent on personal relationships but guaranteed as a matter of justice.

5.4. Turning Points in Educational Journeys

Participants identified distinct "turning points" in their educational trajectories—moments of recognition, achievement, or advocacy that transformed their self-perception and aspirations. These episodes often emerged through positive interactions with peers or faculty, successful academic experiences, or opportunities to represent their universities. Such moments exemplify transformative learning theory (Cranton, 2023; Mezirow, 1992), wherein individuals critically reassess previously internalized limitations and reconstruct their sense of self, through reflection and empowerment. For Afghan SwDs, encouragement from educators or peers often triggered these

transformations, reinforcing global evidence that inclusive mentorship cultivates self-efficacy and agency (Moriña et al., 2015).

For many Afghan SwDs, encouragement from educators or peers served as catalysts for change, transforming feelings of dependency into confidence and agency. These experiences also resonate with resistance and empowerment approaches (Charlton, 2012; Freire, 1970), which view education as both a personal and collective act of liberation. By persisting in HE despite physical, institutional, and social barriers, students engaged in subtle but powerful resistance against exclusionary structures and cultural stereotypes that equate disability with weakness.

This process of empowerment was inherently relational and reflective. Through education, SwDs not only gained academic knowledge but also redefined their role within their families and communities—from passive recipients of support to active contributors and advocates. These transformations echo Lord and Hutchison's (2003) view of empowerment as both "a process and an outcome," enabling individuals to reclaim control over their lives while contributing to broader social change (J. Lord & Hutchison, 2003). In this sense, HE in Afghanistan becomes more than an academic pursuit—it becomes a transformative space where students with disabilities rewrite narratives of dependence into stories of capability, resilience, and hope.

5.5. Aspirations and Employment Challenges

The narratives of Afghan SwDs reveal a complex interplay between aspiration, capability, and structural exclusion in the transition from HE to employment. Despite their academic achievements, participants expressed deep anxiety about future job prospects, citing societal stigma, employers' misconceptions, and the state's weak enforcement of disability employment policies. These barriers mirror global findings from low- and middle-income contexts, where educated persons with disabilities often remain excluded from the labor market despite possessing comparable qualifications (Joshi & Thomas, 2019; Kaye et al., 2011; Morwane et al., 2021).

The persistence of stigma reflects what Goffman (1963) termed the "spoiled identity," where social prejudice undermines confidence and opportunity. Many participants described employers doubting their productivity or viewing accommodation as costly or burdensome—attitudes consistent with international evidence that negative perceptions, rather than actual limitations, drive workplace exclusion (Bialik & Mhiri, 2022; Kaye et al., 2011). Such discrimination underscores the continuing dominance of the medical and charity models of disability in Afghan society, which emphasize dependency rather than rights and inclusion.

Compounding these attitudes is the lack of policy enforcement, a problem seen in many low-resource settings, which further exacerbates the employment challenges for SwDs. Although Afghanistan's Law on the Rights and Privileges of PwDs mandates a 3% employment quota (Hashimy, 2023), implementation remains minimal—a pattern seen across many low-resource countries (Groce et al., 2011; Szerman, 2022). Without monitoring mechanisms, incentives, or accountability structures, quotas function more symbolically than substantively. As in other contexts, employers' limited awareness of reasonable accommodation and fear of legal liability further discourage hiring (Kaye et al., 2011).

Meaningful employment inclusion therefore requires a systemic shift. Beyond symbolic quotas, effective strategies include employer training, disability awareness campaigns, accessible workplaces, and centralized support for accommodations (Kaye et al., 2011). As Schur et al. (2014) and Vornholt et al. (2018) emphasize, fostering inclusive workplace cultures—where difference is normalized and valued—is critical for sustainable inclusion. Ultimately, as articulated in the disability rights framework (Barnes & Mercer, 2010; Charlton, 2012) , employment must be viewed not as charity but as a matter of justice and participation. Empowering SwDs to contribute meaningfully to

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Afghanistan's workforce demands coordinated reforms that address both structural barriers and attitudinal change.

5.6. Assistive Technologies and Institutional Support

Access to assistive technologies and institutional accommodations emerged as one of the most pressing challenges for SwDs in Afghan HE. Participants consistently emphasized the scarcity of adaptive tools—such as Braille keyboards, screen readers, and sign language interpretation—and the absence of structured systems to provide or maintain them. These shortcomings exemplify what the social model of disability identifies as socially constructed barriers.

Globally, studies confirm that assistive technologies and reasonable accommodations significantly enhance students' academic performance and social inclusion (Matsuzaki et al., 2020; Satar, 2019; Vartic & Oprisan, 2019). Yet, in Afghanistan, such provisions remain virtually absent, leaving students to shoulder the burden of access individually—often relying on personal funds, peer assistance, or improvised solutions. Peer mentoring and informal support networks, while valuable, cannot substitute for these systemic responsibilities (Cargiulo & Blaskowitz, 2022; Mbuvha, 2019). Without such resources, SwDs face significant barriers to academic success, while evidence shows that when provided, they can perform on par with their peers (Zvisinei & Govero, 2019). As Marshak et al. (2010) and Smith et al. (2021) note, stigma and lack of awareness can further discourage students from disclosing disabilities or requesting support, thereby perpetuating exclusion.

Evidence from other low-income and post-conflict contexts shows that affordable innovations—such as tactile graphics, low-cost digital devices, and mobile-based applications—can expand accessibility even under financial constraints (Martillano et al., 2019). However, technological provision alone is insufficient without institutional coordination. Establishing Disability Support Units (DSUs) within universities has proven effective elsewhere in ensuring consistent provision of accessible materials, individualized guidance, and exam accommodations (Chiwandire & Vincent, 2020; Mbuvha, 2019). Such structures also play an advocacy role, bridging students, faculty, and administration to foster a culture of inclusion.

5.7. Gender Imbalance and Political Context

A notable limitation of this study is the gender imbalance—only two of the twenty-six participants were women. This reflects not only sampling constraints but also the broader political and structural realities of Afghanistan since 2021, when the de facto authorities suspended HE for women. At the time of data collection in late 2023, women's participation in universities had already been prohibited, making it extremely difficult to recruit female SwDs. The two women who were included—accessed through personal networks—offered rare and deeply poignant accounts from an educational space that has since been closed to them.

This exclusion represents a double marginalization at the intersection of gender and disability. As feminist disability scholars argue, women with disabilities often experience "compound disadvantage," facing both patriarchal and ableist discrimination that limit educational and social participation (Garland-Thomson, 2002; Stubbs, 2008). For Afghan women with disabilities, the current restrictions have not only eliminated access to HE but also erased critical spaces for empowerment, visibility, and advocacy. Their experiences underscore how gendered social norms and political decisions intersect to deepen educational inequality.

Since the political transition in 2021, Afghanistan's HE landscape has undergone profound change. Women's exclusion from universities and secondary education has reversed two decades of progress toward gender parity (UNESCO, 2025). For female SwDs, this regression is even more severe: education had previously offered a route to self-advocacy and limited economic independence, both

now largely foreclosed. Their narratives therefore stand as testimonies to a disrupted future reminder of the fragility of inclusion gains in contexts where rights are politically contingent.

Although the current administration has not enacted new disability-specific HE policies, isolated gestures—such as the celebration of the International Day of Persons with Disabilities at Kabul University and the continued enrollment of some male SwDs—suggest limited institutional tolerance. However, these symbolic actions fall short of addressing systemic exclusion. The MoHE continues to lack the expertise, policy frameworks, and resources needed to advance inclusive practices. Capacity-building and international collaboration are therefore essential to rebuild institutional knowledge and align Afghanistan's HE with the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) and Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG4), ensuring that no student—particularly women and men with disabilities—is left behind.

5.8. Policy and Practice Implications

The recommendations voiced by Afghan SwDs—emphasizing accessibility, teacher training, curriculum flexibility, financial aid, and employment pathways—resonate strongly with global frameworks for inclusive education and disability rights (Ainscow, 2005; Moriña, 2017; UNESCO, 2020). Achieving genuine inclusion in Afghanistan's HE system requires a multi-level strategy integrating institutional, pedagogical, policy, and cultural reforms.

Institutional Reform: Establishing *Disability Support Units (DSUs)* in each university and a dedicated *Inclusive Education Division* within the MoHE would provide the structural foundation for coordinated inclusion efforts. These units should be tasked with overseeing reasonable accommodations, facilitating faculty development programs, maintaining data on SwDs, and coordinating with student organizations. Predictable funding—through both national allocation and international partnerships—would ensure sustainability and accountability.

Faculty Capacity Building: The professional development of educators is critical. Faculty require systematic training in *inclusive pedagogy*, *Universal Design for Learning (UDL)*, and *assistive technology* to effectively meet diverse learning needs. Embedding disability awareness in teacher education curricula can shift perceptions from charity-based attitudes toward rights-based inclusion, aligning practice with the social model of disability.

Policy Alignment and Enforcement: A clear national policy mandating reasonable accommodation, inclusive infrastructure, and support systems is essential. The enforcement of the 3% employment quota, coupled with transparent mechanisms for monitoring inclusion, would help translate commitments into measurable outcomes. Strengthening collaboration among the MoHE, Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs, Ministry of Martyrs and Disabled Affairs, and disability organizations can enhance coherence and facilitate smoother transitions from education to employment.

Physical Accessibility and Student Support: Consistent with the priorities identified by SwDs in this study, enhancing campus accessibility—through ramps, elevators, and accessible restrooms—is fundamental. Expanding learning resources such as Braille and audio books, adaptive technologies, and accessible curricula would improve participation for students with sensory and mobility impairments. Universities should also establish *counseling, career guidance,* and *mentorship programs* to foster academic success and psychosocial well-being of all students including SwDs. Additional considerations, including affordable transportation, accessible student hostels, and flexibility in entrance examinations, would further reduce structural inequities for SwDs.

Cultural Transformation. Public awareness campaigns that highlight the achievements and rights of PwDs are vital for dismantling stigma and promoting social acceptance. As disability rights and empowerment theorists argue, participation and dignity are central to social justice (Barnes &

Mercer, 2010; Charlton, 2012). Inclusion must therefore be pursued not as a welfare initiative but as a *human rights obligation* and a prerequisite for equitable national development.

By integrating accessibility, inclusive pedagogy, and societal attitude change, Afghan HE institutions can evolve into spaces that cultivate empowerment, foster equality, and reflect the principles of dignity and participation enshrined in the CRPD and SDG4.

5.9. Limitations and Future Directions

This study involved twenty-six participants from multiple Afghan HEIs, representing students with physical, visual, and hearing impairments. While their narratives provide rich insights into the lived realities of SwDs, the study has several limitations that should be acknowledged.

First, gender representation remains limited. Only two female participants were included, reflecting both the structural barriers facing women in HE and the political context of 2023, when women's access to universities had already been suspended. This gender imbalance constrains the scope of the findings and underscores the need for future research that centers women with disabilities, whose experiences of exclusion are likely to be distinct and compounded.

Second, disability diversity within the sample was restricted. Students with intellectual, psychosocial, or multiple disabilities were not represented, largely due to the absence of formal support structures in Afghan HE. Subsequent studies should aim for broader inclusion to capture the full spectrum of disability experiences.

Third, linguistic and cultural interpretation poses an inherent challenge. Although interviews were conducted in Pashto and Dari and translated with careful verification, some nuances of emotion and cultural meaning may have been lost in translation. Reflexive attention was maintained throughout analysis to preserve participants' voices and minimize interpretive bias.

Finally, the study's qualitative design provides depth but limits generalizability. Future research could adopt mixed-methods or longitudinal designs to track how inclusion evolves under Afghanistan's shifting socio-political landscape. Comparative analyses—linking Afghan findings with other low-resource or post-conflict contexts—would further contextualize patterns of exclusion and resilience.

Future inquiries should also engage faculty members, policymakers, and employers to capture systemic perspectives on inclusion. Participatory and action-oriented approaches, involving SwDs as co-researchers, could strengthen advocacy and ensure that research directly informs policy and institutional reform.

Overall, while this study captures a critical moment in the history of Afghan HE, ongoing research is needed to document how disability inclusion—particularly for women—can be sustained or revived in times of political instability. Such work will be vital for shaping equitable education systems that align with the principles of the CRPD, SDG4, and the global agenda for inclusive and quality education for all.

6. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that students with disabilities (SwDs) in Afghanistan continue to encounter systemic barriers across educational, social, and institutional dimensions. Yet, their narratives also reveal remarkable resilience, self-advocacy, and aspirations for participation in HE and beyond. Five interrelated themes—identity reconstruction, institutional inaccessibility, societal stigma, transformative turning points, and employment anxieties—capture the complexity of their lived experiences and the structural inequities that shape them.

Grounded in the social model of disability and transformative learning theory, the findings affirm that access to education alone does not guarantee inclusion. Genuine participation requires systemic reform: accessible infrastructure, the establishment of disability support offices at both institutional and ministerial levels, expanded access to assistive technologies, and comprehensive faculty training rooted in inclusive pedagogy and cultural responsiveness.

By centering the voices of Afghan SwDs, this research amplifies perspectives often marginalized in policy discourse and underscores the need to translate global commitments—particularly the CRPD and SDG4—into contextually grounded national strategies. In the wake of Afghanistan's shifting political landscape, safeguarding inclusive education has become more urgent than ever. Ensuring that no student—especially women with disabilities—is excluded from learning is not only a policy necessity but a moral imperative for rebuilding an equitable and just education system.

Declarations

Author Contributions. M.I.N: Literature review, data collection and analysis, original manuscript preparation. H.Y.: conceptualization, review-editing and writing. All authors have read and approved the published on the final version of the article.

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