The Stories that Shape Us

Deconstructing Gender Narratives that Limit Hazara Canadian Women's Aspirations

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Abstract

This research examines how gender narratives – the culturally transmitted stories, beliefs, and assumptions about appropriate roles and behaviors based on gender – shape the life choices and identities of Hazara women in the Canadian diaspora. Using a systemic design methodology, I investigate how these narratives persist in the Hazara culture and contribute to broader patterns of gender inequality observed in Canada. Through direct engagement with Hazara women across Canada, I identify three powerful narratives that consistently constrain women's choices: i) narratives that i) frame traditional gender roles as natural and biologically determined, ii) position preservation of cultural values against women's freedom, and iii) depict women's lives as incomplete without marriage and motherhood.

Systems mapping reveals how these narratives interact with power imbalances within households and broader systems to create negotiation grounds that produce predictable and traditional gendered outcomes that are deemed "practical". This research specifically deep dives into the context of mix-gender households across six key decision areas: i) division of domestic labor, ii) career choices, iii) marital name change practices, iv) financial decision-making, v) reproductive choices, and vi) tolerance for intimate partner violence. These patterns persist through self-reinforcing cycles where gender-conforming outcomes reinforce the same power disparities and limiting narratives.

Using foresight methodologies, I explore both current system dynamics and potential futures where gender no longer unnecessarily constrains human possibility. These analyses reveal that our current gender system is under increasing strain, with tensions emerging between women's high educational achievements and undesirable occupational outcomes, women's desires for family and aspirations for careers, and continued devaluation of women's unpaid care work and growing demands for caregivers.

Based on visions of desired gender futures from Hazara women in 2050, I use Donella Meadows' leverage points framework to propose two complementary pathways toward gender transformation: the Personal Climber's Path for individuals seeking change in their personal lives and the Collective Builder's Path for individuals seeking community and systemic transformation. These pathways identify strategic intervention points ranging from concrete changes in material structures to profound shifts in underlying paradigms.

Acknowledgements

I begin by acknowledging that this research was conducted on the traditional territories of the Mississaugas of the Credit, the Anishnabeg, the Chippewa, the Haudenosaunee and the Wendat peoples, now home to many diverse First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples. I recognize the enduring presence of Indigenous peoples on this land and am grateful for the opportunity to live, learn, and create here.

This project would not have been possible without the Hazara women who generously shared their stories, insights, and aspirations with me. Their courage, wisdom, and openness form the heart of this research, and I am profoundly grateful for their trust and participation.

I extend my deepest appreciation to the OCAD professors and classmates who created such a transformative experience throughout this Master's program. The OCAD SFI community provided endless opportunities for learning beyond the classroom that have fundamentally shaped my thinking and approach. To Zemina, thank you for providing crucial insights between imagination and self-worth to explore in future research.

I am especially grateful to my supervisor Rodrigo Barreda for invaluable advice and guidance throughout this research journey. Your consistent reminders to ground my work in authenticity and humility have made this project not just academically rigorous but personally meaningful.

To my parents, my sisters Ramzia, Fakhria, and Razia, and my brothers Sadiq and Nabi, I owe a debt that cannot be expressed in words. Your influence on my life and the direction of this project has been immeasurable. The experiences we have shared have shaped my understanding of gender narratives in ways that made this research possible.

Finally, my heartfelt gratitude to my best friend and partner Ali, who has stood beside me through every challenge and celebration. You have been my constant companion on uncharted paths as we imagine and build a new world for ourselves. Your unwavering support and belief in me have sustained this work from beginning to end.

Dedication

To those who came before me—my ancestors who carried wisdom through generations, my community whose stories shaped my understanding, and especially my mother, whose absence is felt deeply yet whose presence continues to guide me.

To the Hazara women of today who demonstrate extraordinary resilience in the face of persistent challenges, whose quiet strength and daily courage inspire this work.

And to my beloved nieces and nephews—Eva, Ariyan, Eliana, and Zindagi, who represent the future I am working toward. May you inherit a world where your possibilities are determined not by gender but by the unique gifts you bring. You are my inspiration, my motivation, and my North Star in this journey.

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Introduction

Preface

Despite decades of advocacy and progress, gender inequality remains one of the most persistent global challenges of our time. The World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report 2024 estimates that at current rates of progress, it will take 134 years to reach full gender parity worldwide (Global Gender Gap 2024, 2024). This sobering projection comes at a time when we are witnessing a concerning global swing toward conservative politics that threatens to erode hard-won advances in women's rights.

Even in Canada, a country that prides itself on its commitment to equality, significant disparities persist. The COVID-19 pandemic revealed the fragility of the progress we have made so far, with women disproportionately shouldering increased caregiving responsibilities and experiencing higher rates of job loss (The Facts, 2022). The pandemic also exposed the deeply seated beliefs and challenges about race, immigration status, and economic class in North America that created compounded disadvantages for groups of BIPOC women (Government of Canada, 2020).

It is within this broader context that I situate my investigation of gender narratives among Hazara women in the Canadian diaspora. The Hazaras, a religious and ethnic minority that has faced historical persecution in Afghanistan, bring their own complex gender traditions that both challenge and reinforce broader patterns of inequality observed in Canada (Abbasi et al., 2025).

For many Hazara women who have fled persecution and war, arrival in Canada represents an escape to safety and opportunity. Yet this gratitude often comes with "survivor guilt", a sense that we should be satisfied with what we have achieved, that asking for true equality might be demanding too much when compared to the dire situations facing those left behind. I have heard women in my own family say to me when talking about gender equality that, "we should be grateful for what we have here", effectively silencing their own aspirations and self-determination. These self-silencing practices are natural responses to the gender narratives that we inherit as women and girls from a young age. Being Hazara and Muslim historically has meant that the gender narratives are deeply patriarchal, misogynistic, and harmful to women.

I recall an incident in Afghanistan during a summer visit in 2006. My oldest sister, my dad, his two brothers, and one of their daughters were at our uncle's home. I was 12 at the time. I remember that the conversation got heated, and my sister had something to say so she tried to speak. I remember this part very clearly. My dad yelled, "this is not the place for a girl to speak when the men are talking". My oldest sister had been our family's primary provider for a few years because my dad was not able to find any work in Pakistan. Despite being the sole financial provider, a position that men often use to claim absolute authority over the family, my sister was completely disrespected and told not to speak in front of men. No one else said anything in response to this statement.

A few years later, I was an engineering student in Canada, one of fifteen girls in a class of 120. In my first year, one of my teacher's assistants (TA) made fun of me when I went to her during office hours to ask for help with MATLAB (a programming language). I had never done any programming, so I asked what a "counter" was, and she laughed me out of her office and said, "you don't know what a counter is, how are you in this program?" That incident, plus a remark from one of my classmates that "I was smart, for a girl" and countless other off-hand comments and scenarios all added to my insecurities about my capabilities as an engineer because of my gender. None of these incidents individually shaped my insecurities, but when they all came together to form a persistent narrative that taught me that women were inherently less capable, I began to internalize this despite my own abilities and achievements.

Fast forward a few more years, at a family gathering, I was sitting on the couch with my 7-year-old niece and 4-year-old nephew, Eva and Ariyan, when I heard Eva tell Ariyan that he was so lucky to have been born a boy because he will not have to do anything when he gets older because he will have a wife, but she is not excited to grow up because she will have to be a wife and do everything for someone else. Even though no one had specifically said this to her verbatim, she had put this idea together based on her own observations – that she will have to make sacrifices because she is born a girl. It was heart-shattering for me to see the weight of gender narratives already beginning to shape these children's sense of self at such a young age.

These moments, separated by years and continents, are connected by invisible threads of gender narratives that have shaped not only my life but the lives of generations of Hazara women in Afghanistan and women from all backgrounds in Canada. I have watched brilliantly talented women set aside professional dreams for marriages arranged by families. I have seen them graduate with honors only to disappear into domestic life. I have also seen women who, like me, have pursued unconventional paths, navigating the tensions between cultural heritage and personal aspiration. We are often viewed with a mixture of pride and concern by our community – success stories to be celebrated but also cautionary tales of what happens when women venture too far from traditional expectations.

These observations are not merely academic. They are deeply personal, rooted in my experiences and connections to a community I love but sometimes struggle to understand. The persistent patterns I see, of possibilities expanded yet still constrained, of choices that seem individual yet follow remarkably similar trajectories, have led me to this research.

This research is my attempt to understand these stories and narratives – where they come from, how they persist, and most importantly, how they might be transformed to create new possibilities not just for my nieces and nephews but for everyone navigating the complex terrain of gender equality.

Research Context & Objectives

Gender narratives – the culturally transmitted stories, beliefs, and assumptions about appropriate roles and behaviors for women and men – profoundly shape individual life choices and societal structures. In Hazara culture, as in many others, these narratives possess immense power, subtly guiding decisions and influencing life trajectories. Ivana Milojevic and Sohail Inayatullah emphasize this in their work on Narrative Foresight, noting that the narratives we are born into "shape not only our identities but also the frameworks through which we perceive and define reality, setting boundaries for what is considered plausible and desirable" (Milojević & Inayatullah, 2015).

These gender narratives consist of stories, beliefs, and assumptions cultivated through interactions with our families, communities, cultural traditions, and broader social contexts. It is often easy to dismiss women's lack of participation in certain activities as personal preference, but the pervasive nature of gender socialization means many women have never had the opportunity to explore their genuine interests because from a young age, we learn not to question the choices that are made for us or the ideas we are taught about women having limited capabilities (Schwesinger, 1999). These constraints extend beyond recreational preferences to other significant life decisions about education, career, marriage, and parenthood.

This research examines how gender narratives operate within the Hazara diaspora communities in Canada as an instance of the diverse broader gender narratives in the Canadian society. The focus on Hazara women is significant because the Hazara community is at a transition point in their collective journey from having fled oppression in Afghanistan, a country that consistently ranks one of the lowest for women's rights, to experiencing an expansion of freedoms in Canada, a country that ranks relatively higher (Ahmed & Hari, 2023; Global Gender Gap Report, 2023). This transition serves as a particularly valuable example for examining how gender narratives adapt, persist, or transform when their surrounding contexts change, helping us to differentiate between constraints that are externally imposed, and narratives that have been internalized (Akbary & Kazemipur, 2022).

The central research question guiding this investigation is:

> ***How have gender narratives shaped the life trajectories of Hazara women in the Canadian diaspora, and how can reframing these gender narratives offer expanded possibilities for these women's futures?***

This overarching question encompasses several interconnected objectives. First, the research aims to identify and analyze the specific gender narratives that influence decision-making processes for Hazara women across generations. Second, the research examines how these narratives interact with and are transformed by the intersection of traditional Hazara culture and Canadian society. Third, the research traces how gender narratives contribute to divergent life paths between women and men, creating systemic patterns often misinterpreted as purely individual choices. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the research seeks to identify pathways for expanding possibilities to explore how gender narratives might be transformed to create more equitable and fulfilling options for both women and men.

Researcher Positionality

This research is informed by my lived experience as a Hazara woman researcher studying my own community in Canada in addition to the bodies of prior work and literature on the topics of gender equality and the Hazara community. I approach this work as both an insider, with deep cultural knowledge, and an outsider, positioned differently from many in my community through education, professional experience, and life choices. This dual positioning creates both insights and blind spots that I have attempted to navigate thoughtfully throughout the research process.

My journey into this topic has taken me through unexpected emotional depths. I have encountered arguments claiming that women are inherently inferior based on religious texts, selective biological research, cultural traditions, and pragmatic justifications. These arguments have often been presented with absolute certainty, leaving little room for questioning. I have eventually come to realize that no amount of evidence will convince the people who are fundamentally committed to believing in women's inferiority, to change their minds. Therefore, this research proceeds from the foundational axiom that, while biological differences exist, neither women nor men are inferior to the other, and they both deserve equal treatment and opportunities.

I recognize that research is not as objective a process as we might think. Every decision in this project, from the questions asked to the methods chosen to the interpretations offered, is influenced by my lived experience and personal biases. To mitigate my biases, I conducted primary research to gather diverse perspectives beyond my own experience, I collaborated with experts from varied backgrounds to challenge my assumptions, and I used participant responses to shape the project's direction. With these participatory-action-research (PAR) principles, I aimed to have this research reflect the experiences of the community.

Given the sensitive nature of gender discussions in Hazara communities, I prioritized ethical considerations throughout this work, including ensuring informed consent and confidentiality for all participants, creating safe spaces for Hazara women to express themselves honestly, and recognizing the responsibility that comes with putting private experiences into public discourse.

Significance & Contribution

The significance of this work is multifaceted, contributing to both academic understanding and practical approaches to gender transformation. First, this research centers the voices of Hazara women that have been systematically excluded from broader Afghan narratives and feminist discourse (Emadi, 2000). Second, this research contributes to broader understandings of how gender narratives evolve and persist in diaspora contexts. The Hazara diaspora in Canada provides a particularly illuminating case study of how gender expectations adapt between dramatically different cultural and political environments.

This research also examines the complex dynamics of progress toward gender equality, exploring both achievements and persistent barriers. By deconstructing gender narratives, we can identify how progress has stalled despite surface-level advancements. For example, many existing approaches to gender equality have primarily benefited women who conform to traditionally masculine life patterns (e.g., prioritizing career over family) without challenging the underlying devaluation of traditionally feminine domains (Marçal, 2012). Building on this analysis, this research aims to expand our conception of progress by acknowledging the importance of both transforming limiting gender structures and honoring diverse ways of being.

In practical terms, the research offers concrete strategies for gender transformation that are culturally sensitive. By identifying effective intervention points within gender systems, the research provides guidance for individuals, communities, and institutions seeking to create more equitable arrangements while respecting cultural identity. Finally, on a personal level, this work helps me make sense of intergenerational trauma and cultural history – not just my own, but that of my community. It offers a framework for healing through understanding, providing tools to recognize patterns without judgment and imagine alternatives without rejection of cultural identity.

Research Limitations

This research is informed by my lived experience as a Hazara woman researcher studying my own community in Canada in addition to the bodies of prior work and literature on the topics of gender equality and the Hazara community. I approach this work as both an insider, with deep cultural knowledge, and an outsider, positioned differently from many in my community through education, professional experience, and life choices. This dual positioning creates both insights and blind spots that I have attempted to navigate thoughtfully throughout the research process.

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Structure of the Report

This report is organized into the following main sections to systematically explore and analyze the research question:

1. **Introduction *(this section)*** establishes personal connection, research context, and objectives through an exploration of my own experiences and the broader context of gender inequality affecting Hazara women
2. **Methodology** details the research frameworks and process and methods used to explore gender narratives within the Hazara diaspora
3. **Structures that Shape Gender** examines theoretical frameworks around gender, identity, and diaspora experiences and analyzes historical and current gender contexts that form the foundation of today's limiting gender narratives
4. **Hazara Women Speak Their Truths** presents primary research findings from questionnaires and workshop, centering the direct experiences and perspectives of Hazara women in Canada
5. **Decoding Gender Negotiations** analyzes the underlying patterns and system dynamics of how gendered narratives and power imbalances persist
6. **Reimagining Gender Possibilities** maps desired futures using the Three Horizons framework, mapping potential pathways toward more equitable gender arrangements
7. **Pathways to Gender Equality** presents practical strategies and interventions for transforming gender narratives and power relations across individual, community, and institutional levels on our journey towards equality
8. **Reflections & New Beginnings** synthesizes key findings, offers personal reflections on the research journey, and suggests directions for continuing this work

Throughout these sections, I weave together personal reflections, participant voices, theoretical analysis, and future-oriented thinking to create a comprehensive understanding of gender narratives and their potential transformation. The report moves from personal experience to systemic understanding to practical action, mirroring the journey that many undertake when working toward gender equality.

Methodology

Methodological Approach

This research employs the Design Journeys methodology (Jones & Ael, 2022) as the overarching approach, allowing me to examine gender narratives as complex social systems while creating pathways for transformation. This approach is complemented by feminist narrative inquiry (Milojević & Inayatullah, 2015; Woodiwiss et al., 2017) to analyze how stories shape women's perceived possibilities about their own futures.

Research Methods & Analytical Tools

My investigation combines multiple methods and analytical frameworks:

Primary Research Methods:

- Questionnaires with 33 Hazara women in the Canadian diaspora
- One interactive workshop exploring gender narratives and futures with 9 Hazara women
- Subject matter expert consultations with 3 Hazara community leaders in Australia and UK

Analytical Frameworks:

- Causal Layered Analysis (CLA) to deconstruct gender narratives
- Systems mapping and story loops to visualize self-reinforcing gender patterns
- Horizon scanning and Three Horizons framework to map transitions between current and desired futures
- Donella Meadows' leverage points to identify strategic interventions

Data Analysis Approaches:

- Thematic analysis for qualitative responses
- Statistical analysis for identifying patterns in questionnaire data

Research Process

My research process was non-linear and emergent, and evolved throughout the project. During the first half of the project duration, I explored various "problems" in which I was interested, within the domain of gender equality, but they all appeared to be symptoms of deeper issues. I devoted considerable time to investigating the "leaky pipeline" affecting women in STEM as well as the practice of women changing their last names after marriage in Canada and internationally (Hamilton et al., 2011; Liu et al., 2019). Even though both issues resonated with me personally, I felt that they were connected to something more fundamental. This exploratory phase helped me gain clarity about how these and other gender issues interconnect through the stories we believe about gender.

I was drawn to engaging with my community of Hazara women on these stories about gender, because doing so would help me explore the stories I have struggled with in my own life and explore the interconnectedness of these stories to the broader context. Once I was set on this path, my research followed a more linear progression. I conducted literature review and historical context analysis, followed by primary research through questionnaires, workshop, and subject matter expert consultations. Subsequently, systems mapping and sense-making phases tested my abilities, but I trusted the frameworks and methodologies mentioned in the previous section to help guide the analysis.

Throughout the research process, I valued remaining open to ideas, patterns, and themes arising from the community rather than testing predetermined hypotheses developed in isolation, so I could honor the complexity of my community's lived experiences as they manifested at intersections of cultural identity, diaspora experience, and social change (Creswell, 2014; Kovach, 2009).

Structures that Shape Gender

Framing the System

Conceptualizing Gender

Sex and gender are often conflated, but they are not the same thing. Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR)'s definitions for sex and gender are as follows (C. I. of H. R. Government of Canada, 2014):

> **Sex** is defined as a set of biological attributes in humans and animals. It is primarily associated with physical and physiological features including chromosomes, gene expression, hormone levels and function, and reproductive/sexual anatomy. Sex is usually categorized as female or male but there is variation in the biological attributes that comprise sex and how those attributes are expressed.
>
> **Gender** is defined as socially constructed roles, behaviours, expressions and identities of girls, women, boys, men, and gender diverse people. It influences how people perceive themselves and each other, how they act and interact, and the distribution of resources and power in society. Gender identity is not confined to a binary (girl/woman, boy/man) nor is it static; it exists along a continuum and can change over time.

The importance of sex and gender to our societies can be understood as follows. Evolutionary evidence indicates that our brains have evolved to make rapid assessments of our environment rooted in our survival instincts, triggering fight-or-flight responses within milliseconds when potential dangers are perceived (Mobbs et al., 2015). This neural efficiency depends on rapid categorization – sorting between "threatening" and "safe" encounters without the luxury of detailed analysis. These primitive categorization mechanisms also extend into our social cognition, which result in cognitive biases that we all possess (Koski et al., 2015). We instinctively classify people we encounter using immediately visible markers, like physical size, creating mental shortcuts that determine how we interact and how we construct our relationships with one another. These mental shortcuts can differ across cultures and may be based on age, ethnicity, ability, or other attributes. Of these shortcuts, sex, and its conflation with gender, have emerged as one of the most pervasive attributes on which our interactions and social structures are based, across virtually all human societies and civilizations. Through this mechanism, sex and gender exist not just as an individual characteristic but as a complex social system that organizes human relationships and opportunities.

In this context, Cecelia L. Ridgeway defines gender as "a system of social practices within society that constitutes distinct differentiated sex categories and organizes relations between people on the basis of the differences defined by their sex category" (Ridgeway, 2011). As early as 2.5 years old, children can learn to reliably categorize faces and voices by gender and begin to show preferential choices based on gender (Martin & Ruble, 2010). This early gender differentiation establishes the foundation for relating to others throughout our lives on the basis of gender, perpetuating further gender-based differentiation.

Sex and gender are conflated through attributes of femininity and masculinity that emerge as relational categories; "in practice masculinity becomes 'what men and boys do', and femininity the Other of that" (Paechter, 2006). This positioning of femininity and masculinity as opposites creates arbitrary assignments that then result in different gender norms. Figure 1 provides a few examples present in our contemporary Canadian society of how biological traits, whether similar or different, coupled with arbitrary attributes assigned to femininity and masculinity result in different gender expectations for women and men.

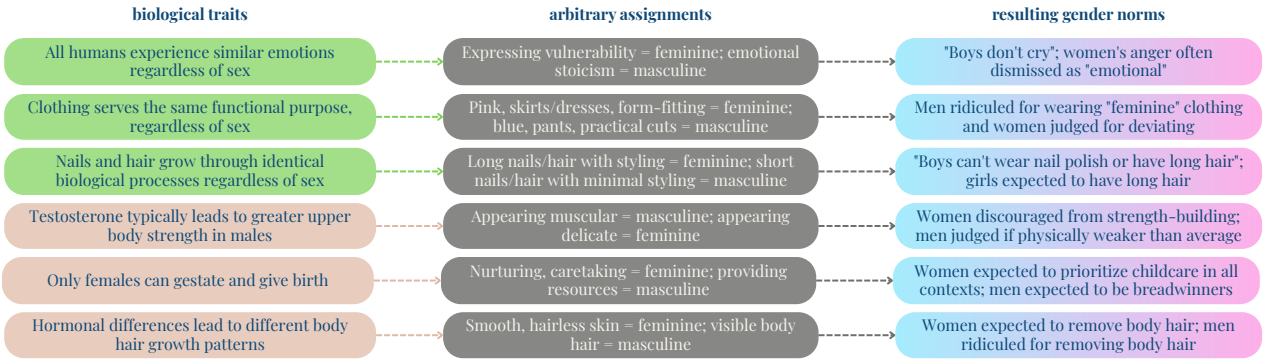

Figure 1: *Biological traits, arbitrary feminine/masculine assignments, and resulting gender norms in our contemporary society.*

The social constructions of feminine and masculine attributes and their corresponding gender expectations presented in Figure 1 are not representative of the range of attributes that is expressed across time periods and cultures. As Kimmel et al. state, the principles of gender differ in social contexts in the following ways (Kimmel et al., 2015):

1. The meaning of gender differences varies from one society to another
2. The experiences of being masculine and feminine vary within any one culture over time
3. Gender is always intersectional, shaped by race, religion, class, and other social categories
4. The meaning of masculinity and femininity changes over the life course
5. Feelings about gender vary among different groups of women and men even in the same culture

Understanding these variations helps contextualize our specific community's gender system while revealing the underlying mechanisms that maintain gender inequality across diverse settings.

Dimensions of Gender Inequality

Anthropological and historical evidence reveals two fundamental patterns: first, virtually every single society differentiates people on the basis of gender; second, virtually every known society is also based on male dominance in some form, resulting in sexism and patriarchy (Perry & Albee, 1998). While there are dramatic differences between various societies in how women and men are thought to be different, the basic fact remains that virtually every society known to us is founded upon assumptions of gender difference and the politics of gender inequality (Kimmel et al., 2015). Most justifications for male dominance begin with biological determinism, which point to differences in reproductive systems, brain structures, hormonal compositions, and musculature between women and men, and theorize that these biological differences inevitably add up to fundamental social differences that provide the foundation for male dominance (Perry & Albee, 1998).

However, we know empirically that while biological sex does not vary from society to society, the experience of being a woman or man, i.e., the definitions of "gender" and the aspects shaped by social constructions, differ dramatically across cultures and historical periods (Kimmel et al., 2015). Feminist researchers and philosophers submit that the basis for persistent gender inequality stems from the conflation of sex with gender in forming the primary categorization system (Mikkola, 2024). While other forms of social categorizations also result in persistent inequality, gender is unique due to a few distinctive aspects (Ridgeway, 2011):

- Females and males are born into the same families and households
- Females and males are more often in intimate relationships
- Different-sex households exist across all economic strata
- There are roughly equal numbers of females and males in the population

These characteristics create the social context where unequal gender dynamics are experienced even within families that have identical racial, socioeconomic, and/or national identities. Gender inequality operates as a multidimensional phenomenon that can be understood using Max Weber's framework for analyzing forms of social inequality across three dimensions (Ridgeway, 2011):

1. **Resources** - all forms of capital: wealth, information, education, etc.
2. **Power** - authority, influence, and control over oneself and others
3. **Status** - social esteem, honor, respect

Resources and power are largely attached to positions in our social institutions (government, religion, community) that create "positional inequalities" (Ridgeway, 2011). Status inequalities, by contrast, stem from cultural beliefs about the traits and worth of different social categories. Gender inequality results from the combined effect of these dimensions – both positional inequalities (i.e., unequal access to resources and power) and status inequalities (i.e., beliefs about women vs. men). While positional inequalities are more tangible and perhaps easier to identify, status inequalities operate in more insidious ways. As Mary Brinton's summary of Ridgeway's work states that status inequalities in gender contexts have two dimensions: i) diffuse status beliefs (i.e., generalized assumptions that men are more competent, capable, and agentic than women) and ii) the belief that work done by men is inherently higher status (Brinton, 2013; Ridgeway, 2011). These status beliefs create patterns of deference, influence, and participation that reinforce gender inequality at the interactional level. As Brinton notes, while diffuse status beliefs about male superiority have begun eroding as women's academic and workplace achievements surpasses men's, "what does remain locked in place is... the belief that work done by men is inherently higher status" (Brinton, 2013). This creates a moving target that perpetuates inequality even as women gain access to previously male domains. Society systematically devalues work associated with women while overvaluing work associated with men, regardless of the actual content or importance of that work.

Nobel Prize winner Claudia Goldin offers another framework for understanding gender inequality, particularly in the context of women's economic participation. Goldin identifies three key variables that shape women's participation in the labor force (Goldin, 2006):

1. **Horizons:** Does a woman perceive her labor force involvement as long and continuous or intermittent and brief?
2. **Identity:** Does a woman find individuality in her job, occupation, profession, or career?
3. **Decision-making:** Does a woman make independent decisions, or optimize her time in the labor force based on someone else's decisions (e.g., husband's)?

Using this framework to assess women's participation in the labor force reveals how women's participation is heavily influenced by their outlook, workplace identity, and relationship status (C. Goldin, 2006). This framework helps to explain how despite significant advances in women's educational achievements and labor force participation, gender inequality persists in economic spheres. The underlying assumptions about women's horizons, identity, and decision-making authority continue to shape both individual choices and institutional structures in ways that maintain gendered patterns of economic engagement.

These theoretical frameworks – Weber's multidimensional inequality, Ridgeway's distinction between positional and status inequalities, and Goldin's economic participation variables – together provide a cohesive explanation for how gender inequality persists through observable patterns. What ties these frameworks together is the underlying mechanism of gender socialization – the process through which individuals learn and internalize gender-appropriate behaviors, roles, and expectations. These frameworks help us understand the measurable outcomes of inequality, while socialization explains how these patterns are maintained and reproduced across generations through stories, beliefs, and daily practices that shape our understanding of gender from early childhood.

Patriarchal Foundations of Gender

The construction of gendered narratives begins early in life through both explicit teaching and implicit socialization. Little girls learn what constitutes "good" female behavior, while boys are taught to embody qualities considered masculine. Figure 2 below visualizes the observable differences in the socialization of gender in our formative years by our families and communities, which results in divergent life choices later in adulthood based on gender.

These differences in treatment based on gender in formative years (i.e., double standards) start even before we are born, when the sex of the baby is determined, after which the level of excitement shifts, the conversations shift, and in the extreme cases, the value of the pregnancy and the woman carrying the baby shifts. From an early age, children are socialized into gender roles through their toys – boys racing cars and battling with action figures and girls cooking in miniature kitchens and cradling dolls. This socialization intensifies as children then self-categorize based on their gender and start to form their identities around these constraints. As Martin & Ruble mention, preschoolers "who had greater exposure to "gender enforcer" peers were more likely to limit their play to same-sex peers" (Martin & Ruble, 2010).

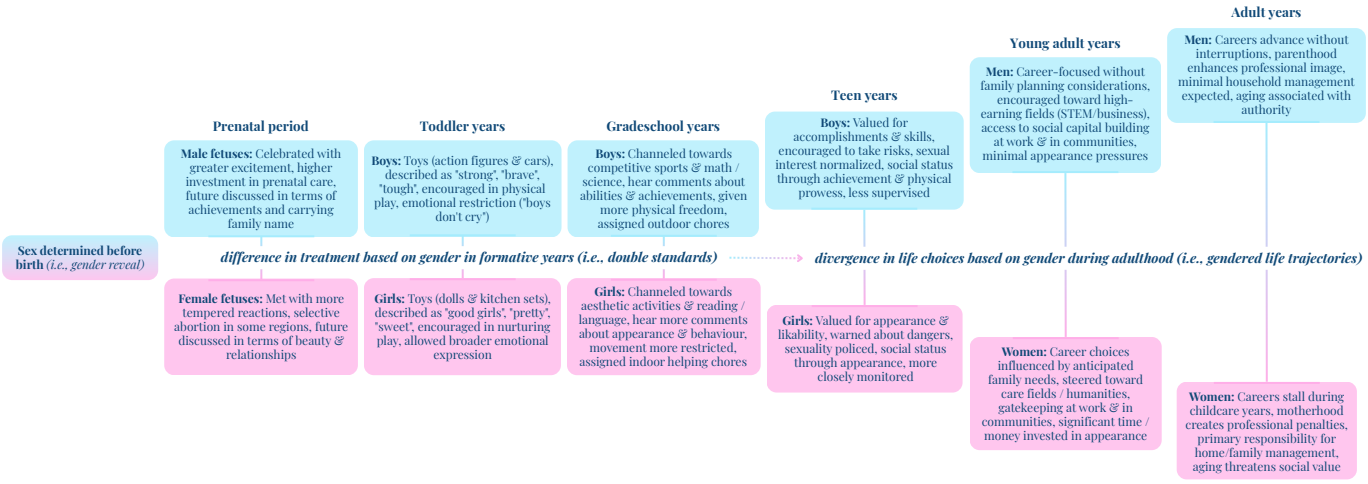

Figure 2: *Difference in treatment in formative years leading to divergence in life choices during adulthood as part of socialization of gender.*

As part of gender socialization, we often suppress our true desires to fit in, even during childhood. As Judith Butler observes, "there is a whole lot of repression going into becoming a man, a whole lot of repression going into becoming a woman, and... one of the things we have to do to conform to the existing gender norms is to rule out all those possibilities of being, feeling, doing, loving that do not line up with the gender norms that are governing our lives" (Big Think, 2023). Our gender socialization system is based in the gender binary that leaves little room for ambiguity or fluidity. As Sered notes: "Differences that are envisioned as binary tend to be particularly compelling; binary distinctions leave no gray area, no room for doubt, and no room to negotiate. The construction of two – and only two – sexes or genders tends to lead to cultural understandings in which women and men are not only essentially different but actually antithetical and mutually exclusive types of beings" (Sered, 2001).

This binary thinking appears in gender ideologies based on religious and cultural contexts where female and male bodies, and even souls, are considered ontologically different, which then legitimizes hierarchy and systematic inequality in power and prestige, with an aim to privilege male authority and devalue femininity (Kimmel et al., 2015; Sered, 2001).

The growing visibility of transgender, non-binary, and gender-fluid identities reveal just how deeply our social organization depends on immediate gender categorization. The backlash against these identities stems partly from the threat they pose to the underlying mechanisms of the gender system itself. When gender cannot be immediately and reliably categorized within the first few seconds, within our currently accepted premises, the entire structure of gendered interactions, from sexual attraction to professional hierarchies, becomes destabilized. This destabilization explains both the transformative potential of gender diversity and the intensity of resistance against it.

These patriarchal structures are upheld by conferring what is termed a "patriarchal dividend", which are collective advantages, benefits, and privileges that primarily men receive from the overall subordination of femininity in a patriarchal society (Paechter, 2006). For men, these patriarchal dividends manifest as higher social status, greater representation and reverence in leadership positions, presumed authority in household, community, and professional settings, and freedom from domestic labor expectations.

Women, on the other hand, often engage in what is termed "patriarchal bargain", which can be understood as strategic accommodations to patriarchal norms that provide limited security or benefits while preserving the larger system of inequality (Kandiyoti, 1988). For women, these bargains may look like conforming to traditional gender roles for financial security or certain forms of protective treatment (Kandiyoti, 1988). However, these "benefits" come at significant costs to their autonomy and equality, ultimately reinforcing rather than challenging the patriarchal system that primarily advantages men.

In contemporary society, where feminist values have gained significant traction, distancing oneself from stereotypical femininity also functions as a patriarchal bargain (Paechter, 2006). This reflects the complex reality that even as women pursue equality, the strategies they adopt, like distancing from traditionally feminine traits to succeed in male-dominated spaces, can sometimes inadvertently reinforce the devaluation of femininity rather than challenging the hierarchical systems that position masculine traits as inherently superior (Paechter, 2006). We all fall prey to this dynamic because our economic systems, despite being portrayed as rational and logical, systematically devalue femininity and feminine-coded labor (Marçal, 2012).

It is important to note that for Hazaras, cultural and religious identities are deeply intertwined in complex ways that influence gender narratives. As predominantly Shia Muslims in a historically Sunni-majority country, Hazaras' religious identity has always been a source of persecution and resilience. The religious dimension cannot be easily separated from ethnic and cultural traditions when examining gender narratives. While my research identified clear patterns in how gender narratives operate within the community, determining which aspects stem primarily from religious interpretations versus cultural practices would require more focused theological and anthropological analysis than this study could accommodate. What is clear, however, is that these narratives draw authority from multiple sources – religious texts and interpretations, cultural traditions, and historical survival strategies developed under conditions of persecution – creating a powerful, multifaceted system that shapes gender expectations.

In my research on Hazara Afghan and Canadian history (as presented in Section 3.5), it is apparent that despite the ostensible differences between secular Canada and religious Afghanistan today, both societies are a testament to the patriarchal system's remarkable adaptability – manifesting differently in religious, cultural, and secular environments. Even in Canada, pursuing equality creates profound tensions for Hazara women (and any women) who are bound by ideological beliefs legitimizing women's inferiority through religion or biology, sources that seem irrefutable.

All of the above, in addition to my own experiences make clear that women seeking true equality must constantly question how to reconcile all different aspects of their identities and ideologies – their cultural heritage, religious beliefs, and even their family bonds. As Sa'diyya Shaikh expresses, as a Muslim woman, she experiences "spiritual and psychological and social dissonance when [reading] much of the authoritative texts in Islam, which makes it almost impossible to consider myself, a female Muslim, as the normative addressee of the text" (Shaikh, 2004). These tensions become even more challenging to resolve when they are overlaid with economic systems and other "rational" and seemingly irrefutable structures that further reinforce notions of female inferiority. For those of us striving to become more conscious of how these systems limit women's full human experience, understanding and questioning these assumptions are essential to distinguishing between imposed constraints and genuine differences.

The Diaspora Experience

The diaspora experience creates unique dynamics for gender identity and expectations, particularly when communities are navigating between two contrasting cultural frameworks. The diaspora experience varies based on family status, education level, socioeconomic status, access to community, and place and time of settlement, all of which create variations of "cultural hybridity", i.e., creation of new cultural forms and identities (Ahmed & Hari, 2023).

Afghan women and men in the Canadian diaspora experience cultural shifts differently in their acculturation journey. Afghan women in Canada reportedly grapple with feelings of fear, guilt, and resentment as they are faced with forces that shape their choices between maintaining their cultural identity, family honor, and constructing their own hybrid identity (Ahmed & Hari, 2023). Meanwhile, Afghan men in Canada report feelings of dissonance, powerlessness, and emasculation as they are faced with tensions between maintaining cultural gender norms of Afghanistan's conservative society and adapting to Canadian liberal society's "unnatural" gender order (Akbary & Kazemipur, 2022). The distinct feelings that Afghan women and men feel as they are forming their diasporic identity is a strong indicator of the unequal power dynamics that exist.

One of the root causes of these tensions in the diaspora are the pressures to maintain their "true identity" as an Afghan, whether this is self-imposed as a result of feeling survivor's guilt or imposed externally by family or community. These pressures can strongly shape the outcomes of settlement, which is highly gendered (Sadat, 2008). Women are disproportionately expected to preserve culture by embodying traditional values, making their bodies and behaviors contested sites where anxieties about cultural loss and assimilation play out (Afrouz et al., 2023). Acculturation in diaspora communities commonly occurs unevenly across generations as well. Younger generations typically adapt more quickly to host country norms and older generations typically want to maintain their home country norms, creating intergenerational tensions. The default dynamics for negotiating resolutions to these tensions typically place men in the final decision-making role.

From this perspective, when men make allowances for women's education or professional work, it is often framed as a concession rather than a right, and typically conditional on maintaining appropriate behavior and performance (Afrouz et al., 2023; Ahmed & Hari, 2023). On the other hand, men generally experience greater freedom to explore the newfound opportunities that Canada provides without similar levels of scrutiny. Akbary & Kazemipur show the range of strategies that diaspora communities use to negotiate new contexts (Akbary & Kazemipur, 2022):

- **Traditionalists:** Firmly maintain home country cultural norms while reluctantly engaging with host country expectations (often willing to sacrifice economic possibilities to preserve cultural identity)
- **Assimilationists:** Adopt host country norms while maintaining a connection to their Afghan identity

- **Integrationists:** Negotiate a middle path, adopting and adapting practices from both cultures with varying degrees of selectivity (some drawing lines at outward expressions of culture while others focus on maintaining core values)

These dynamics are constantly negotiated and evolve over time. In fact, identity formation in diaspora contexts involves continuous negotiation between multiple cultural frameworks (Ahmed & Hari, 2023; Akbary & Kazemipur, 2022). Individuals develop strategies for managing these sometimes-conflicting expectations, including compartmentalization (behaving differently in different contexts) or integration (resolving conflicts between different important identities), both resulting in forms of hybrid identities (Ahmed & Hari, 2023). These strategies carry different social costs and psychological impacts, particularly for women whose behaviors are more closely monitored and judged (Wachter et al., 2025).

The diaspora experience also creates unique opportunities for gender transformation. Displacement from familiar contexts can denaturalize previously taken-for-granted gender arrangements, making their constructed nature more visible. Another insight that the diaspora experience brings into clarity is the evolution of culture over time, which we may take for granted and rarely question. When older generations attempt to preserve a version of culture that no longer exists even in their homeland, we can see how these preservation efforts stem from deeper psychological needs related to survivor's guilt, cultural idealization, and othering (Sadat, 2008).

This understanding highlights the importance of examining both historical and current cultural contexts, especially regarding the evolution of gender relations, rather than treating culture as static and unchanging.

Evolution of Gender Relations

The world has dramatically changed in the last century, especially for women, and even more dramatically in Canada in the last 50 years. However, Gaskell reports that in Canada, "analyses of textbooks, teaching materials, films and readers used in schools have consistently revealed that women are underrepresented and are portrayed in traditional ways" (Gaskell, 2014). This lack of comprehensive education about women's history creates a significant knowledge gap that affects how society perceives gender relations today. When people remain unaware of historical contexts underlying contemporary gender norms, they may unknowingly perpetuate systems of inequality while framing them as personal choice or tradition. As noted, "the concern is not so much that people are fated to repeat history, but rather, if someone is ignorant of the past, they may not recognize moments when society has changed, shifted, or failed to progress" (Gataveckas, 2019).

This historical amnesia manifests in seemingly innocuous practices that are deeply rooted in historical systems of patriarchy, like the tradition of women adopting their husband's surname. This is often defended as a neutral individual choice, but understanding its historical roots helps showcase how it relates to inheritance laws, property rights, and the narrative of women "joining" men's families rather than forming equal partnerships.

Tables 1 and 2 below track the evolution of gender relations through approximately 130 years of transformative history crucial to understanding the current systems. This period encompasses defining events for three groups of importance for this study:

1. Afghanistan's turbulent shifts from tribal governance to attempted centralization through foreign intrusions and multiple regime changes (Ahmed-Ghosh, 2003; Hakimi, 2024; Summerfield, 1997)
2. The devastating 1890s genocide and subsequent persecution of Hazaras within Afghanistan
3. Canada's journey through waves of feminism and constitutional transformation.

The tables use a color-coded scale to illustrate a subjective rate of change between consecutive time periods. Green shades (↑, ↑↑, ↑↑↑) indicate positive progress toward equality, with darker green showing stronger improvement. Grey (→) represents periods of stagnation. Red shades (↓, ↓↓, ↓↓↓) show regression, with darker red indicating more severe setbacks. For Hazara-specific contexts, dark green (↑↑↑↑) and dark red (↓↓↓↓) represent exceptional improvement and severe ethnic-targeted decline respectively.

Using an integrated analytical framework that I developed for this study, the tables combine Weber's resource-power-status dimensions, Ridgeway's positional and status inequalities, and Goldin's economic participation variables to provide a multidimensional analysis of how gender relations have evolved across material resources (education, economic opportunities, information access), power relations (political representation, household authority, legal rights), and cultural status (gender beliefs, social valuation, integration patterns).

The inclusion of the Hazara experience as a specific case study within this analysis highlights the intersectional nature of gender inequality and reveals how ethnicity and religion compound gender-based disadvantages. This comprehensive mapping across time and social dimensions provides essential context for understanding the complex historical legacies that shape the current experiences of Hazara women in the Canadian diaspora.

Table 1: Evolution of Afghanistan's gender relations from 1890s to present (2025), with a focus on Hazara-specific context.

	1890s–1920s (Baseline)	1920s–1950s	1950s–1970s	1970s–1979	1979–1989 (Soviet)	1989–1996 (Civil War)	1996–2001 (Taliban)	2001–2021	2021–Present (Taliban)
Economic Context	Traditional agrarian economy	↑ Early modernization attempts	↑ Limited industrialization	↑ Gradual urban development	↑↑ Soviet-backed centrally planned economy	↓↓↓ Collapse of economy	↓ Further economic isolation	↑↑ Aid-dependent reconstruction	↓↓↓ Economic crisis
Hazara Context	Aftermath of 1890s Hazara genocide; land dispossession; enslavement	→ Continued economic marginalization; extreme poverty	→ Minimal improvement; systematic discrimination	↑ Limited inclusion in development initiatives	↑↑ Some economic improvement under class-based policies	↓↓↓ Severe humanitarian crisis in Hazara regions	↓↓↓↓ Deliberate economic strangulation; blockades	↑↑ Improved economic opportunities; continued discrimination	↓↓↓↓ Targeted economic exclusion; heightened poverty
RESOURCES									
Education Access	Very limited for women	↑ Elite urban women only	↑ Growing in urban areas	↑ Expanding in cities	↑↑↑ Major expansion	↓↓ Disruption and decline	↓↓↓ Prohibited for girls	↑↑↑ Significant growth	↓↓↓ Severe restrictions
Economic Participation	Agricultural/domestic only	→ Limited urban opportunities	↑ Growing in cities	↑ Public sector growth	↑↑ State employment push	↓↓↓ Severe contraction	↓↓↓ Formal ban on employment	↑↑↑ NGO and public sector growth	↓↓↓ Severe restrictions
Information Access	Extremely limited	↑ Elite access only	↑ Radio expansion	↑ Growing media	↑↑ Literacy campaigns	↓↓ Infrastructure collapse	↓↓↓ Severe restrictions	↑↑↑ Digital/media growth	↓↓ Increasing censorship
Resource-Related Legal Rights	No right to education for girls; no property rights for women; no inheritance rights	↑ First girls' school established (1921); right to education in Amanullah's reforms (later revoked)	↑ Limited right to secondary education; opening of first women's university faculty (1960)	↑ Education Ministry policy promoting girls' education; employment rights in civil service	↑↑↑ Mandatory education for all children; equal employment rights; elimination of bride price	↓↓ Legal frameworks collapsed; rights varied by controlling faction	↓↓↓ Legal prohibition of girls' education; ban on women's employment outside healthcare	↑↑↑ Constitutional right to education (Art. 43); inheritance rights; property rights; equal pay guarantees	↓↓↓ Secondary and university education banned for girls; employment in most sectors prohibited
Hazara Women's Resource Access	Nearly nonexistent resources; extreme marginalization after genocide	→ Excluded from educational advances; continued isolation	↑ Minimal urban improvements; largely excluded from development	↑ Slight improvements in cities; persistent discrimination	↑↑↑ Strong emphasis on literacy and education in Hazara communities	↓↓↓ Disproportionate resource deprivation; targeted violence	↓↓↓↓ Double discrimination as women and ethnic minority; denied healthcare	↑↑↑↑ Exceptional emphasis on girls' education; higher than average enrolment	↓↓↓↓ Targeted attacks on Hazara schools; severe education restrictions
POWER									
Political Representation	None	→ No significant change	↑ Symbolic inclusion	↑ Limited participation	↑↑ Communist quotas	↓↓ Factional variation	↓↓↓ Total exclusion	↑↑↑ Constitutional quotas	↓↓↓ Removal from government
Household Authority	Strict patriarchy	→ No significant change	↑ Urban variation	↑ Growing in educated families	↑↑ State-backed changes	↓↓ Return to tradition	↓↓↓ Male guardianship enforced	↑↑ Legal reforms, varied practice	↓↓ Enforced subordination
Reproductive Control	Very limited	→ No significant change	↑ Beginning in cities	↑ Urban access growing	↑↑ State programs	↓↓ Healthcare collapse	↓↓↓ Severe restrictions	↑↑ Improved but limited	↓↓ Declining access
Power-Related Legal Rights	No voting rights, women legally considered property of male relatives; no right to choose marriage partner; no right to divorce	↑↑ Women granted suffrage under Amanullah's 1923 constitution (later revoked); minimum marriage age established (15 years old)	↑ 1964 Constitution granted women's suffrage; right to stand for parliament (first women elected 1965); minimum marriage age raised (16 years old)	↑↑ 1977 Civil Law granted limited divorce rights for women; women appointed to high government positions	↑↑ PDPA Decree No. 7 (1978) eliminated forced marriage; banned bride price; established marriage consent; lowered marriage age to 15	↓↓ Legal system fragmented by region; laws varied by controlling faction	↓↓↓ Voting rights revoked; women required male guardians for all public activity; marriages could be forced	↑↑↑ 2004 Constitution guaranteed gender equality (Art. 22); 25% parliamentary quota for women; Elimination of Violence Against Women Act (2009)	↓↓ Women removed from government; no right to travel without male guardian; restrictions on legal testimony
Hazara Women's Power Position	Complete political exclusion; distinct Shia family practices	→ Continued second-class status; no political voice	→ Minimal improvement; legal discrimination	↑ Limited recognition; marginalized status	↑↑ Formation of Hazara political organizations; some women's participation	→ Development of Hazara resistance with some women's involvement	↓↓↓↓ Classified as non-Muslims; Shia practices banned; extreme vulnerability	↑↑↑ Constitutional protection as minority; significant political representation	↓↓↓↓ Specific targeting as religious minority; forced compliance with Taliban interpretations
STATUS									
Cultural Gender Beliefs	Strict gender hierarchy	↑ Early reformist ideas	→ Urban-rural divide growing	↑ Modernization in cities	↑↑ State feminism	↓↓ Traditional resurgence	↓↓↓ Extreme gender ideology	↑↑ Contested norms	↓↓ Conservative enforcement
Women's Social Value	Domestic/reproductive roles	→ Elite women as symbols	↑ Urban professional value	↑ Growing recognition	↑↑ Worker value emphasized	↓↓ Survival priorities	↓↓↓ Restricted to home	↑↑ Multiple roles valued	↓↓ Domestic emphasis
Gender Integration	Extreme segregation (purdah)	↑ Limited integration of elites	↑ Growing in urban areas	↑ Significant urban progress	↑↑ Officially promoted	↓↓ Decreasing integration	↓↓↓ Strict segregation enforced	↑↑↑ Urban mobility and integration	↓↓↓ Renewed segregation
Status-Related Legal Rights	No protection from domestic violence; honor killings tacitly permitted; child marriage common	↑ Queen Soraya promoted unveiling (1920s); minimum age of marriage laws introduced (rarely enforced)	↑ 1964 Constitution recognized women as citizens; voluntary unveiling for elite women (1959)	↑ Family Law reforms attempted; women appointed as judges	↑↑ Reforms criminalized domestic violence; recognition of women's rights to education and work as "revolutionary duties"	↓↓ Protection laws not enforced; rights varied by regional control	↓↓↓ Mandatory full covering (burqa); public beatings legalized for dress code violations; women prohibited from speaking loudly in public	↑↑ EVAW law (2009) criminalized 22 acts against women; Afghanistan signed CEDAW with reservations; shelters for abused women legalized	↓↓ Mandatory face covering reinstated; gender segregation legally enforced; restrictions on women's voice in public
Hazara Women's Status Position	Triple marginalization (gender, ethnicity, religion); distinct Shia practices	→ Continued cultural isolation; maintained distinct practices	↑ Minimal urban status improvement; continued stigmatization	↑ Slight recognition; continued discrimination	↑↑ Recognition of cultural distinctiveness; reduced discrimination	→ Preservation of cultural practices during conflict	↓↓↓↓ Cultural practices criminalized; subjected to forced marriages and conversions	↑↑↑ Cultural revival; strong emphasison female education as community value	↓↓↓↓ Renewed persecution; targeted violence against female students; religious discrimination

Table 2: Evolution of Canada's gender relations from 1890s to present (2025).

	1890s–1920s (Baseline)	1920s–1950s	1950s–1970s	1970s–1980s	1980s–2000s	2000s–Present
Economic Context	Industrial economy; urban growth	↑ Manufacturing growth; post-war boom	↑ Post-war prosperity	↑ Service economy growth	↑ Knowledge economy; globalization	↑ Digital economy; more precarious work
RESOURCES						
Education Access	Limited higher education	↑ Growing access	↑ Expanding opportunities	↑↑ Equal access laws	↑↑ Women surpassing men in graduation	↑ Dominance in most fields
Economic Participation	Domestic service; limited sectors	↠ War expansion then contraction	↑ "Pink collar" growth	↑↑ Professional integration begins	↑ Widespread participation	↠ Persistent sectoral segregation
Information Access	Growing literacy	↑ Radio/print expansion	↑ Television era	↑ Women in media	↑↑ Digital access	↠ Equal digital literacy; online harassment
Resource-Related Legal Rights	Married women could not own property in own name in most provinces; no right to manage own wages; restrictions on inheritance; unequal access to education	↑ Provincial Married Women's Property Acts (ON 1884; BC 1897; expanded in 1920s–30s); women admitted to most universities, but quotas limited	↑ Equal admission policies to professional schools (though informal barriers remained); married women gained right to independent banking; equal pay laws in some sectors	↑↑↑ Human Rights Codes prohibited discrimination in education and employment (1977 Canadian Human Rights Act); equal pay for equal work legislation	↑↑ Employment Equity Act (1986); pay equity legislation requiring equal pay for work of equal value	↑ Equal pay enforcement improvements; Pay Transparency Act in some provinces; expanded parental leave benefits
POWER						
Political Representation	No federal vote until 1918	↑↑ Voting rights; minimal representation	↑ Token representation	↑ Growing numbers	↑ Increasing representation	↑ Cabinet parity but not legislature
Household Authority	Legal subordination	↑ Growing legal rights	↑ Divorce reform	↑↑ Legal equality	↑ Shared authority norm	↠ Formal equality; practical inequality
Reproductive Control	Very limited	↑ Growing contraception	↑↑ Birth control pill	↑↑ Abortion rights	↑ Comprehensive rights	↠ Regional access issues
Power-Related Legal Rights	Women not "persons" under law until 1929; could not vote federally until 1918 (excluding Indigenous women until 1960); husbands had legal authority over wives and children; divorce required Act of Parliament	↑↑↑ Women's suffrage (1918); Persons Case established women as "persons" eligible for Senate (1929); Divorce Act amendments; Ontario gave women right to serve on juries (1951)	↑↑ Divorces became obtainable in court rather than Parliament; women gained independent domicile rights; Indigenous women gained voting rights (1960); contraception legalized (1969)	↑↑↑ Omnibus Bill decriminalized contraception and homosexuality (1969); no-fault divorce established (1968); Charter of Rights and Freedoms (1982) guaranteed gender equality	↑↑ Criminal Code reforms for sexual assault; employment equity legislation; Pay Equity Acts in multiple provinces; reproductive rights expanded through R. v. Morgentaler (1988)	↑ Same-sex marriage legalized (2005); transgender rights recognized in human rights codes; improved sexual assault laws; ongoing regional disparities in reproductive healthcare access
STATUS						
Cultural Gender Beliefs	"Separate spheres" ideology	↑ Domestic ideals	↑ Feminist challenges	↑ Equality principle	↑ Formal equality norm	↠ Tension between equality and stereotypes
Women's Social Value	Moral guardians	↠ Mothers and wives	↑ Growing professional value	↑ Multiple roles	↑ Individual achievement	↠ Achievement vs. care tension
Gender Integration	Strong public/private division	↑ Limited workplace integration	↑ Growing integration	↑↑ Legal barriers removed	↑ Substantial integration	↠ High but incomplete integration
Status-Related Legal Rights	Women lost citizenship upon marrying non-Canadians; husband exempt from rape charges; no protection from domestic violence; women could be fired for pregnancy; legal age of marriage 12 for girls	↑ Canadian Citizenship Act reformed nationality laws (1946); divorce grounds expanded slightly; first women police officers; minimum marriage age raised	↑↑ Law Reform Commission established (1971); rape shield laws began; maternity leave provisions (1971); reforms to sex discrimination in Immigration Act	↑↑↑ Criminal Code amendments removing spousal immunity for sexual assault (1983); inclusion of sexual orientation in human rights codes began; sexual harassment recognized legally	↑↑ Domestic violence legislation strengthened; sexual assault definitions expanded; workplace harassment laws; spousal abuse made specific crime	↑ Same-sex marriage recognized; transgender rights protections; improved intimate partner violence legislation; online harassment laws; #MeToo legal responses

Rate Change Legend (Symbols Key)
↑↑↑↑ Exceptional improvement (Hazara-specific)
↑↑↑ Major improvement
↑↑ Moderate improvement
↑ Slight improvement
↠ No significant change
↓ Slight decline
↓↓ Moderate decline
↓↓↓ Major decline
↓↓↓↓ Severe decline with ethnic targeting (Hazara-specific)

Afghanistan: Cycles of Progress & Regression

Afghanistan's gender relations history reveals dramatic oscillations between reform and retrenchment of gender relations. From the 1920s through the 1970s, gradual progress emerged in urban centers, with the establishment of girls' schools, women's suffrage in the 1923 and 1964 constitutions, and women's entrance into professional fields as teachers and doctors (Ahmed-Ghosh, 2003). This progress accelerated during the Soviet period (1979-1989), when the state actively promoted women's education and employment through mandatory education laws and workplace recruitment programs (Yassari & Saboory, 2010).

For Hazara women specifically, this history takes on additional dimensions. Following the devastating 1890s Hazara genocide that included mass killings, displacement, and enslavement, the Hazaras experienced consistent discrimination due to their ethnic and religious identities (Abbasi et al., 2025). Early reforms during Amanullah's and Zahir Shah's regimes primarily benefited urban elite women from dominant ethnic groups (Yassari & Saboory, 2010). Interestingly, the Soviet period created unprecedented opportunities for some Hazara women through its ideological rejection of religious discrimination, though implementation remained uneven (Leclerc & Shreeves, 2024).

The civil war period (1989-1996) after the Soviet period was characterized by severe human rights violations towards Hazara minorities and women, followed by the first Taliban regime (1996-2001) that eliminated women's rights to education, employment, and mobility (Emadi, 2000; Vale et al., 2023). For Hazara women, this period brought additional persecution as Shias classified as "non-Muslims", with forced marriages, religious conversion, and extraordinary restrictions even beyond those imposed on other Afghan women.

The post-Taliban period (2001-2021) established comprehensive legal frameworks for women's rights, including constitutional guarantees of gender equality, educational rights, and protections against violence (Akbari & True, 2024). Remarkably, Hazara communities demonstrated exceptional commitment to girls' education during this period, with enrollment rates exceeding national averages – suggesting how marginalized communities may develop distinctive approaches to gender as part of survival strategies (Semple, 2011). Since the Taliban's return in 2021, women's rights have been systematically dismantled, with particular targeting of Hazara educational institutions, healthcare facilities, places of worship, places of work, cultural centers, among others (Hakimi, 2023). The two recent targeted attacks were the 2020 mass shooting at the Dasht-e-Barchi hospital's maternity ward where 15 Hazara mothers and two children were killed and the 2022 Kaaj Educational Center bombing where 35 Hazara girls and young women were killed (Drury, 2020; Ehsassi & El-Khoury, 2024)

Canada: Evolutionary Progress with Persistent Patterns

In contrast to Afghanistan's dramatic reversals, Canada shows a more evolutionary pattern of gender transformation. From the early 20th century, when married women could not own property in their own name and were not considered "persons" under law, Canada progressed through waves of legal reform. The suffrage movement succeeded in 1918 (though excluding Indigenous women until 1960), followed by the Persons Case victory in 1929 (Government of Canada, 2024b). The WWII period saw women temporarily entering workplaces, only to face pressure to return to domestic roles once the men returned from the war (C. R. Goldin, 1991).

The 1960s through 1980s brought transformative change through the women's movement, establishing legal protections against discrimination, reproductive rights, and constitutional guarantees of gender equality in the 1982 Charter of Rights and Freedoms (Government of Canada, 2024b). However, subsequent decades brought more incremental improvements in employment equity, pay transparency, parental leave, and protections against harassment and violence.

Despite this formal progress, we see persistent gender patterns in Canada that mirror more traditional societies in surprising ways. While certain dynamics have shifted, like women marrying later and pursuing higher education at greater rates, fundamental gendered patterns reemerge with remarkable consistency:

- Women continue to perform disproportionate shares of household labor regardless of age, education, or socioeconomic background (Government of Canada, 2018b)
- 80% of women in North America still adopt their husband's surnames upon marriage in 2023 (Lin, 2023)
- Women's career trajectories remain strongly correlated with relationship and parental status, with married mothers frequently experiencing fragmented employment histories while childless and single women advance more consistently (Mooyaart et al., 2023)

The COVID-19 pandemic revealed how as work and home life boundaries dissolved, we witnessed the emergence of sobering realities of working parents, particularly mothers, struggling to balance professional responsibilities with childcare, education, and household management (C. Goldin, 2022). Before the pandemic, these dual burdens were more easily concealed, obscuring the reality that women disproportionately managed logistical challenges by adapting their professional schedules around their children's needs, often at significant career cost. Even when women strive to transcend gendered expectations and pursue authentic interests, they continue to face workplace bias and discrimination that hampers their progress (Diehl & Dzubinski, 2023). Women's progress in the workforce has largely been at the expense of their mental health or their personal lives. In essence, our current approach to gender equality has primarily succeeded in allowing some women to live and work like traditionally idealized men, unburdened by family responsibilities, rather than transforming systems to value and accommodate caregiving alongside professional accomplishment (Marçal, 2012).

Points of Convergence & Divergence

Comparing Canadian and Hazara gender dynamics reveals surprising parallels despite their different historical trajectories. Within Hazara communities in Canada, I have observed consistent gender-based trajectories across generations, despite the supposedly liberating Canadian context. An average young Hazara woman in Canada typically completes her undergraduate education, expresses desire for further study, but instead marries, has children, and either remains at home or works part-time in unstable employment. An average young Hazara man in Canada often expresses disinterest in academic pursuits, gravitating toward traditionally masculine occupations in construction, general labor, and trades (Pendakur, 2021). This pattern creates an interesting contradiction: Hazara women are frequently more educated than Hazara men yet are expected to make choices that prioritize childrearing over career advancement.

The key divergence between these contexts lies in how choices are framed. Canadian narratives emphasize individual autonomy through what scholars call "choice feminism" – a framework that insists that "every woman's feminism looks different", obscuring how structural constraints reproduce traditional gender patterns, potentially undermining collective progress toward gender equality (Thwaites, 2017). In contrast, Hazara contexts more explicitly acknowledge family and community considerations in life decisions, making the social influences on individual choices more visible. Both reveal deeper tensions between stated values and lived realities.

These tensions manifest not merely in surface-level behaviors, but in how gender roles are maintained under the guise of practicality, moral rationales, and biological justifications. In both contexts, beliefs that women are "naturally" better suited for childcare and domestic responsibilities are reinforced at every level of the system. Women's adoption of their husband's surnames, gravitation toward "caring" professions, marriage expectations, reproductive decisions, and even tolerance of domestic violence all follow gendered patterns that are remarkably consistent. These outcomes are legitimized through frameworks like "choice feminism" in Canadian contexts and religious doctrine in traditional Hazara settings while government policies simultaneously shape and reinforce these "choices" while claiming that they do not interference in personal and family matters.

In Canada, Hazara women are forced to navigate systems that claim to offer freedom while subtly reinforcing traditional paths through the same justifications of practicality, biology, and morality found in their own culture. The striking similarity in outcomes, despite different cultural frameworks, reveals how deeply embedded gender narratives remain across seemingly different societies, shaping life trajectories.

Centrality of Gender Narratives in Persistence of Traditional Choices

Beyond legal frameworks and economic conditions, gender narratives function as both drivers of change and sources of resistance, creating complex dynamics that help explain both the non-linear trajectory of gender equality and the persistence of traditional choices despite expanded formal opportunities.

In Afghanistan, narratives positioning women's seclusion as essential to cultural and religious authenticity have repeatedly emerged as powerful counterforces to reform, from the backlash against Amanullah's reforms in the 1920s to the Taliban's current gender ideology. Competing narratives linking women's advancement to national progress and modernization have powered reform periods, with sentiments like a country cannot progress when half its population is held back becoming common during the 2001-2021 period (Kabeer et al., 2011).
Following decades of persecution, Hazara communities in Afghanistan developed narratives positioning girls' education as essential to collective resilience and survival rather than as a Western imposition. Yet despite valuing education, Hazara communities often maintain traditional expectations for women's primary role in family care, creating tension between educational achievement and limited career advancement.

In Canada, early narratives positioning women as "guardians of morality" evolved into post-war domestic femininity ideals, followed by second-wave feminist narratives about merit and equal opportunity (Miller, 1987). More recently, work-family balance narratives have primarily targeted women rather than challenging the gendered division of labor, while empowerment narratives like "lean in" and "women can have it all" obscure continuing structural barriers and place the onus on women when they fail (Webber & Giuffre, 2023).
The narrative of the "good woman", deeply gendered and often tied to cultural preservation, exists in different forms across both cultures. The Hazara version may be more explicit, while the Canadian version operates more subtly, but both channel women toward traditional family roles despite educational and professional opportunities.

These narratives, the stories societies tell about what it means to be a woman or man, ultimately determine whether formal rights translate into lived equality. They explain the remarkable consistency of gendered choices across diverse individuals, revealing how what appears as free choice is often powerfully shaped by internalized narratives about appropriate and "correct" gender roles.

For Hazara women in the Canadian diaspora, becoming conscious of these narrative forces is an essential step toward expanding their possibilities beyond traditional constraints. Only by recognizing how deeply these narratives shape our perceptions of what is possible, desirable, and appropriate can women begin to make choices that truly reflect their own aspirations rather than societal expectations. The same is true for Hazara men. In the fight for gender equality, it is crucial that men are brought along on the learning journey so that they also become aware of how traditional gender roles also limit their choices and aspirations.

Hazara Women Speak Their Truths

Listening to the System

To understand how gender narratives shape the life choices of Hazara women in the Canadian diaspora, I sought to capture their experiences related to gender from their childhood and families, whether in Afghanistan or Canada, to understand its influence on their life choices and their identities. This chapter presents the findings from this primary research, which consisted of two main components: an anonymous questionnaire distributed to Hazara women in the Canadian diaspora, and a workshop that brought together Hazara women to explore and deconstruct key gender narratives that emerged from the questionnaire.

Questionnaire Design

The primary purpose of the questionnaire was to capture firsthand stories about gender narratives in the Hazara diaspora – stories that have not been documented before. I also wanted to assess participants' gender beliefs and perspectives on their gendered upbringing, with measurable differences that could be analyzed.

The questionnaire was structured into five sections: childhood upbringing, family beliefs and practices, personal experiences and outlook, community life in Afghanistan and Canada, and views about the future. Each section included both quantitative and qualitative prompts to provide comprehensive insights. The childhood section captured memories and experiences of gendered upbringing; the family section examined perceptions of family gender beliefs and practices (past and present); the personal section explored the effects of upbringing on personal beliefs, aspirations, and life decisions; the community section gathered views about life in Afghanistan and the effects of immigration; and the future section documented aspirations, hopes, and expectations.

Throughout the questionnaire, I used the concept of the "good woman" as a starting point to explore gender narratives, as this concept frequently appeared in preliminary conversations with community members and in my own experience.

Quantitative Components

The questionnaire included two primary quantitative components: a standardized assessment of gender beliefs and a series of questions designed to measure participants' experiences in a way that would reveal patterns. These quantitative measures were important for providing some objectivity in my analysis of the results.

The first quantitative tool I employed was the Gender Role Beliefs Scale (GRBS), originally developed by Kerr and Holden and revised in 2012 by Michael J. Brown and Nancy Gladstone as a shorter assessment that could be embedded within larger questionnaires (J. Brown & Gladstone, 2012). This 10-item scale was used to establish a baseline assessment of participants' gender beliefs. The GRBS is particularly valuable because it differentiates between gender stereotypes (descriptive beliefs about gender characteristics) and gender role ideology (prescriptive beliefs about gender roles). The GRBS test has not been widely used in academic research, but its foundational principles of descriptive and prescriptive beliefs are used in more contemporary research.

The GRBS uses a 7-point Likert scale (ranging from 1="Strongly agree" to 7="Strongly disagree"), with possible scores ranging from 10 to 70. Higher scores indicate more feminist gender role beliefs. While this test is reliable, I recognized its limitations – particularly that gender role beliefs may have changed considerably since its construction in 1994. However, its simplicity and ability to provide a quick assessment that could be connected with other questionnaire responses made it valuable. I took the assessment myself and found it appropriate for use with the Hazara community.

The GRBS assessment included statements such as "It is disrespectful to swear in the presence of a lady", "Women with children should not work outside the home if they do not have to financially", and "Women should be concerned with their duties of childrearing and house tending, rather than with desires for professional and business careers". The scale can be analyzed as two distinct factors: Factor 1 (Questions 3,4,5,8,9) measures beliefs relating to women's roles in the household and workplace, while Factor 2 (Questions 1,2,6,7,10) measures beliefs related to protectionism and chivalry toward women. This allowed me to differentiate between different types of traditional gender role beliefs among participants.

Beyond the GRBS, I created five distinct sections with quantitative prompts to explore different aspects of participants' gendered experiences at different life stages, as shown in Figure 3 below. Each section contained 7-10 statements requiring responses on a 5-point Likert scale. The childhood section included statements like "Girls and boys were treated the same in my family" and "I had more responsibilities for house chores compared to my brothers". The family section included items such as "My family upholds strict rules about how girls should dress and behave" and "In my family, boys are seen as the future breadwinner, while girls are seen as caretakers". The personal section explored statements like "I feel limited in pursuing certain hobbies or activities because of my gender" and "My career ambitions are hindered because of my gender".

From these responses, I developed several indices: the Gendered Childhood Index (GCI), Gendered Family Outlook Index (GFOI), Gendered Personal Beliefs Index (GPBI), Community Inequality Assessment (CIA), and Community Future Assessment (CFA). The sums of GCI, GFOI, and GPBI were then tabulated to create the Gendered Life Index (GLI), which served as a comprehensive measure of participants' gendered experiences.

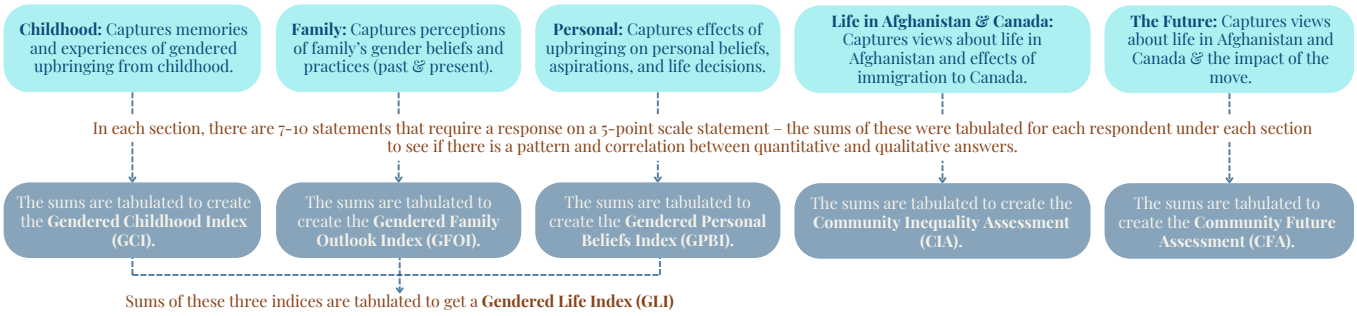

Figure 3: *Quantitative indices developed from the questionnaire.*

Qualitative Components

Each section also included open-ended qualitative questions that invited participants to share their experiences, memories, and reflections in their own words. These narrative responses were crucial for understanding the specific gender narratives that have shaped participants' life choices and for contextualizing the quantitative findings.

In the childhood section, participants were asked to recall stories or lessons they were taught about being a "good girl" or a "good daughter" and to share about female figures they looked up to when they were younger. The family section asked about family traditions or practices that reinforce ideas about how a "good daughter" or "good woman" should be, and about moments when participants feel pressure to conform to certain behaviors because of their gender. The personal section explored how participants' goals and aspirations about education, career, marriage, and motherhood have evolved over time, and whether they would make different choices if they could go back.

Questions about life in Afghanistan and Canada focused on how Hazara communities' views about gender roles have changed (or stayed the same) after moving to Canada and the biggest challenges these communities face in adjusting to Canada's more egalitarian gender norms. Finally, the future section asked participants to suggest necessary changes to redefine gender roles in Hazara communities and how women and men can work together to challenge traditional gender narratives.

Data Analysis

For analyzing qualitative data from questionnaires and workshop, I employed thematic analysis and narrative analysis to identify key themes, patterns, and underlying emotions in participants' stories. This involved multiple rounds of coding, starting with broad themes and gradually developing more specific categories as patterns emerged. I was attentive to both told and untold stories, recognizing that certain experiences (such as domestic violence) might be alluded to but not directly discussed due to cultural sensitivities.

To ground my interpretation of the narratives in appropriate cultural context, I consulted with three Hazara subject matter experts who had lived experience in international diasporas (Australia and UK) and were actively involved in advocacy work for gender equality and Hazara communities' wellbeing. These consultations helped ensure that my analysis was culturally informed, particularly for cultural elements that I might lack direct experience with.

For analyzing quantitative data from questionnaires, I employed descriptive statistics to summarize and contextualize the qualitative findings.

Questionnaire Findings

The questionnaire yielded responses from 35 participants, though two were inadmissible, leaving 33 relevant respondents from across Canada. One quarter of the respondents were born in Canada, and more than half had been in Canada for 15+ years. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 45, with the majority between 26-34 years old. More than half of the respondents held a bachelor's degree, and a quarter had a Master's degree or higher. More than a third were married, while almost half were single. A notable gap in the data was the lack of substantial representation from newly arrived women in Canada.

Initial Analysis: GRBS & Gendered Life Index Clustering

The average GRBS score for the 33 Hazara women respondents was 52, indicating moderately feminist beliefs for the group overall. Interestingly, the sum for Factor 1 (household and workplace roles) was consistently higher than the sum for Factor 2 (protectionism and chivalry) for every respondent. This suggests that the respondents generally believe in more egalitarian roles relating to the household and workplace but hold somewhat more traditional views regarding protectionism and chivalry toward women.

When mapping GRBS results against GLI results, three distinct clusters emerged, as shown in Figure 4 below:

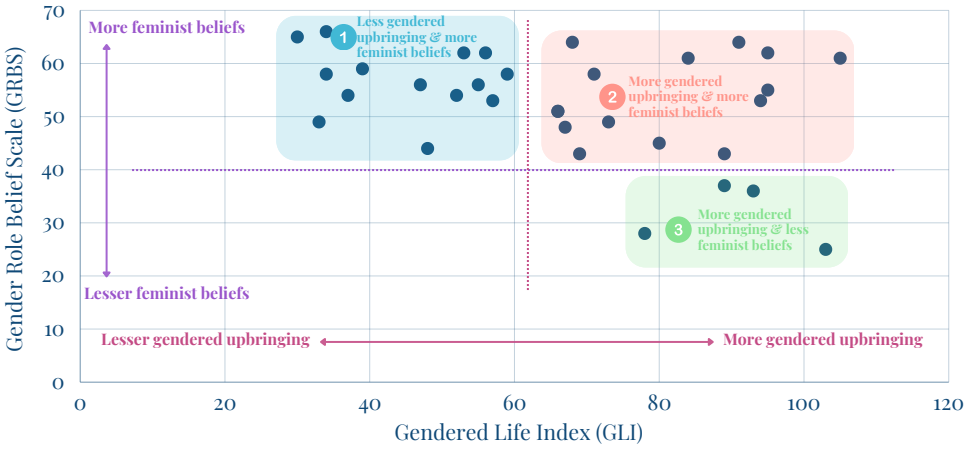

Figure 4: *GRBS vs. GLI clustering results.*

Cluster 1: "The Empowered Inheritors" (Less Gendered Upbringing + Feminist Beliefs)

This group experienced relatively egalitarian childhood environments and developed feminist perspectives. Their experiences reflect how more equitable family dynamics can foster progressive gender attitudes:

- "We were always treated the same as my brother. Chores were separated between all four of us and based on our knowledge and skills."
- "My parents understand my views on not wanting marriage or children and they respect it."
- "I am an independent single woman which is the biggest stigma to the Afghan culture."
- "If I have felt any kind of pressure, I make sure my opinions are heard and respected."

However, even in these more egalitarian households, subtle gender expectations emerged over time:

- "Growing up my parents never stopped me from doing anything, if I wanted to, I would run around and play with my cousins but as I got older, they would tell me, don't run stay sangeen [meaning demure]."

Cluster 2: "The Resilient Transformers" (More Gendered Upbringing + Feminist Beliefs)

This larger cluster developed feminist beliefs despite growing up in more traditional environments, suggesting resilience and evolution in their gender perspectives:

- "People have often used certain things to make me not say anything, 'you are a smart woman and not saying anything would bring peace'."
- "In settings where extended family members, relatives, or people within our Hazara community are present- I feel extremely pressured to conform to gender roles. Not doing so would bring 'shame' to my family. For example, helping the women wash dishes following a meal while the men sit and socialize."

Several women described evolving family support:

- "My parents believes that as long as we are living in their house, it is a heavily traditional household, but once everyone is married, it can be whatever we choose (traditional or egalitarian)."
- "My dad and brothers didn't really support me when I went to pursue post-secondary education, but now that I am working and earning well, they are happy that I did."

Their personal journeys often showed dramatic shifts in perspective:

- "When I was younger, I was very eager to marry and have a lot of children just like my parents (5 kids). However, that mindset drastically shifted over time. I have a career now. I have the financial freedom to do anything I want, something my mom was not afforded. I have mixed feelings about motherhood and marriage."

Many described harsh childhood messaging about gender:

- "Being a 'good girl' meant unquestioning obedience. Critical thinking wasn't taught to the previous generation, and they didn't know to expect it from their children. So anything short of agreeing blindly with what the elders deemed as the right way of life would cause one to be labeled as a 'bad girl'."

Cluster 3: "The Traditional Navigators" (More Gendered Upbringing + Less Feminist Beliefs)

This smaller cluster maintained more traditional gender beliefs while also reporting highly gendered upbringings:

- "My mom always made me feel like I had a clock as a woman."
- "The saying that 'you should learn to cook, one day it will come handy to you' (in terms of when you get married you need to cook for your husband and family)."

Their current perspectives often attempted to balance tradition with some elements of equality:

- "I have learned that it's not hard for women to do what men do but still we need to keep our traditions alive in a right way."
- "I think being raised in a traditional household, I do carry some of those believes. That men should be the provider of the family. And women do have more childbearing responsibilities."

Many expressed deep regrets about earlier life choices:

- "I would have set boundaries for my parents to make sure that I got the best education possible, not marry young, and pursue all my dreams. I felt that my parents hindered my goals, based on the fear of 'What would people think?'"

When attempting to express different views, they reported significant resistance:

- "Yes, I try to give my perspective, but I end up being told I'm the bad child for speaking against my parents."
- "They say the guys are allowed to do anything because they are men."

Deep Dive Analysis: Gender Beliefs & Autonomy Clustering

While the GRBS and GLI provided valuable initial insights, the rich qualitative data suggested more complex patterns. To capture these nuances, I developed a comprehensive rubric to assess participants' gender beliefs and autonomy more holistically.

For gender beliefs, I evaluated responses across several dimensions: gender division of labor, family caretaking versus personal ambitions, modesty and family reputation, hierarchical family structures, gender-differentiated childrearing, educational/career aspirations, and relationship/marriage expectations. These were rated on a scale from traditional (0–1) to moderate (1–2) to egalitarian (2–3).

On this scale, traditional scores (0–1) indicated support for distinct gender roles, prioritization of family needs over women's individual goals, concern for family reputation over personal choice, acceptance of male authority in decision-making, different expectations for sons and daughters, viewing women's education primarily as beneficial for family rather than personal growth, and support for family involvement in marriage decisions. Egalitarian scores (2–3) reflected rejection of gender-based divisions, equal valuing of individual fulfillment and family needs, rejection of reputation-based constraints, advocacy for equal voice in decisions, commitment to raising children similarly regardless of gender, full support for women's education and career pursuits, and full autonomy in relationship decisions.

For autonomy over choices, I assessed elements relating to expressed agency, experience of external pressure, expressions of regret or alternative desires, negotiation of competing demands, and emotional language. These were rated on a scale from limited (0–1) to moderate (1–2) to complete (2–3).

On this autonomy scale, limited scores (0–1) were assigned when participants rarely described making independent decisions, reported significant external pressure affecting their choices, expressed considerable regret about paths not taken due to constraints, demonstrated few effective strategies for navigating conflicting expectations, and used emotional language dominated by fear, guilt, or resignation. Complete autonomy scores (2–3) reflected consistent descriptions of independent decision-making, minimal external pressure affecting choices, satisfaction with chosen paths, effective negotiation creating significant personal space, and emotional language characterized by pride, confidence, and satisfaction.

To ensure consistency in applying this rubric, I first analyzed a subset of responses to establish benchmark examples for each level, then systematically evaluated all qualitative responses. For each participant, I calculated average scores across the gender belief dimensions and autonomy elements, resulting in two composite scores that positioned them on the Gender Beliefs-Autonomy Matrix. This approach allowed me to capture nuances that might be missed in standardized quantitative measures, particularly the complex ways participants negotiated between conflicting values and pressures.

This more nuanced analysis revealed five distinct clusters, as shown in Figure 5 below:

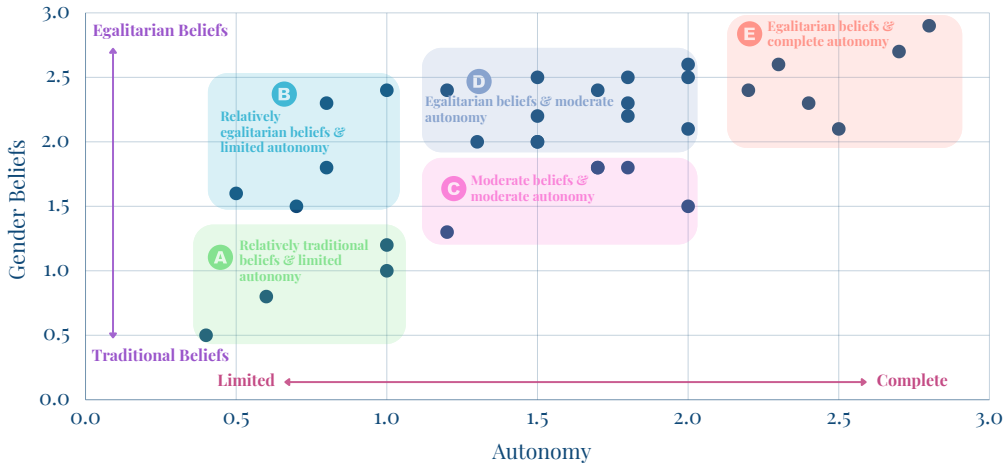

Figure 5: *Gender beliefs vs. autonomy clustering results.*

Cluster A: "The Silent Compromisers" (Traditional Beliefs + Limited Autonomy)

This small cluster showed minimal expression of personal aspirations despite strongly gendered upbringings. Their responses included statements about how "Girls should never be seen outside, Girls should remain quiet, they can't have bold personalities, Girls should only listen, never been heard. Boys are the future of family and on the other hand girls are outsider because they go to different house." While they expressed belief in equality ("Both men and women are of equal value"), they demonstrated little external advocacy. Their responses frequently included regrets about life choices: "I would not rush to get married, I would've pursued my education. I would have applied to law school much earlier. I would choose a different career." Notably, these participants often used phrases like "no comment" or "not applicable" when asked about personal views on gender roles. Their hopes for the future were expressed in minimal terms, such as wanting the community to "accept that woman is as equal as man."

Cluster B: "The Constrained Visionaries" (Egalitarian Beliefs + Limited Autonomy)

This cluster experienced highly gendered childhoods filled with restrictive messages:

- "Sit like a girl, don't raise your voice, don't talk too much as a girl, always offer to help, help clean after people."
- "'You're a girl. Do you really want to ruin our family's reputation for that.'"
- "I was taught to go to school only if I don't talk and interact with any male."

They expressed strong egalitarian beliefs: "My personal views are that women and men are equal in every aspect of life. Women and men are equal in all cases. Whatever a man is allowed to do and however a man is treated, a women should receive the same treatment." However, they lacked the power to act on these beliefs:

- "I just do what is expected of me because I am afraid to upset those around me."
- "I try to give my perspective but I end up being told I'm the bad child for speaking against my parents."

Their hopes for change were often projected onto the next generation:

- "I will not pass on one thing to my daughter that she should not sacrifice her for her husband and children. I want my daughters and sons to be treated equally. I'd allow both to date, I'd make both do equal domestic chores."

Cluster C: "The Pragmatic Balancers" (Moderate Beliefs + Moderate Autonomy)

This group reported traditional upbringings similar to other clusters:

- "I was told to not talk to boys or men as people will talk bad about me and ruin my reputation."
- "The saying that 'you should learn to cook, one day it will come handy to you' (in terms of when you get married you need to cook for your husband and family)."

Their current beliefs showed characteristic ambivalence:

- "I would say mine is closer to egalitarian. But I think being raised in a traditional household, I do carry some of those believes. That men should be the provider of the family. And women do have more childbearing responsibilities."
- "I am neutral. There are times that I think traditional roles are good and at time egalitarian."

Biological differences were frequently cited as justification for certain gender roles:

- "I do not completely deny the traditional roles, there are certain roles I believe for men and women to be specific to them for example men cannot be pregnant and anything a mother can do, a father cannot do."

Cluster D: "The Strategic Negotiators" (Egalitarian Beliefs + Moderate Autonomy) (Largest Cluster)

This group – the largest in the study – experienced varying degrees of gendered socialization:

- "Don't talk back to elders, be polite, demure, always greet every person respectfully, do not date/have romantic relationships, dress modestly, do not fraternize with boys outside of school."
- "I was always told that I should not compare myself to my brother's because they were boys and no one will take negative about boys, but they will about girls."

Their egalitarian beliefs were articulated with sophistication:

- "I believe in egalitarian gender roles because they promote fairness, flexibility, and mutual respect. True equity means balance, mutual respect, and shared responsibility, ensuring equal rights and opportunities for both men and women. It is not about rejecting tradition but challenging limitations that hinder personal and collective growth."

They employed various strategies to navigate gender expectations, ranging from confrontation to disengagement:

- "I spent many years, trying to explain and fight for myself. When I was younger, I would dismiss these pressures in a very aggressive manner, often leading to a lot of verbal arguments."
- "I've learned to disengage, I just nod and walk away, I found myself avoiding these issues sometimes and pretending they were acceptable because I lacked the mental strength to face the consequences."

Many expressed evolving perspectives on marriage and motherhood while acknowledging persistent pressure:

- "Even if I have a career and I'm financially independent, my life is not considered as 'complete' since I am not engaged or married yet. I still struggle with this pressure."
- "'I think I would wait a few years to get into a committed relationship because sometimes I do wonder whether it's what I fully wanted or whether there was so much happiness and encouragement from everybody around me that I convinced myself that this is the next chapter."

Cluster E: "The Empowered Architects" (Egalitarian Beliefs + Complete Autonomy)

This group's distinguishing feature was growing up in more egalitarian families, though their gendered messages still ranged from traditional ("Being a good girl entailed sitting with your legs closed, listening to your elders, being quiet, knowing how to make chai and serving guests") to more general respect-based guidance ("To be a good daughter, I was taught to be honest, respectful, and mindful of my speech when speaking to elders or strangers in general"). Their perspectives on gender roles showed nuanced thinking about practical realities:

- "I think it's important to both be equal in a relationship. We are in an era where both men and women need to be independent and skilled in both house and work matters."
- "A healthy balance between traditional and modern roles is ideal, but the reality often falls short. In practice, the concept of balance is skewed, with women frequently bearing a disproportionate share of responsibilities, both at home and in their careers."

Many were actively questioning traditional expectations about marriage and motherhood from a position of genuine choice:

- "There is a time and place to practice traditional gender roles, I do understand that as a women who wants to have children and a family in the future that I would need to make sacrifices in my career and lifestyle to raise children but I am also aware that this sacrifice is not only mine to make alone and that my future partner will have to make more contribution to child rearing that is normally not seen in traditional Afghan households."
- "While it may have once been feasible for women to focus solely on homemaking, today's economy, with its high cost of living, often requires both partners to work. This shifts the conversation and requires us to reframe the question to reflect these changes."

Identifying Limiting Narratives Across Clusters

The most striking finding from this analysis was the identification of three powerful gender narratives that consistently influenced women's choices across all clusters, regardless of their position on the Gender Beliefs and Autonomy matrix:

1. Narratives Framing Traditional Gender Divisions as Natural, Practical, and Biologically Determined

Across all clusters, participants referenced biological differences as justifications for gendered roles. Even among those with strongly

egalitarian beliefs, notions of women's "natural" affinity for caregiving and men's "natural" leadership abilities persisted. As one participant articulated: "I do not completely deny the traditional roles, there are certain roles I believe for men and women to be specific to them." Another explained: "I think being raised in a traditional household, I do carry some of those believes. That men should be the provider of the family. And women do have more childbearing responsibilities." These narratives were particularly effective because they presented gender divisions not as cultural constructions but as immutable natural law, making them difficult to question or challenge.

2. Narratives Positioning Cultural Preservation Against Women's Autonomy

A persistent theme across responses was the framing of women's conformity to traditional roles as essential to cultural preservation. Women who challenged gender norms were characterized as rejecting their cultural identity. As one participant shared: "I have learned that it's not hard for women to do what men do but still we need to keep our traditions alive in a right way." The burden of preserving Hazara culture fell disproportionately on women's behaviors, creating a false dichotomy between cultural authenticity and gender equality. This narrative was particularly powerful in the diaspora context, where concerns about cultural loss were heightened.

3. Cultural and Religious Narratives Depicting Life as Incomplete Without Marriage and Motherhood

Across all clusters, participants described persistent messaging that women's lives were fundamentally incomplete without marriage and motherhood. As one participant recalled: "My mom always made me feel like I had a clock as a woman." Another noted: "Even if I have a career and I'm financially independent, my life is not considered as 'complete' since I am not engaged or married yet. I still struggle with this pressure." These narratives created significant internal conflict for participants pursuing education and career goals. Even those with the highest autonomy and most egalitarian beliefs struggled with questions about whether foregoing traditional family structures would lead to future regret or incomplete life experiences.

These three limiting narratives proved especially powerful because they operated across personal, familial, and community levels, creating consistent messages that shaped women's perceptions of possibility. Importantly, these narratives transcended the quantitative measures of feminist beliefs or gendered upbringing – they influenced women across all clusters, suggesting their deeply embedded nature in gender socialization.

These findings formed the foundation for the workshop component of my research, where I engaged Hazara women in exploring and deconstructing these three specific narratives that consistently channeled them toward traditional gender roles despite their stated desires for more egalitarian arrangements.

Workshop Design & Implementation

Prior to the workshop, I conducted causal layered analyses (CLAs), a tool developed by Sohail Inayatullah that helps reveal how gender narratives operate at different levels of awareness, from surface-level symptoms to deep cultural stories (Inayatullah, 2008). I presented these analyses to workshop participants as a foundation for our discussions, and they generally affirmed my findings. The workshop then employed several activities to help participants engage with and deconstruct these narratives.

The primary workshop activities included reflective discussions where participants shared their experiences with each narrative and speculative exercises designed to push participants beyond established patterns of thinking. Using "what-if" scenarios, participants explored alternative possibilities that challenged traditional gender narratives. These exercises were structured to help participants question taken-for-granted assumptions and imagine different possible futures.

Causal Layered Analysis of Key Gender Narratives

Narrative 1: Biological Determinism in Gender Roles

My CLA exploration of the narrative framing traditional gender divisions as natural and biologically determined revealed multiple layers of understanding and influence, as shown in Figure 6 below. At the systemic level, several structural factors maintain this narrative. The biological functions of pregnancy and childbirth occurring in female bodies create an initial division of labor that extends beyond these specific functions. Breastfeeding capabilities establish early childcare patterns that often expand into broader expectations about women's caregiving roles. These biological realities interact with social and economic systems designed around traditional gender divisions, where economic constraints make dual specialized roles seem efficient.

At the worldview level, deeper beliefs sustain these systems. There exists an assumption that biological difference naturally extends to broader social roles – that what begins as physical difference inevitably determines psychological and social capabilities. This belief system, backed by scientific and religious justifications, accepts not only that women and men are different and complementary, but also that these differences are "natural" and inherently right or inevitable, creating resistance to questioning traditional arrangements (Klingorová & Havlíček, 2015; Perry & Albee, 1998).

At the deepest level, powerful myths and metaphors give meaning to gender divisions. The concept of a "natural order" that is sacred and not to be disrupted provides a powerful foundation for gender roles. The metaphor of "complementary halves" presents women and men as

incomplete without each other and naturally suited to different functions. As expressed in the Quran, "And of everything We have created pairs: that ye may receive instruction" (51:49), this divine design is presented as intentional and instructive, reinforcing that these differences are not just natural but divinely ordained for a purpose (Topbaş, 2011).

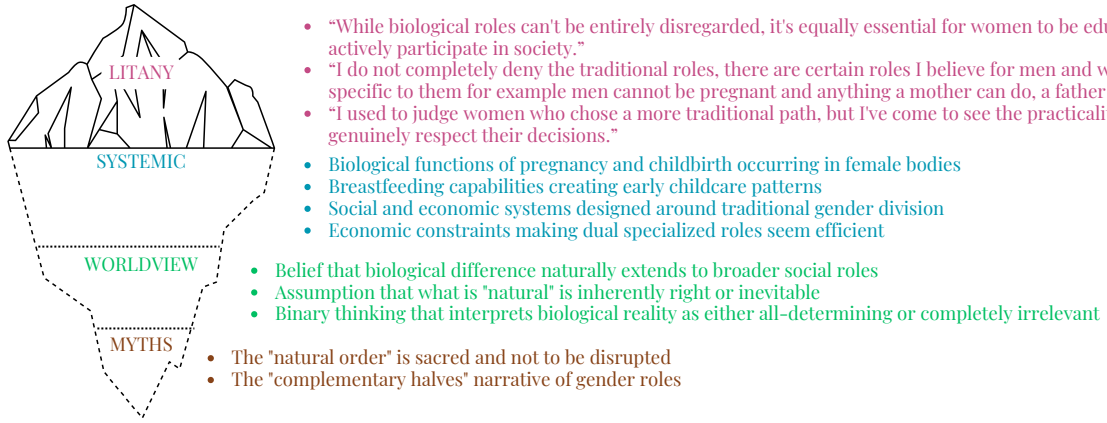

Figure 6: *Causal Layered Analysis findings for narratives about biological determinism in gender roles.*

Narrative 2: Cultural Preservation vs. Women's Autonomy

My analysis of the narrative that positions cultural preservation against women's autonomy revealed complex systemic causes, as shown in Figure 7 below. Family and community systems enforce traditional gender expectations through approval and disapproval, creating powerful social incentives for conformity. Limited models for cultural integration that preserve identity while allowing for individual autonomy create significant challenges. The fear of community judgment and exclusion for "becoming too Canadian" creates significant pressure, particularly on women whose behavior is often seen as representative of cultural authenticity (Ahmed & Hari, 2023).

At the worldview level, I identified the belief that cultural identity requires maintaining traditional gender roles – that to be authentically Afghan means to organize gender relations in specific ways. This creates an assumption that individual freedom threatens collective identity. There is also a widespread understanding of cultural practices as fixed rather than evolving – ignoring how what is considered "traditional" today may itself be relatively recent. This aligns with research on Afghan culture that notes, "women were and remain subject to abuse not only because of gender but also because of ethnicity, politics, social class, and religion" (Drumbl, 2003). There is also a belief held by many in diaspora communities that they must be more traditional than the homeland to preserve identity, creating additional pressure on women.

The deepest myths and metaphors underpinning this narrative include the false binary between being "authentic" versus "westernized" – as if cultural identity exists on a single spectrum with tradition at one end and assimilation at the other. The powerful metaphor of staying "true" to one's roots presumes cultural purity and stability that rarely exists in reality (Sadat, 2008).

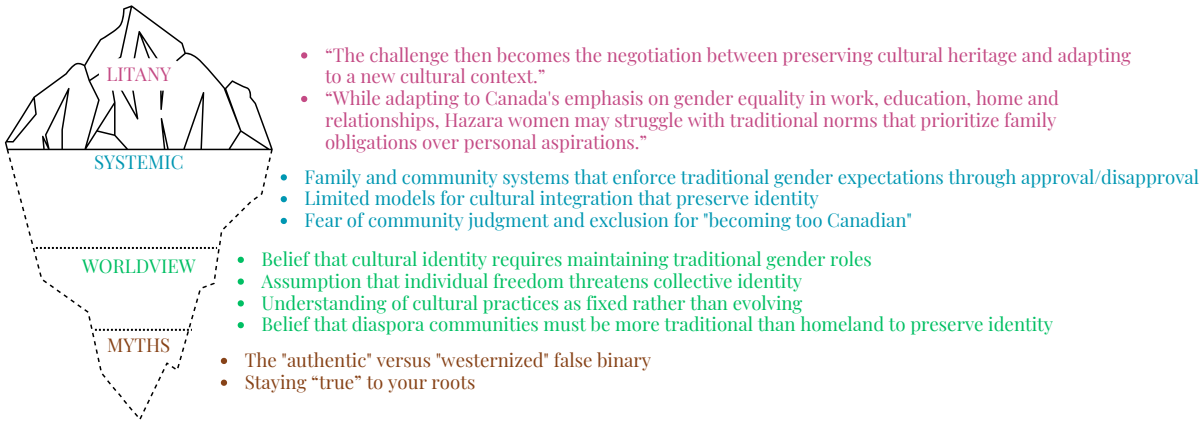

Figure 7: *Causal Layered Analysis findings for narratives about cultural preservation vs. women's autonomy.*

Narrative 3: Marriage and Motherhood as Life Completion

My CLA of the narrative that portrays life as incomplete without marriage and motherhood identified multiple systemic mechanisms, as shown in Figure 8 below. Cultural systems reward married women with higher status, while family and community structures center marriage and motherhood as essential developmental milestones. The intergenerational transmission of "life completion" narratives ensure their persistence across generations, even in diaspora contexts. Limited celebration or recognition of alternative life paths makes it difficult for women to envision fulfilling lives outside traditional marriage and motherhood.

At the worldview level, I identified the assumption that biological capabilities determine life purpose – that having a female reproductive system naturally defines one's primary social role. This creates a view that female identity requires external completion through relationship, rather than being whole in itself. For many, there is also a belief that marriage and motherhood enable unique dimensions of spiritual growth, connecting female fulfillment to religious devotion. The deepest myths and metaphors supporting this narrative include the concept of the "half-person" becoming "whole" through partnership, and the journey narrative with marriage and motherhood as the path to spiritual fulfillment and getting closer to Allah (Topbaş, 2011).

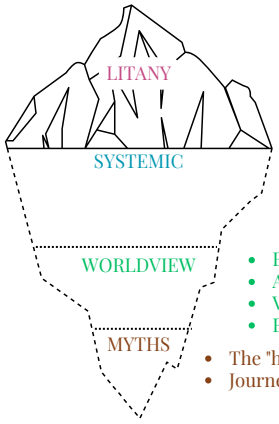

Figure 8: *Causal Layered Analysis findings for narratives about marriage and motherhood as life completion.*

Workshop Speculative Exercises

After the participants largely affirmed my CLA findings through their own experiences, we engaged in speculative exercises to further explore and challenge these narratives.

Narrative 1: Biological Justifications and Beyond

Our speculative exercises examining biological determinism in gender roles yielded rich insights. When exploring historical uses of biology to justify differential treatment, participants identified how biological arguments have been employed both in Afghanistan and Canada to justify restrictive gender norms. They noted how women were historically assumed to be unable to perform certain tasks because they were "physically weaker", and how men "were thought to be smarter than women so they can work in government, labs, offices". Participants recognized how these arguments served to "perpetuate the cycle of oppression against women to exert control over them" and effectively "uphold patriarchy". When asked to distinguish between truly biological aspects of gender and social constructions, participants showed nuanced understanding. They identified reproduction as biologically female but challenged numerous assumptions about gender differences: "Men are less emotional beings. This is not true. They simply are taught to suppress their emotions. Displaying emotions is a universal human experience, regardless of your gender". This exercise revealed how selective biological facts are often elevated while others (like male fertility decline with age) receive less attention.

Participants' analysis of "practicality" in traditional gender roles was particularly insightful. They questioned who benefits from these arrangements, noting that claims about women being "naturally better at multi-tasking" often benefit men by placing multiple household responsibilities on women. As one participant observed, "Men benefit mostly from these because they get to self-actualize. Whereas women are not always afforded the same privilege of pursuing other endeavors outside motherhood, caregiving". The most transformative part of this exercise came when imagining alternative social structures. Participants envisioned how automation of household labor might reshape gender dynamics, though some cautioned that "women would still be in charge of managing this technology" or men might claim technological domains as masculine. They considered how compensating care work at rates comparable to male-dominated professions would transform social values: "women would finally be compensated and respected for the incredibly hard work they now perform for free and without much recognition".

When imagining reproductive technologies that separated reproduction from female bodies, participants suggested this could reduce "ways for society to control women by controlling their uteruses". Considering employment structures that presumed all workers had significant care responsibilities, they envisioned how "women would continue advancing in their careers as quickly as men and would not be expected to put their careers on hold to have children" while "men will be more involved in the care of their children's upbringing".
Perhaps most profoundly, participants imagined a society designed around care as the central value rather than production. They described how "roles would be defined by how much society contributes to the well-being of others leading to equitable social structures and more focus on human welfare" and how "society would be more empathetic, rather than the idea of the individualism, we would hold responsibility for each other and would want everyone to equally find success and happiness".

Narrative 2: Cultural Timeline and Preservation

The cultural timeline mapping exercise revealed significant evolution in gender practices across generations. Participants noted how their grandparents' generations maintained practices like checking for women's virginity after marriage, polygamy for women who could not have sons, and expectations that women were "only responsible to do household chores and reproduction". One participant shared that women "were seen and not heard, this is what they taught to parents' generation, who tried to teach to our generation, but it didn't stick".

For their parents' generation, participants identified practices like strict taboos against divorce "no matter how bad or abusive - in order to not put shame your father's name" and limited educational opportunities. They noted how "the man makes the decision on behalf of the ENTIRE family and his word stays true - any other thought would be deemed as disrespecting the family". For their own generation, participants described how they "pursue an education while also juggling household responsibilities" and observed how "girls and boys are both breadwinners now, but only girls are still expected to take care of domestic duties". They noted "gradual shifts in what girls could wear, how long they could study, whether they could go outside for extracurricular activities or to be with friends as society integrated with Canadian values and also gained more education".

When examining who bears responsibility for maintaining cultural identity, participants overwhelmingly identified women as cultural carriers. They observed that responsibilities like "hosting an event lies on the women" and practices around "hospitality, respect, honor" fall primarily to women. Even with food as "a central aspect to our culture", it is "traditionally, women" who maintain this practice. For celebratory traditions, they noted "the financial responsibility always falls on the men, however, it seems that after the wedding everything else falls on the women. 'Get all the gold while you can, but you'll be paying it all back through manual labour- cleaning, cooking, taking care of in-laws, children, etc.'"

When creating new narratives for cultural identity and preservation, participants moved beyond current frames like "freedom of women to pursue education but within the limits of the culture and family dynamics" where "by maintaining their 'purity', women are the guardians of a family's honor and integrity". Instead, they envisioned "pursuit of education with freedom and without barriers" and redefined honor as each family member "being authentic to self and your true faith and cultural values (honesty, integrity, compassion, curiosity, courage, service) and exploring your full potential and celebrating that in whatever shape and form that it may lead to".

Narrative 3: Reimagining Completeness

The exercise of reimagining common statements about women by flipping the gender revealed powerful insights about asymmetrical expectations. Statements like "A woman isn't fulfilled until she becomes a mother" became "A man isn't fulfilled until he becomes a father and is actively involved in childcare". The judgment "She has everything - except someone to share it with" transformed to "He has everything - except the deep bonds that come from being the primary caregiver to his children". Flipping statements about women's domestic responsibilities ("As a girl and a future wife, you need to learn how to cook and clean in order to take care of your family, future husband, children and in-laws") to target men revealed the arbitrariness of these gendered expectations. Similarly, flipping statements about virginity, travel restrictions, and investment value highlighted how these expectations are applied almost exclusively to women.

When participants imagined a historical world where men were consistently told their lives were incomplete without deep involvement in childcare and home life, they envisioned dramatically different historical achievements, with the world leaders being "less focused on conquering land/empires and more focused on building family units and building a system providing for domestic needs". They suggested men's sense of purpose and identity would be shaped "by the depth and quality of his relationship to his partner and children" and men would be "more in tune with their emotions and not be afraid to show vulnerability". Economic and political systems would likely have evolved differently, with "government funded paternity leave and childcare", "free resources for childcare", "free and/or affordable and easily accessible contraceptive methods", and potentially "women as religious leaders and influencers". The value associated with childcare and domestic work would be elevated, with "high status and respect associated with childcare/domestic work" and it would be considered "honorable to take care of your child whereas now it is viewed as 'whipped'".

When exploring what aspects of human experience men might be missing through limited caregiving roles, participants identified "the ability to have instincts of knowing their child's needs", "what it means to feed someone 3x per day every day forever", and "the deep personal/spiritual bonds you experience when you develop a strong relationship with your family". They noted emotional costs for men, which are a lack of "a safe space to be emotional and vulnerable" and "empathizing with other human being because they are told to toughen up and suppress emotions".

Finally, when crafting alternative completeness narratives, participants created powerful new visions: "a complete life would be when you understand the essence of your being from the depths of your soul while living in this world" and "a complete life is a life lived by your own definition of what it means to be complete, free of societal expectations or norms - it is living a life according to your own choices, without fear of not meeting others' expectations".

Deconstructing Limiting Narratives

The primary research findings reveal several crucial insights about the gender narratives that shape Hazara women's lives in the Canadian diaspora. By deconstructing these narratives through multiple analytical layers, we identified several underlying assumptions that limit women's possibilities:

- These narratives operate through selective emphasis – highlighting certain biological facts while downplaying others, emphasizing cultural preservation in ways that burden women disproportionately, and elevating marriage and motherhood above other paths to fulfillment.
- These narratives blur the boundaries between biological realities, cultural practices, and religious teachings. By conflating these distinct domains, seemingly immutable "natural laws" or "divine commands" are created from what are often historically specific cultural practices.
- These narratives place disproportionate responsibility on women – for maintaining cultural authenticity, for ensuring family harmony, and for reproductive labor – while simultaneously devaluing this work.

The next chapter will build upon these insights to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the system within which these gender narratives operate. By mapping the dynamics of this system, we can better understand how these narratives function within larger social systems, how they adapt to new contexts, and most importantly, where interventions might effectively expand possibilities for Hazara women in the Canadian diaspora.

Decoding Gender Negotiations

Understanding the System

In the previous chapters, we learned that gender narratives powerfully influence individual choices based on gender, and this is made explicitly clear in the case of Hazara communities. The mechanisms through which these gender narratives take hold can feel remarkably complex. As I have hopefully shown through this research, these narratives are intuitively felt to have roots in religious beliefs that are considered beyond question or debate, beliefs about biology that are supposedly backed by "objective" scientific research, and real-life "practical" evidence that seemingly cannot be denied.

For those of us studying these phenomena extensively – examining historical patterns and challenging the underlying assumptions of gender narratives and our gendered society – we seek a more detailed understanding to effectively influence these systems. Through the exercise of systems mapping presented in this chapter, I hope to make the systems of gender inequality and their persistence more tangible and easier to understand, while clarifying potential intervention points.

Mapping Gender Negotiations & Identity Formation

To map the process effectively, we must start from the beginning. As Ridgeway articulates, we created the system of gender to simplify interactions and encounters with others – essentially to reduce the cognitive cost of understanding our position in any given encounter. This applies to encounters that are virtual, in person, in our imagination, and in every other context where humans interact. Ridgeway offers the example of someone speaking on the phone, where we immediately assess voice, level of authority in speech patterns, names, and other cues to determine gender. When these markers are easily identified, we intuitively position ourselves within the social hierarchy relative to the other person. We then decide whether to accept this positioning or challenge it through what might be considered a soft negotiation of identity. Different aspects of our identities come into play depending on who we are speaking with and the specific context. However, since gender functions as one of the primary categorization systems, it forms the underlying context in almost all interactions. To map how gender narratives operate, we must examine where these gender negotiations become crucial for establishing self-identity.

Throughout our lives, we engage in gender negotiations that either affirm or reject gender expectations. Our earliest negotiations occur with parents and family members, who interpret our behaviors as either acceptable or unacceptable according to our gender. I experienced this recently with my three-year-old niece. While I was engaging in the gender-defying activity of doing handy work around the home, she became interested in the screwdrivers and mimicked my actions. I immediately said, "Oh, you're going to be a handywoman when you grow up!" I imposed my own gender-defying narratives on her, because that is how I negotiate my own gender. Other significant gender negotiations during childhood involve teachers, classmates, community members, and others who are simultaneously living out their own gender truths while shaping ours. I vividly recall an experience when I was eleven years old, after my family had moved to Afghanistan. Excited to enroll in school, I arrived wearing my best outfit, which was a pantsuit with a short-sleeved top. The principal immediately asked, "Are you here for a fashion show?" Within the context of the narratives about women seeking attention or "fashion" being equated with sexuality – it made me extremely self-conscious about my appearance. From that day forward, I ensured my uniform of full black with a white headscarf was impeccable, eliminating any possibility of misinterpretation. I internalized this experience, and it profoundly shaped my feelings around body image, shame, and self-consciousness for many years.

We are further shaped by media representations on television, books, and stories our families tell us about our culture, religion, and future. Around age eleven, also in Afghanistan, I had a book about our solar system. During months without snow, we would sleep outside on the sufa (patio) under the stars, and I deeply wished to become an astronaut because there was an astronaut in the storybook. I cannot remember the sex of the character, but at that age, gender expectations were not as firmly established in my mind as they would later become, which would shape my career choices. These negotiation dynamics are not exclusive to gender – they occur strongly with race, class, disability, and even more strongly at the intersections of these identities. However, gender negotiations are unique, as Ridgeway notes, because they happen across all social strata (across the spectrum of all races, class, and ability). While these negotiations happen at school, workplaces, community settings, the most intimate, formative, and consequential negotiations occur within the home: with parents, siblings, partners, spouses, and extended family members. These domestic interactions shape our deepest stories of gender identity, and our identity as a whole.

The Home Sphere as a Critical Site of Negotiation

The three deep gender narratives identified through my primary research: framing traditional gender roles as natural and biologically determined, positioning cultural preservation against women's autonomy, and depicting life as incomplete without marriage and motherhood – all manifest in the decisions that are primarily negotiated within the intimate relationships of our immediate families. As shown in Figure 9 below, each of these gendered narratives shapes specific decisions in predictable ways.

The narrative framing traditional gender roles as natural and biologically determined, for instance, influences decisions around the division of domestic labor, financial decision-making in the home, and career-related decisions, based on the assumption that women and men inherently possess different areas of expertise – that certain capabilities are "innate" rather than learned. Similarly, the narrative positioning cultural preservation against women's autonomy influences decisions about domestic responsibilities, career trajectories, and even tolerance for intimate partner violence, based on expectations to make choices that maintain cultural identity and traditions, with departures from these expectations viewed as threats to community cohesion rather than expressions of individual autonomy. The third narrative, depicting life as incomplete without marriage and motherhood, shapes decisions around career investment, marital name change practices, and reproductive choices.

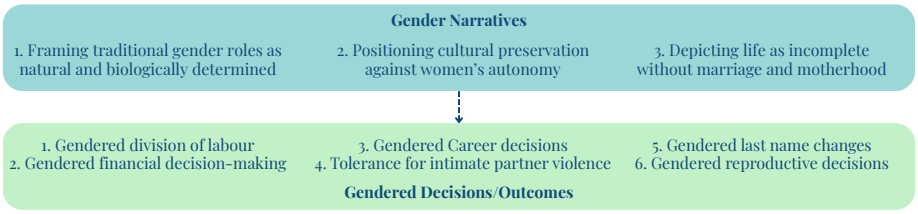

Figure 9: *Gender narratives that are loosely connected to gendered decisions/outcomes.*

At first glance, these choices may seem practical, intentional, and unique to each household or individual. They are often framed as purely personal preferences or logical divisions based on circumstances. However, by studying the narratives behind these choices, we can recognize the powerful forces shaping outcomes along gender lines. What appears as individual decision-making reflects systematic patterns produced through the interaction of internalized narratives and structural constraints.

I use story loop diagrams, which translate complex system dynamics into accessible visual narratives, to visualize how gender narratives and power imbalances shape decision-making. As illustrated in Figure 10 below, in the context of a mixed-gender (i.e., heterosexual) household, these internal gendered narratives coupled with power imbalances between women and men establish the negotiation grounds within the home. If gendered narratives and power imbalances exist, negotiations are biased towards gender-conforming decisions, which ultimately are observed as patterns of heavily gendered outcomes. Over time, these gendered outcomes reinforce the same power imbalances and perpetuate the same gendered narratives that we pass on to the next generations. These internal gender narratives and power imbalances in the household are manifestations of external gender narratives and power structures that are upheld in the larger society, through family, community, economic and legal policies, and other institutions.

Figure 10 shows the self-reinforcing cycle between gender narratives and gender outcomes in a generic context. I will expand on how this dynamic plays out in specific situations between women and men in the household context.

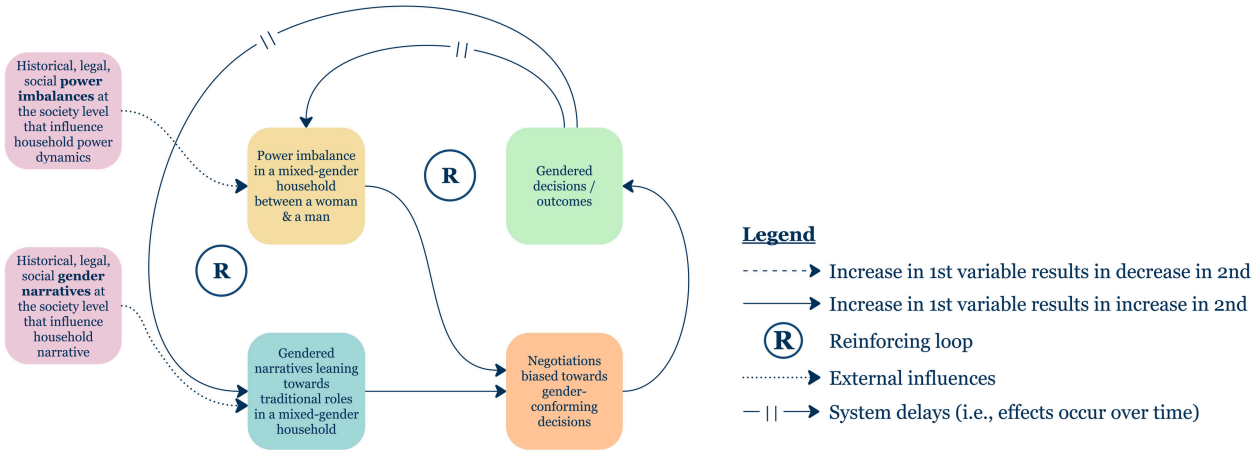

Figure 10: *Gender narratives coupled with power imbalance leads to gendered decisions.*

The Self-Reinforcing Cycle of Gender Inequality

Across diverse decision domains in household life, we observe a consistent pattern: what appears as individual choice is a product of systematic forces that reproduce gender inequality. In this section, I examine six critical decision areas where gender inequality is maintained through a self-reinforcing cycle involving structural power imbalances, internalized narratives, and biased negotiations.

This cycle follows a consistent pattern across all decision domains:

1. Resource and power disparities create the initial conditions under which negotiations occur
2. Internalized narratives shape how women and men approach these negotiations
3. Biases in negotiation lead predictably to gender-conforming outcomes
4. These outcomes reinforce the original power imbalances and narratives

Let us examine how this cycle operates across six key decision domains through more detailed story loop diagrams. Refer to Figure 10 as the overarching story loop pattern with the legend and colors as shown.

Division of Domestic Labor

Women in Canada between ages 25-54 spend 1390 hours annually on unpaid domestic work compared to men's 880 hours – nearly 60% more (Government of Canada, 2022). Even when both partners work full-time, women continue performing more domestic labor. As one Hazara woman participant noted, "I have never seen a husband come home, help with chores, cooking, helping kids with homework, etc. However, the wife is somehow given the role of being 'allowed' to work, but still having to come home and do most of the chores."

As Figure 11 illustrates, this inequality persists through resource disparities that include women having less time for career development due to domestic responsibilities, experiencing more career interruptions, and consequently having reduced earning potential. These intersect with cultural and religious beliefs in patriarchal systems that position men as household heads, alongside workplace policies favoring male work patterns that assume minimal domestic responsibilities.

Status inequalities further reinforce this arrangement as domestic labor remains culturally devalued despite its essential function. Women's worth becomes attached to household management rather than economic contributions, while men gain status primarily through career achievements, creating a system where prioritization of men's preferences appears natural. Women internalize beliefs that they are naturally better at caregiving and household management, judging their worth as partners and mothers by their home management skills. Men internalize complementary beliefs that they lack "instinct" for domestic tasks, viewing their contributions as "helping" rather than sharing equal responsibility. Many unconsciously believe domestic incompetence confirms rather than undermines their masculinity.

In negotiations, women often fear judgment for household failures, limiting their willingness to delegate tasks (a form of "gatekeeping"). Men's perceived incompetence becomes self-fulfilling through lack of practice, reinforcing skill gaps. Women's identity investment in household management makes criticism feel deeply personal, while men's "helper" mentality prevents full responsibility-taking. As women continue performing most domestic labor, they have less time for career development and leisure, perpetuating economic disparities. Children's attachment to mothers reinforces expectations about women's primary caregiving role. These seemingly practical division based on skill or preference reproduces gender inequality through a systematic interaction of cultural beliefs, economic structures, and daily negotiations in the home.

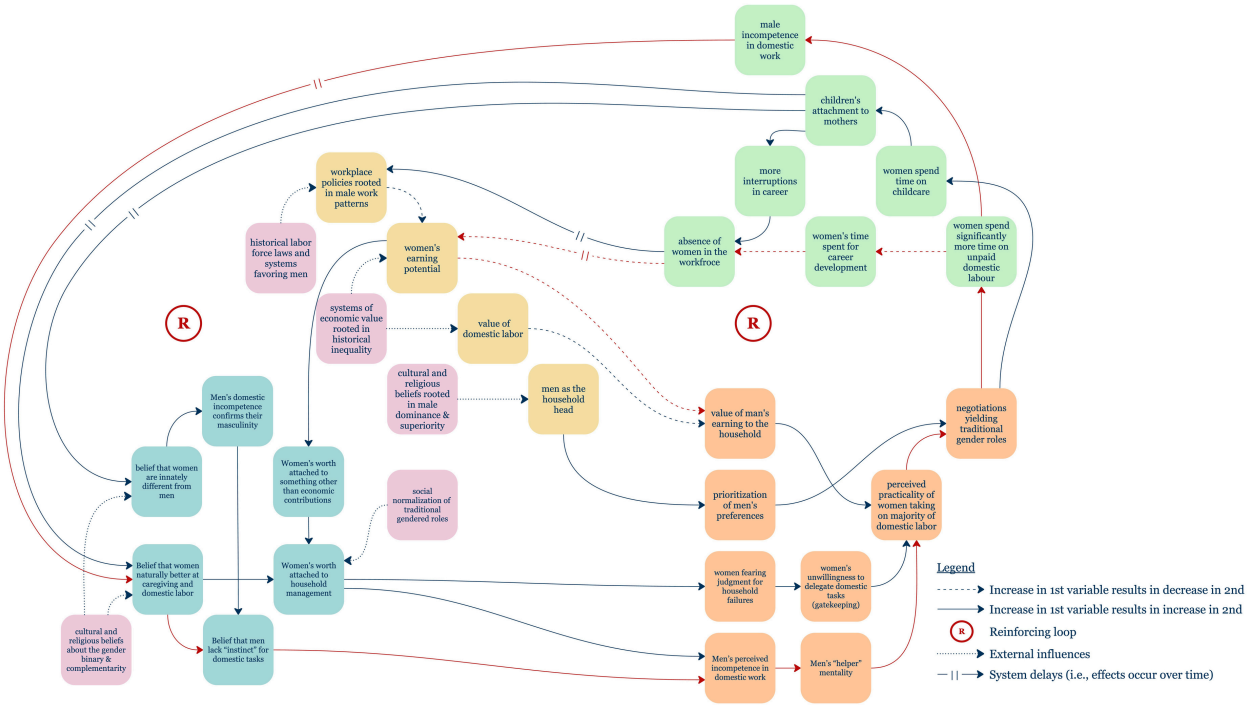

Figure 11: *Gender narratives and power relation patterns that reinforce gendered outcomes in domestic labour division.*

Career Decisions

Statistics reveal stark gender disparities: 62.5% of part-time workers are women, 38.5% of women with children work part-time compared to just 9.4% of men with children (Government of Canada, 2018a; The Vanier Institute of the Family, 2024b) . Women made up 83% of healthcare workers but only 9% of trades workers in 2024 (S. C. Government of Canada, 2023). Parenthood affects earnings in opposite directions – each child reduces a woman's lifetime earnings by approximately 4%, while men with children earn 6% more than childless men (Becker, 2023; Budig, 2014).

As illustrated in Figure 12, these patterns persist through resource disparities including gender-based wage gaps, asymmetrical parental leave policies, and the physical demands of childbearing (pregnancy, breastfeeding) that create unavoidable career interruptions. Power structures maintain male-dominated leadership across sectors, with workplace designs built around traditionally male career patterns. Status inequalities further reinforce these patterns: motherhood is professionally penalized while fatherhood is rewarded. Cultural narratives about motherhood position women as primarily responsible for children's attachment needs, while lagging workplace policies offer little accommodation for family responsibilities.

Women internalize beliefs that work-life balance is primarily their responsibility, feeling their careers should accommodate family needs while they remain responsible for anticipating children's needs. Many women choose "safe" and accommodating careers, moving from job to job rather than building continuous career trajectories. Men internalize beliefs that career success is central to their identity and masculinity, viewing career sacrifice as emasculating and expecting their professional needs to take precedence in family decisions.
In negotiations, women optimize career decisions based on household needs, prioritizing family compatibility over advancement opportunities. Men resist career compromises that might threaten their provider identity, viewing their earnings as central to household stability. Both partners often perceive the "practicality" of women making career sacrifices, given their presumed primary responsibility for childrearing.

As women continue making career accommodations for family needs, they accumulate disadvantages in earnings, advancement, and retirement security, reinforcing power imbalances and cultural narratives about women's "natural" priorities, completing the cycle that systematically funnels women toward career tracks with lower pay, less security, and fewer advancement opportunities.

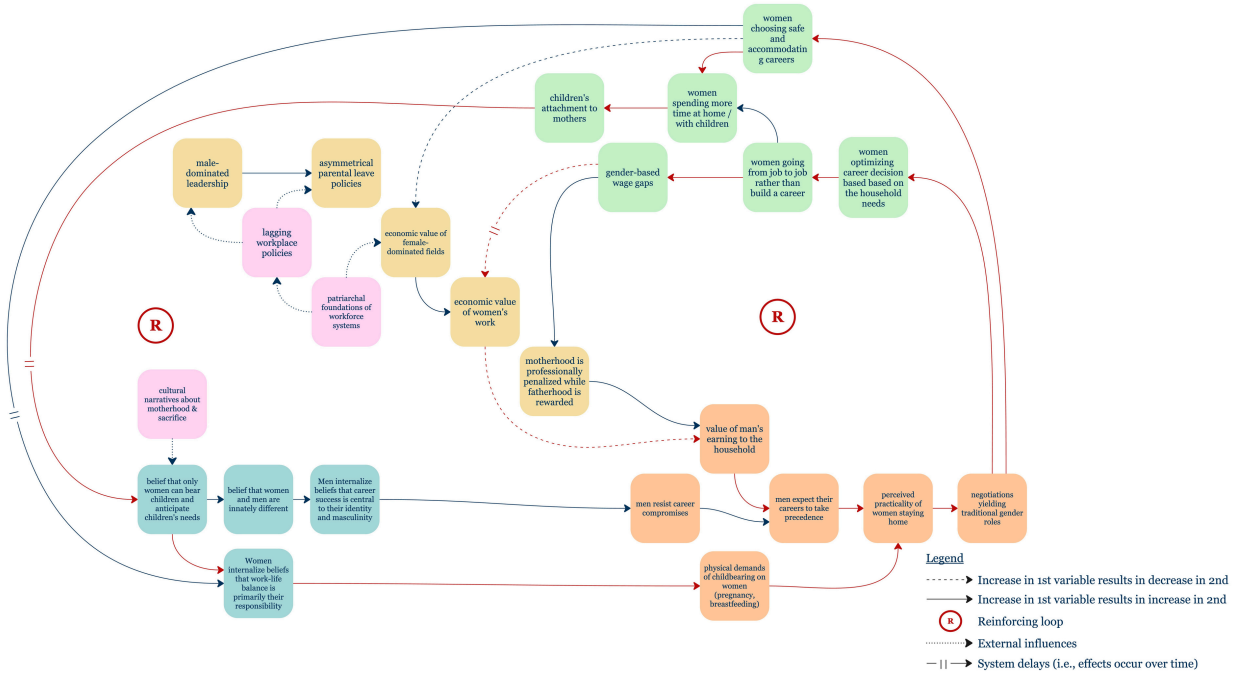

Figure 12: *Gender narratives and power relation patterns that reinforce gendered outcomes in career decisions.*

Marital Name Change Practices

Nearly 80% of North American women still take their husband's surname upon marriage (Lin, 2023). Even in Quebec, where civil law prohibits married women from adopting their husbands' surnames legally, many use their husbands' names socially. Almost all children receive their father's surname exclusively, regardless of the mother's naming choice (MacEacheron, 2024).

Unlike other gendered decisions requiring ongoing negotiation, surname changes represent a seemingly one-time choice with permanent symbolic significance. As Figure 13 illustrates, the persistence of traditional naming patterns partly stems from resource disparities that create practical barriers for women who want to keep their birth names. Women face contradictory pressures: those who change names often experience professional identity disruption and disconnection from previous accomplishments, while those who retain birth names encounter administrative burdens and documentation challenges that make name retention practically difficult.

Power structures presume patrilineal family formation, with family integration expectations framing women as "joining" men's families. Status dimensions position male surnames as the primary carriers of family history, while questioning the authenticity of families with different surnames. Media and cultural messages overwhelmingly normalize women taking their husband's names, making alternative choices appear politically charged.

Women internalize beliefs that taking their husband's name demonstrates commitment and unity, while men view name continuity as their right and responsibility, rarely considering changing their own names.

In negotiations, women feel responsible for demonstrating commitment through adaptation, prioritizing practical considerations over personal identity. Men perceive name retention as rejection of family integration and see name continuity as birthright.

The Quebec case is particularly revealing – despite legal prohibition against women changing surnames, many still use their husbands' names socially, demonstrating how deeply internalized patrilineal expectations remain. This systematic erasure of maternal lineage operates largely beneath conscious awareness, representing the literal inscription of patriarchal lineage into family formation.

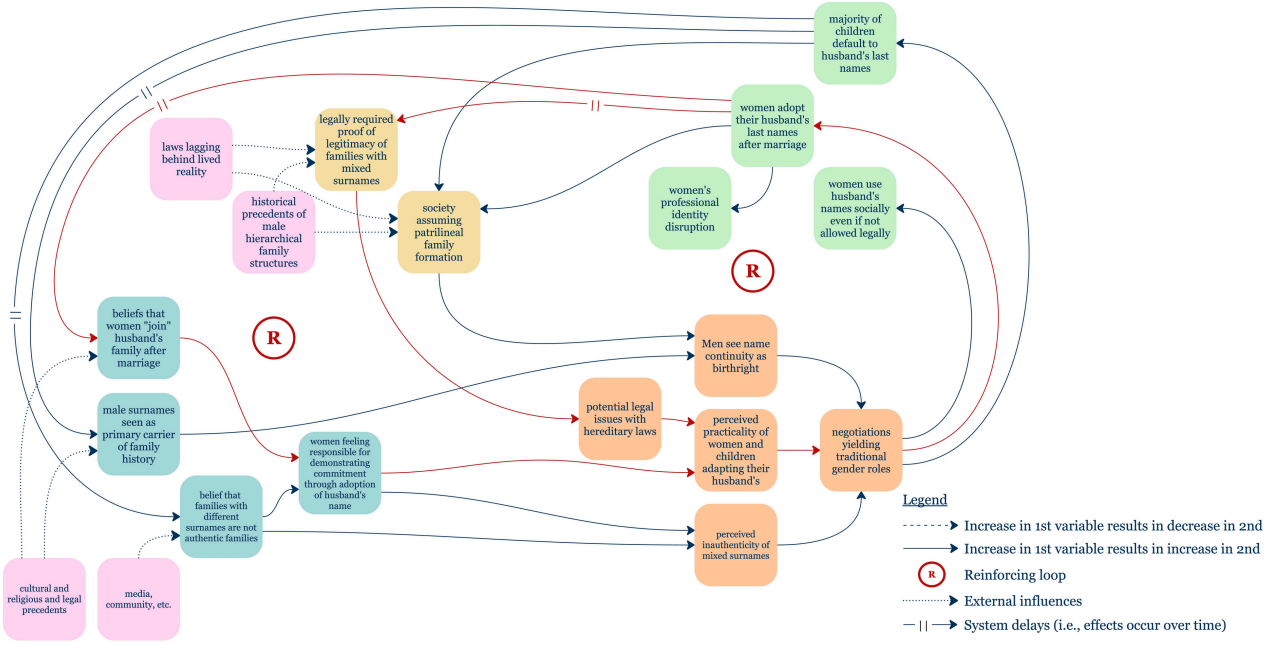

Figure 13: *Gender narratives and power relation patterns that reinforce gendered outcomes in marital name change practices.*

Financial Decision-Making

Many couples demonstrate a division where men typically have greater responsibility for major financial decisions and investment strategies (i.e., "orchestration" of long-term goals) while women more often manage routine household spending (i.e., "implementation") (Hitczenko, 2021). As one Hazara woman participant explained, "My husband expects me to be responsible for chores and raising kids and he must be responsible for financial and living decisions."

As Figure 14 illustrates, resource disparities include women's gaps in financial literacy, limited access to financial opportunities, and overall worse financial outcomes than men. These interact with historical precedents of male financial control – not long ago, married women in some Canadian provinces could not open bank accounts without their husband's permission.

Status dimensions compound these disparities: financial expertise is culturally coded as masculine, with identical financial advice perceived as more credible when attributed to a man.

Women internalize beliefs that they have less natural aptitude for financial matters, prioritizing security over growth and viewing some degree of financial dependency as normal. Men internalize beliefs that they possess natural financial aptitude, viewing financial control as part of their provider responsibility, with sharing financial decision authority often feeling emasculating.

In negotiations, women frequently underestimate their financial capabilities while men overestimate their expertise. The perceived "practicality" of men handling major financial decisions becomes self-reinforcing as women have fewer opportunities to develop financial skills through practice.

This arrangement persists even when women out-earn their partners, demonstrating how financial control connects to gender identity rather than economic contribution. As men maintain control over consequential financial decisions that build wealth and security, women's knowledge gaps persist as they focus on time-consuming routine tasks. The consequence is not just current inequality but the systematic production of future economic insecurity along gender lines.

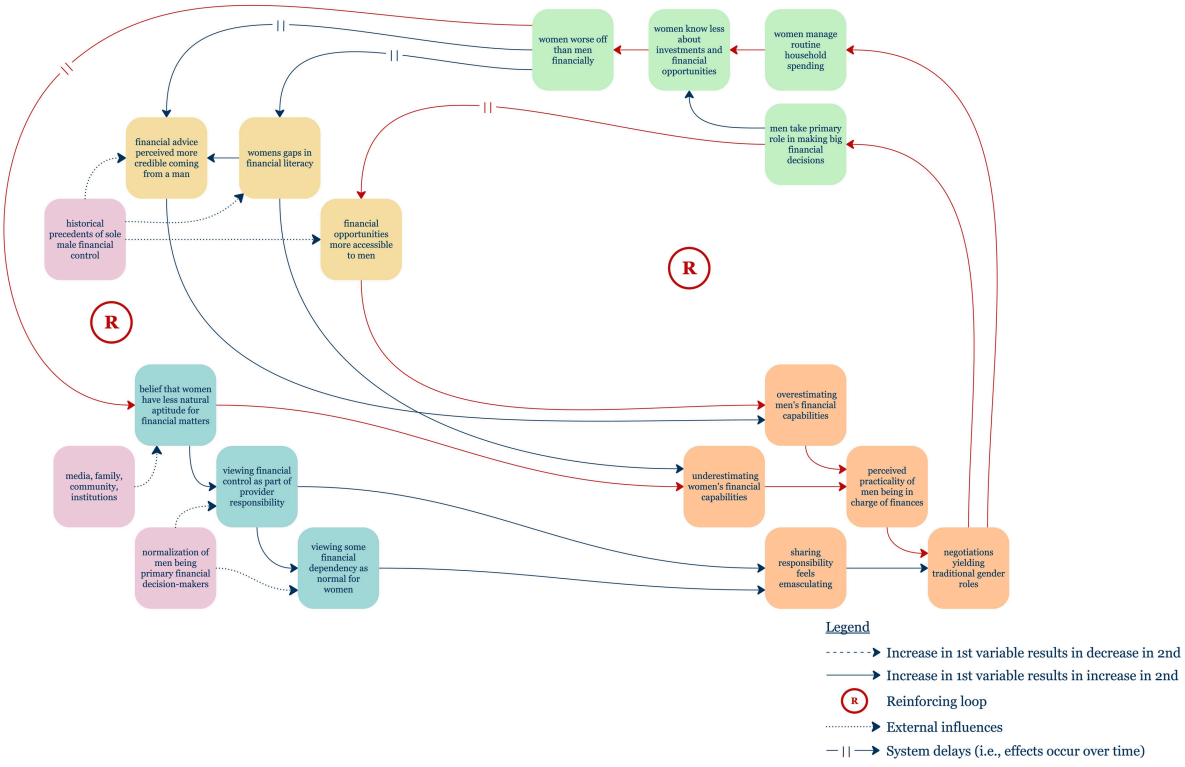

Figure 14: *Gender narratives and power relation patterns that reinforce gendered outcomes in financial decisions.*

Reproductive Decisions

Women manage contraception almost exclusively since only 2 of 12+ birth control methods are designed for men (Campo-Engelstein, 2012). For the estimated 16% of Canadians experiencing infertility, women undergo over 90% of fertility treatments even when male factors contribute equally to conception difficulties (O'Reilly, 2025). As one Hazara woman participant reflected, "My mom always made me feel like I had a clock as a woman."

As Figure 15 illustrates, these patterns persist through fundamental resource disparities: women bear the biological investment of pregnancy and childbirth, most contraceptive methods are designed for female bodies, and female bodies remain at the center of political debates about reproductive rights.

Critically, women and men face profoundly unequal biological windows and anxieties around reproduction. Women confront narrower fertility timeframes and declining egg quality after 35, creating urgency that men – who can father children well into their 60s or beyond—simply do not experience. This biological reality translates into disproportionate social pressure and anxiety for women, who must balance career development and partner selection against a perceived reproductive deadline.

These realities interact with power structures that create different standards for women's and men's reproductive autonomy.

Status dimensions further shape this dynamic as motherhood is frequently presented as women's primary purpose and fulfillment – a sentiment not matched for men and fatherhood. Women without children face significantly more social questioning and stigma than childless men, reinforcing beliefs that reproductive interests are biologically different between genders.

Women often internalize beliefs that motherhood is central to feminine identity, feeling primary responsibility for contraception despite limited male knowledge about contraceptive options. Men typically view fatherhood as confirming masculinity but not defining their identity, considering reproductive responsibility primarily women's domain based on perceived biological differences.

In negotiations, women frequently face identity pressure to pursue motherhood where women's "biological clock" become negotiation grounds, with the "practicality" of women taking primary responsibility for reproductive challenges seeming self-evident rather than socially constructed.

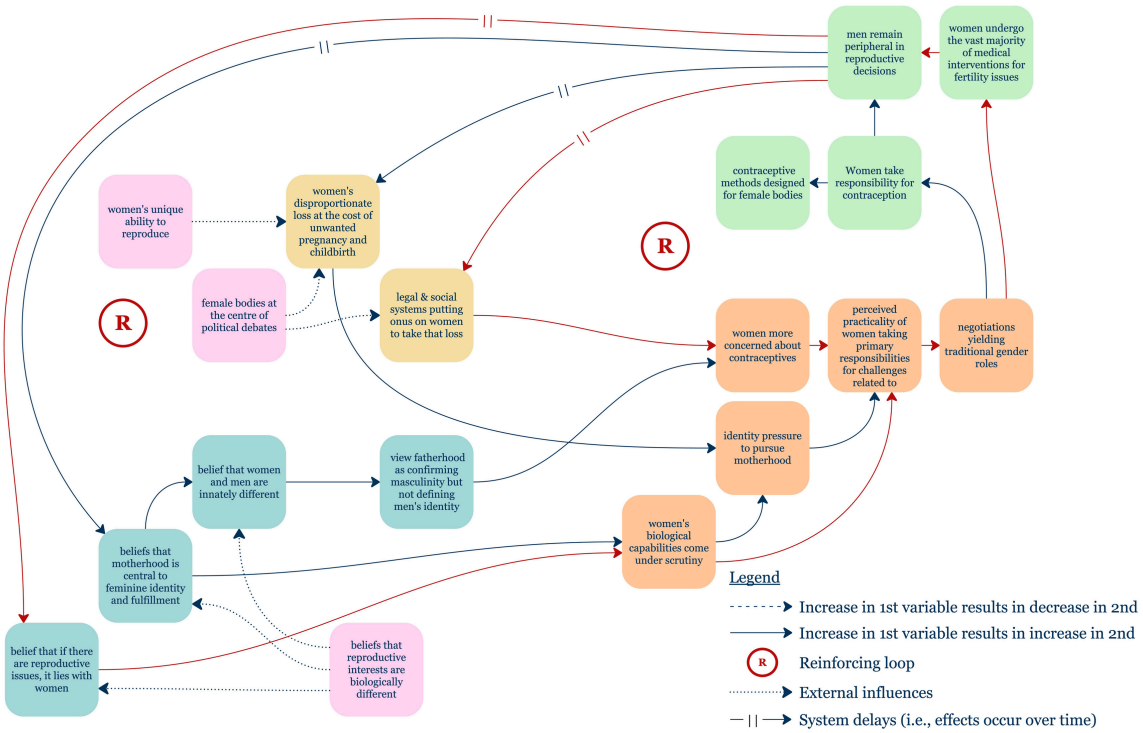

Figure 15: *Gender narratives and power relation patterns that reinforce gendered outcomes in reproductive decisions.*

Tolerance for Intimate Partner Violence

Canadian statistics reveal the gendered nature of intimate partner violence (IPV): 44% of women and girls who had ever been in an intimate partner relationship reported experiencing psychological, physical, or sexual abuse since age 15, with women significantly more likely than men to experience the most severe forms (Government of Canada, 2024c). Women are four times more likely than men to have ever feared a partner (37% versus 9%), and twice as likely to experience IPV on a daily or almost daily basis (Government of Canada, 2024c). Despite these alarming statistics, 80% of IPV cases go unreported to police, with women only reporting 22% of incidents (Government of Canada, 2024c). As one Hazara woman participant observed, "Biggest challenge that Hazara communities face in adjusting in Canada is seeing women make decisions for themselves and speaking up for themselves and going against the norm. Some girls were abused because of this."

As Figure 16 illustrates, patterns of violence and tolerance reflect a self-reinforcing cycle that builds upon all other forms of gender inequality discussed in the previous sections. Resource disparities create vulnerability through economic dependency on abusive partners, childcare responsibilities that complicate separation, and physical vulnerability due to size and strength differences. These practical constraints limit women's ability to leave abusive situations.

Power structures further constrain women's options through immigration status leverage that abusers can exploit, religious and cultural beliefs that normalize male authority (sometimes even justifying violence), and inadequate institutional responses including limited enforcement of protection orders. Status dimensions compound these challenges: family preservation is often prioritized over individual safety, with relationship compromise expected primarily from women. Women who leave relationships face social isolation, while victim-blaming remains prevalent in many communities.

Women often internalize beliefs that they are responsible for relationship harmony and success, viewing tolerance of emotional and physical abuse as necessary sacrifices for family stability. Many believe they can change their partners through patience and love. Men frequently internalize beliefs that control and monitoring demonstrate care and protection, viewing anger as justification for aggressive behavior and interpreting dominance as appropriate masculinity.

As abusive patterns continue, women become increasingly isolated and dependent. The high return rate to abusive relationships demonstrates how complex psychological, social, and economic forces pull women back into dangerous situations. The normalization of controlling behaviors as expressions of care shows how deeply patriarchal relationship models penetrate contemporary understandings of relationships, creating a pattern where gender-based violence is reproduced through interconnected systems of power, narrative, and negotiation.

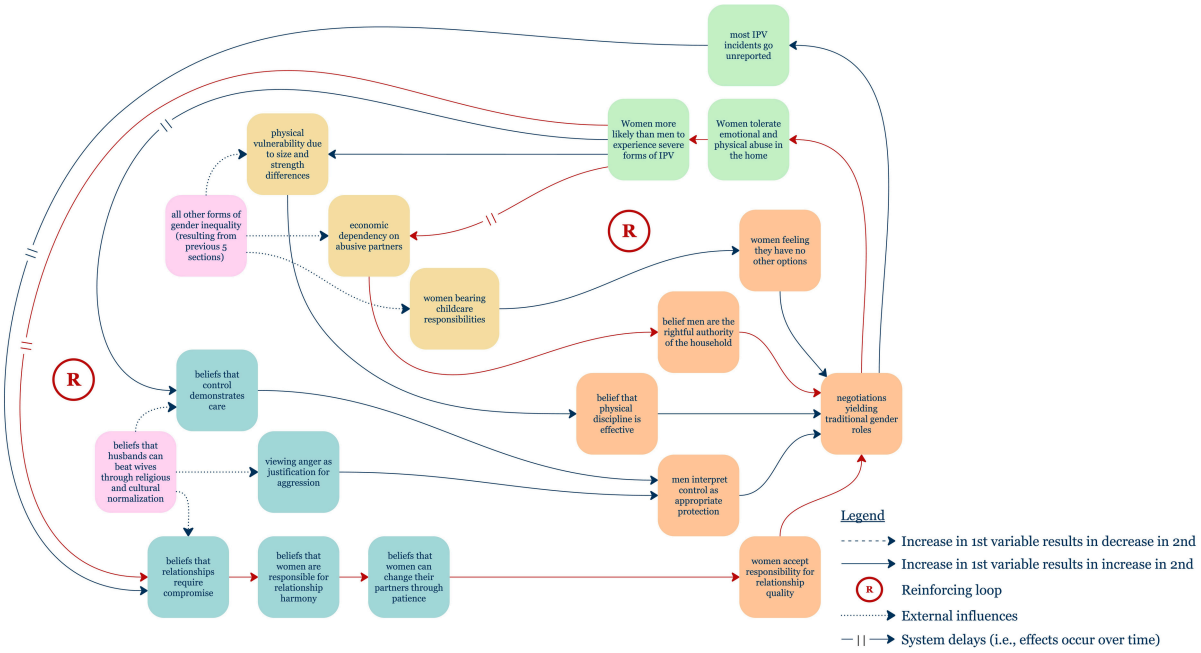

Figure 16: *Gender narratives and power relation patterns that reinforce gendered outcomes in intimate partner violence.*

Breaking the Reinforcing Cycle

Understanding the dynamics of gender negotiations provides us with critical insights into how we might disrupt the self-reinforcing cycles that perpetuate gender inequality. The patterns documented throughout this chapter – from domestic labor division to career decisions to intimate partner violence – reveal a system that consistently reproduces gender-conforming outcomes through the interaction of internal narratives and power imbalances.

When we recognize these dynamics, we gain the ability to identify strategic intervention points. Rather than seeing gendered outcomes as inevitable or as the result of countless individual choices, we can identify the specific mechanisms through which inequality reproduces itself. We can then design targeted interventions that address these mechanisms directly.

The systems analysis makes clear that when either gender narratives or power relations shift, the entire system can begin to move in a different direction. The same self-reinforcing dynamic that currently maintains inequality could, if redirected, begin to reinforce equality instead. For instance, when women gain economic power through career advancement, this can shift household negotiations about domestic labor, which creates more time for further career development, establishing a virtuous cycle rather than a constraining one.

This understanding makes clear the direction in which we must move the system: toward narratives that expand rather than constrain human possibility, toward power relations characterized by partnership rather than dominance, and toward outcomes that enable all genders to develop their full range of capacities. By addressing both the internal narratives and the external structures that maintain current arrangements, we can create conditions where gender negotiations produce more equitable outcomes.

The next chapter explores this possibility through the eyes of Hazara women themselves, as they envision futures where gender systems have evolved in alignment with their deepest hopes. These visions provide not just inspiration but concrete direction for the changes we might pursue. Understanding the current system, how we arrived here, and the future we desire positions us to develop a concrete plan for bridging the gap between present reality and future possibility.

Reimagining Gender Possibilities

Envisioning Desired Futures

Having mapped the current gender system in the previous chapter – identifying how gender narratives, power imbalances, and negotiation biases create and maintain gender-conforming outcomes – we now turn our attention to the future. To develop a comprehensive understanding of possible gender futures, I employed three complementary approaches.

I conducted a horizon scan identifying significant trends reshaping gender dynamics in Canadian society. This scan focused on technological, social, political, economic, and cultural shifts with potential to transform current gender arrangements. I invited Hazara women to write letters to their present-day selves from the year 2050, describing futures where gender roles have evolved in alignment with their deepest hopes. Participants detailed transformed gender narratives, rebalanced power relations, and equitable outcomes across personal, professional, and community domains. I synthesized these findings through the Three Horizons methodology, which maps transitions between current systems (Horizon 1), emergent innovations (Horizon 2), and desired futures (Horizon 3). This framework helps identify pathways from present challenges to preferred outcomes, considering both obstacles and opportunities.

Together, these approaches provide a multidimensional view of gender futures – revealing both what seems likely based on current trajectories and what is desirable based on lived experiences of gender constraints.

Horizon 3: Visions of a Gender-Transformed 2050

Horizon 3 represents our desired future vision for 2050. Drawing from both Hazara women's letters and expanded possibilities that address deeper systemic transformation, this vision describes a world where gender operates differently at narrative, power, and outcome levels, which are outlined below.

Transformed Gender Narratives

Freedom of Choice Replacing Biological Determinism

By 2050, biological sex no longer dictates appropriate life paths or capabilities. As one Hazara woman describes, "Women now pursue education and careers without resistance or guilt. The sacrifices your mother made – giving up her mathematics degree, prioritizing family over herself – are no longer expected of women." The narrative that biology determines destiny has been replaced by one emphasizing individual aptitude and preference regardless of gender.

This freedom extends beyond career to all life domains. "The guilt and shame that society makes you feel for not being married already or having children? That has changed. They have now realized that you are meant for more than just bearing children." Partnership decisions are similarly liberated: "Afghan daughters are no longer pressured into marriages dictated by family honor; instead, they choose partners who respect them as individuals."

My expanded vision takes this further: gender itself has diminished as a primary framing device for human interaction. While biological sex remains relevant for reproductive and some health contexts, it no longer serves as an immediate social categorization system. This transformation makes it harder to impose differential expectations or constraints based on gender, as the very cognitive shortcut that facilitates gendered treatment has been weakened.

Redefined Masculinity Embracing Vulnerability

Men's possibilities have expanded dramatically. "Afghan families openly discuss emotions, therapy is embraced, and fathers, brothers, and sons are learning to be emotionally present and accountable", writes one participant. Another describes "the normalization of men expressing vulnerability and emotional depth" as "one of the greatest victories" of the transformed gender landscape.

This shift recognizes that current gender constraints harm everyone: "Men, too, were trapped by the expectation of being 'protectors', carrying a responsibility that was never fair to them either." By 2050, emotional intelligence, nurturing capacity, and expressive range are cultivated across genders.

In my expanded vision, the very concepts of "feminine" and "masculine" traits have been abandoned as organizing principles for human behavior. Qualities like nurturing, assertiveness, empathy, and leadership are recognized as human capacities distributed across all genders, with individual variation far exceeding gender-based patterns.

Family as Shared Joy Rather Than Women's Burden

Family responsibilities have been reconceptualized as shared endeavors rather than primarily women's domain. "Parenthood is no longer seen as solely a mother's duty; it is a shared experience, responsibility, and joy for both partners." Men are equally engaged in the emotional and practical aspects of family life: "Your husband spends quality time with your children and works on showing up consistently as an emotionally available paternal figure in their lives." Perhaps most significantly, the gendered judgments around parenting choices have disappeared: "Your partner took on the caregiver role for a while because at the time, you both thrived in your own ways. And guess what? No one called you a 'shitty mom' or guilted you into quitting your job and making your entire existence about this child."

Wholeness Beyond Relationship Status

By 2050, personhood is no longer conditional on relationship status, particularly for women. “They are encouraged to feel whole on their own, without the need to be someone’s wife”, writes one participant. “Marriage is no longer the peak purpose in young women’s lives within the Hazara community.” Women “can choose to remain single and not have children without being labelled as ‘expired’ or alienated for their choices.” This represents a profound shift from narratives that depict women’s lives as incomplete without marriage and motherhood, toward recognition of multiple valid life paths and sources of fulfillment.

Freedom from Shame and Self-Doubt

The letters consistently envision liberation from the shame and self-doubt that currently enforce gender conformity. “I know you feel a lot of pressure right now to minimize yourself and hold back in order to meet the world’s expectations of being submissive.” By 2050, this pressure has lifted: “Women are no longer burdened by the expectation of self-sacrifice as their primary role.”

For women with intersectional identities, this liberation is particularly powerful: “Your validity is not questioned because you are a female but rather used as a strength. The feeling that you have right now – of feeling apologetic and overcompensating because of the fear of bruising others’ egos? That’s all gone. You don’t have to wonder whether you are good enough because you are not only a female but also Afghan.”

Rebalanced Power Relations

Safety as Universal Right Rather than Women’s Responsibility

Physical safety has been redefined from women’s responsibility to universal right: “There was a time when women had to think twice before walking alone at night or speaking too boldly in public. But over time, through policies, education, and cultural shifts, safety has become a right rather than a privilege or a gendered responsibility.”

Intimate partner violence has dramatically declined: “We hear less and less of Afghan men being alcoholics and being violence prone.” This transformation addresses one of the most extreme power imbalances in current gender relations.

Family as Partnership Rather than Hierarchy

Family structures have evolved from hierarchies to genuine partnerships: “Families function as true partnerships, where both men and women equally share caregiving, household responsibilities, and financial contributions.” Previous restrictions on women’s autonomy, particularly in traditional communities, have been recognized as harmful: “Fathers are beginning to see that restricting their daughters from receiving education has brought detrimental harm to the family structure.”

Institutional and Positional Equality

Beyond family, institutional structures have transformed to accommodate diverse needs equally: “Workplaces have adapted to real work-life balance, making space for parents, caregivers, and mental health. There is no need to prove your worth twice over because of your gender or background. Pay gaps have closed, and women in the workforce stand shoulder to shoulder with men.”

Women’s contributions are valued across domains: “Women in our community are not just caretakers but have transitioned into creatives, visionaries and innovators.” Even religious leadership, traditionally among the most male-dominated domains, has opened: “You will be thrilled to learn a woman was appointed as Imam.”

Voice and Courage Valued

Women’s perspectives are equally valued in community discourse. The courage to challenge unequal systems is recognized and honored: “Looking back, I see the strength it took for you to stand firm in your beliefs, to be transparent with your mother, to challenge traditions that didn’t serve you. Keep going. Your courage is shaping the future.”

Equitable Outcomes

Genuine Work-Life Balance

By 2050, domestic responsibilities are genuinely shared: “I am very lucky to have found the most caring, kind, and supportive husband. He has been with me through thick and thin, and as much as he would say it’s equal between us, he takes on more responsibility in the house, and in our lives.”

Critically, the mental load of household management is no longer primarily women’s burden: “You live in a household where you don’t have to take on the mental load of doing everything. You have an equal partner who not only shows up for you by doing things but also takes initiative in what needs to be done, again letting you use your brain for the things that matter to you.”

Career Advancement Without Motherhood Penalties

Systemic changes have eliminated motherhood penalties: "There is equal paternity and maternity leave which allows men to step up in their involvement in raising children. This systemic change has had a ripple effect all over the corporate world. Having children no longer hinders your career."

These changes enable women to pursue both family and career without sacrifice: "You have been able to thrive because the system has changed. It didn't penalize you for also wanting to start a family. You were able to take the time you needed without jeopardizing your career."

Diverse Family Formations Equally Valued

Multiple family forms are equally respected: "Some women are not married, some have kids without marriage, some don't have kids, and more and more live their lives how they choose to." Parental responsibilities are shared equitably: "Parenthood is no longer a woman's burden; fathers are just as involved, just as nurturing. Childcare, cooking, and financial planning are shared responsibilities."

Marriage has been decentered as women's primary achievement: "Marriage is no longer an imposed milestone; instead, it is a choice, one of many equally valued paths. Women who choose not to marry or have children are no longer questioned, judged, or pressured."

Reproductive autonomy has expanded: "No longer do women feel shame for seeking autonomy over their own bodies. Surrogacy, IVF, adoption, and single motherhood are equally valid paths to parenthood."

Cultural Identity Evolution Rather Than Preservation

Cultural identity has evolved rather than remaining fixed in traditional gender arrangements: "Our community has embraced a deeper understanding of equality that honors, rather than rejects, cultural heritage. Hazara identity is no longer confined to outdated gender expectations."

This evolution represents a sophisticated reconciliation of cultural connection and gender equality: "For years, I've watched our community struggle through the balance of keeping our culture alive in foreign lands, while realizing the broken state of relationships in our families. With time to heal from our past traumas and re-examining our traditions to be used as teaching tools has further evolved and progressed our community."

Professional Achievement and Authentic Self-Expression

Women have achieved positions previously inaccessible: "I'm currently a CEO at my own company. I did it and I couldn't have done it without the support of my husband, family, and friends." Beyond specific achievements, professional freedom enables authentic self-discovery: "This has helped you understand your own identity better, now that you have a chance to pursue freely what it is you truly desire."

Intersectional identities are reframed from disadvantages to unique strengths: "You don't have to wonder whether you are good enough because you are not only a female but also Afghan. This is the kind of world that thrives on intersectionality rather than using it to create systems of oppression."

Religious Inclusion Transforming Faith Experience

Women's inclusion in religious leadership has transformed their spiritual connection: "You will be thrilled to learn a woman was appointed as Imam. This has opened up a whole new perspective about your relationship with your faith. You now attend prayer ceremonies more often as you feel more connected to your faith now that women are treated as equally capable of being religious leaders within the community."

Horizon 1: Current System Under Strain

Horizon 1 represents our current systems, including the economic system, gender system, legal and social systems, showing increasing signs of misfit with emerging needs and conditions. Below, we identify key systemic tensions and contradictions that reveal how the established systems are becoming decreasingly viable and actively breaking down in multiple domains.

The Educational-Occupational Paradox

Canadian women have represented 58% of university students since 2001 and earn 60% of undergraduate degrees, yet this educational advantage fails to translate into proportional economic power (Frenette & Zeman, 2007). Women hold just 21% of executive officer positions (MacDougall et al., 2024), comprise only 29% of board members at TSX-listed companies (Levine et al., 2025), and experience an overall gender pay gap of 16% (Howard, 2024), with significantly worse outcomes for women with intersectional identities (Islam et al., 2024). This fundamental contradiction shows a system failing to convert women's human capital investments into economic and decision-making power.

Women are increasingly experiencing burnout and stress related to work indicating they have considered leaving their fields due to structural barriers that are remnants of gender bias, like unequal opportunities, devaluation, and insufficient organizational support (Minerva, 2023; Wilson, 2023). The tension between women's educational investments and limited professional returns generates increasing resistance to traditional gender arrangements, especially among younger generations.

The Reproductive-Economic Contradiction

Canada faces record-low fertility rates (1.33 children per woman in 2022) alongside severe economic penalties for motherhood (Government of Canada, 2024a). Each child reduces a woman's lifetime earnings by approximately 4%, while men with children earn 6% more than childless men (Budig, 2014). Simultaneously, Canada faces labor challenges, with 77% of Canadian businesses reporting difficulty finding qualified workers across many sectors, like IT, healthcare, consumer goods, etc. (Wilson, 2025), creating an unsustainable contradiction between economic needs and the penalties imposed on reproduction.

The fertility rate continues to fall as women delay or forgo childbearing due to economic constraints (Stahl, 2020). Employers face growing challenges while maintaining practices that sideline mothers, like quiet quitting, low productivity, and burnout (The Prosperity Project, 2022). This tension creates a demographic crisis where neither economic productivity nor population sustainability can be maintained under current arrangements.

The Care Work Devaluation Crisis

Canada's aging population is creating exponentially growing care needs while the system continues to devalue care work. Statistics Canada's 2019 analysis valued unpaid household work at 25-37% of GDP, yet it has received no economic recognition (Government of Canada, 2022). Canada also reports that women are disproportionately represented in the informal paid care economy, which is characterized by low pay, low status, poor working conditions and limited social protections (Government of Canada, 2017). Meanwhile, care worker shortages are reaching critical levels, with 23% of long-term care positions unfilled and projections showing 30% fewer available unpaid caregivers by 2050 (National Institute on Ageing, 2020).

Women are increasingly refusing to accept unpaid or underpaid care roles, creating growing gaps in both family and institutional care. The COVID-19 pandemic exposed and accelerated this system breakdown, with over half a million women leaving the workforce due to care responsibilities they could no longer sustain within existing structures (Skrzypinski, 2021).

The Gender Identity Polarization

Canadian society is experiencing unprecedented polarization in gender belief systems. While an increasing number of Canadians identify as non-binary and conversations about queer identities are becoming more mainstream, at the same time, we are seeing an intensified political and cultural backlash against "wokeness" and feminism (Angus Reid Institute, 2023; Bowden, 2025). In anticipation of Trump's crackdown on wokeness, many companies slashed programs for DEI, that have been critical for progress for women in marginalized communities (J. Roberts, 2025). This cultural polarization is based in gender because more women report being progressive and more men report taking a turn towards conservative values, creating incompatible gender expectations across different social spheres (Montpetit, 2025).

The Digital Gender Contradiction

Digital environments simultaneously provide spaces for gender liberation and intensify gender constraints. Social media platforms amplify both feminist discourse and misogynistic content (like the "manosphere"), with algorithms promoting gender polarization for engagement (Hammack & Manago, 2025). 85% of women online report witnessing technology-facilitated gender-based violence (TFGBV), which can range from online harassment to image-based abuse and cyberstalking, with 38% of women experiencing it personally (O'Brien, 2024). These increasingly polarizing content has led to a rise in incidents of knife crimes and murders of young girls by young boys in the UK (Cordeiro, 2025). At the same time, digital spaces provide vital connection to support networks and alternative gender possibilities, like the #MeToo movement that transformed gender conversations in the context of workplaces (Bremond, 2023).

The Family Structure Misalignment

Canadian census data shows an increasingly diverse set of family structures, including multigenerational households, 2SLGBTQ+ parenting arrangements, and families formed through adoption or step-relationships, yet the "nuclear family" remains the presumed arrangement across government policies and social services (Mitchell, 2023; The Vanier Institute of the Family, 2024a).

Child support systems propagate gendered assumptions about single parenting, and inheritance laws fail to accommodate non-nuclear family arrangements (Cárdenas, 2020). The legal response has typically extended marriage as the "gold standard" to more couples rather than recognizing distinct family forms on their own terms (Leckey, 2009). These highlight the limits of private family law and demonstrates the need for robust social programs to support today's diverse family structures.

A System at Breaking Point

These fundamental contradictions and tensions reveal our systems that can no longer maintain coherence or functionality. The statistical

evidence demonstrates not merely incremental pressure but active system breakdown across multiple domains. Women's educational achievements without proportional advancement, critical care needs without economic recognition, and diverse family forms without appropriate support structures all point to a system that cannot adapt to emerging realities.

The inability of the current gender system to resolve these contradictions creates growing opportunities for transformative change. As existing arrangements fail to meet social needs, the search for alternatives accelerates. The next section explores the emerging innovations and bridges that are arising in response to these systemic failures.

Horizon 2: Innovations & Systems to Preserve

Horizon 2 represents emergent innovations and approaches that connect our strained present system to our desired futures in addition to allowing us to reflect on aspects of the present system that we may want to preserve.

Key Bridging Innovations

This section identifies key innovations showing early promise for transforming gender narratives and power relations, which are by no means exhaustive. The innovations described here offer windows into broader patterns of change taking shape across diverse communities, organizations, and governments all over the world.

Collective Care Infrastructure

Community-based approaches to distributing care beyond individual households are emerging through innovative models that recognize, reduce, and redistribute care work. Bogotá's groundbreaking "Manzanas del Cuidado" (Care Blocks) program, launched in 2020, offers free services to unpaid caregivers within walking distance of their homes. With 20 blocks across the city, the program has reached over 400,000 family caregivers, providing wellness activities, professional training, and temporary childcare. The program has provided educational courses to more than 12,000 women and helped over 500 obtain high school diplomas (Chatterjee, 2023).

In Africa, the IDRC-supported "Scaling Care Innovations in Africa" initiative is implementing similar approaches across 15 countries. In Kenya, the Tiny Totos daycare-franchise model serves 8,000 caregivers in Nairobi's informal settlements, while the Aga Khan University is co-designing approximately 100 early-childhood development centers with nomadic and pastoral communities. Freetown, Sierra Leone is adapting Bogotá's care-block model to create municipal "one-stop shops" for childcare, eldercare, and critical services to reduce the unpaid care burden for low-income women (International Development Research Centre, 2024).

Meanwhile, cooperative models for care are emerging in smaller communities. In Channel-Port Aux Basques, Canada, the Growing Our Future Childcare Cooperative established the town's first regulated childcare center through a community-owned model where parents and community members purchase $100 shares. This cooperative approach has allowed concerned citizens and service users to collaborate on addressing the critical shortage of childcare, enabling parents to return to work while investing profits back into the community (Munden & Hill, n.d.).

Implications for gender narratives and power relations: These collective care infrastructure innovations fundamentally challenge gender narratives that position care as women's private responsibility and natural domain. By making care visible as essential public infrastructure rather than individual family obligation, they disrupt the narrative that caregiving is an inherently female capacity.

From a power relations perspective, these innovations enable women's workforce participation by redistributing care responsibilities, reducing time poverty that has maintained women's economic disadvantage. Politically, programs like Bogotá's explicitly frame care as a right and public good requiring governmental support, elevating care concerns from private troubles to matters of public policy.

Gender-Adaptive Work Design

Innovative approaches to workplace organization are emerging that challenge traditional structures originally built around masculine life patterns. Conventional workplace designs and expected work hours predominantly accommodate traditional male norms, treating women as "broken men" rather than designing for diverse human needs. The shift toward more flexible work arrangements has been accelerated by technological advancements and global events, like the COVID-19 pandemic. Research shows that remote workers were 4.4% more productive than their in-office counterparts due to quieter environments, fewer interruptions, and the ability to structure workdays according to individual productivity patterns (Piscione & Drean, 2023).

Along with the hybrid work model that offer flexibility for employees to work from various locations, four-day workweek trials are demonstrating significant benefits for work-life balance without productivity loss, with particular advantages for those balancing career and care responsibilities (Hunter, 2024; Reyt, 2024).

There is also a shift in mindset in terms of what workers are willing to tolerate in their work lives as emphasis is placed on well-being and purpose, leading to the normalization of previously unconventional work practices like remote collaboration, flexible hours, and relaxed dress codes.

Implications for gender narratives and power relations: These workplace innovations fundamentally challenge narratives about what constitutes an "ideal worker". Traditional workplaces were designed around masculine life patterns that presumed minimal domestic responsibilities and uninterrupted career progression. By recognizing diverse human needs rather than treating women's requirements as exceptions, these innovations shift the underlying narrative from "accommodation" to "optimization for all".

From a power relations perspective, rigid workplace structures have historically reinforced gender hierarchies by privileging those (predominantly men) who could conform to inflexible expectations. The shift toward results-based evaluation rather than presence-based assessment particularly redistributes opportunity toward those with caregiving responsibilities.

Women-Led Innovations in Civic Spaces

Across the globe, women are reclaiming power in civic spaces through innovative approaches. Barcelona's transformation into a "feminist city" under Mayor Ada Colau, the city's first woman mayor, exemplifies how women's leadership can reshape urban governance. Colau's administration instituted a "feminization of politics" requiring gender perspective integration in every policy area, from budgeting to urban planning. This feminist data-driven approach has produced concrete innovations: pedestrian-focused "superblocks" that reclaim space from cars (transforming busy junctions into parks, landscaping, and play areas for everyone), an orthogonal bus network designed to complement the subway system for easier neighborhood-to-neighborhood travel, and urban design guidelines that enhance safety through better visibility and maintenance of public spaces (Caravantes & Lombardo, 2024; Seitz, 2020).

Evidence from India shows that domestic violence reporting increased by 21.7% in cities with women's police stations, as they are less likely to impose harmful gender norms on survivors, and in South Africa, activist Joanie Fredericks launched the Cape Flats, a women-operated taxi service to help women commute safely without facing harassment (Rodriguez, 2021). Similarly, pharmacies in France, Spain, Germany, Argentina, and the UK introduced code words like "mask 19" and "Ask for Ani" to help women discreetly signal for help during lockdowns. Mobile technology has become a critical tool, with apps like Italy's YouPol and Pakistan's Safety app allowing users to discreetly request assistance (Rodriguez, 2021).

Implications for gender narratives and power relations: These women-led transformations fundamentally challenge traditional gender narratives about public space and decision-making power. Barcelona's approach to urban planning recognizes that seemingly neutral design choices – from transportation routes to street lighting – are laden with gendered assumptions that have historically privileged male patterns of movement and use.

From a power relations perspective, these innovations redistribute control over how public spaces are conceptualized, designed, and used. Women-run services and women-led urban planning shift authority from male-dominated professions and institutions to more diverse decision-makers with lived experience, like women.

Cultural Evolution Frameworks

Communities are developing approaches to maintaining cultural identity that allow for evolution rather than static preservation, recognizing that cultural preservation and gender equality can be complementary rather than opposing forces.
Indigenous peoples provide important leadership and models in this area. Cultural Survival's gender policy offers a framework grounded in Indigenous perspectives, acknowledging that "external forces have imposed harmful ideologies on Indigenous communities" and that communities must distinguish between authentic cultural gender roles and those resulting from colonial influence (Cultural Survival, 2021).

Diaspora communities are implementing similar approaches through the development of hybrid cultural identities whether through fusion cuisine, music collaborations, or fashion trends, that allow diaspora communities to move beyond binary frameworks of assimilation versus preservation (Ahmed & Hari, 2023).

Implications for gender narratives and power relations: These approaches transform gender narratives by creating space to distinguish between essential cultural values and historically contingent gender arrangements. By enabling communities to identify which gender practices represent authentic cultural values versus colonial impositions, they facilitate cultural evolution that maintains identity while advancing equality.

From a power relations perspective, this work redistributes cultural authority by ensuring that the evolution of cultural practices includes diverse voices, building pathways where cultural identity and gender equality are complementary rather than contradictory.

Reproductive Technology Autonomy

Egg freezing technology has transformed from experimental to mainstream, with treatments in Canada increasing from just 94 in 2013 to over 1,524 by 2022, allowing women to "press pause on parenthood" until they feel ready to conceive (Braich et al., 2024). Employer-sponsored fertility benefits are emerging as a significant workplace innovation. The University of British Columbia recently introduced coverage up to $40,000 for fertility treatments including egg freezing and IVF, while companies like Scotiabank, CIBC, and Telus have also begun providing coverage (MacNaughton, 2022).

Early-stage artificial womb technology ("biobag") has successfully supported extremely premature lambs to full development, with human trials possible in a few years (M. Roberts, 2017; Romanis, 2018). Scientists have also been able to create synthetic human embryo models using

stem cells rather than eggs or sperm, pushing our understanding of the biological process of conception (Devlin, 2023).

Implications for gender narratives and power relations: These reproductive innovations fundamentally challenge traditional narratives linking reproduction exclusively to women's bodies and conventional family formations. From a power relations perspective, these technologies redistribute control over reproductive timelines, potentially loosening the biological constraints that have historically impacted women's career advancement and economic security.

Systems to Preserve & Enhance

While these emerging innovations show promise for transforming gender relations, their potential depends on building upon valuable existing systems and structures that provide essential foundations for gender equity. The tension between innovation and preservation is not a binary choice – effective transformation requires both. Identifying which elements of current systems to preserve and enhance is just as critical as spotting emerging innovations, as they provide the institutional scaffolding needed for new approaches to take root and scale.

In the current era of democratic fragility marked by Trump's presidency and rising authoritarianism globally, preserving democratic governance systems – from free elections to independent courts and press freedom – becomes a gender equity imperative requiring constant vigilance. Similarly critical are educational systems that protect academic freedom and research funding, legal frameworks that establish equality principles, and cultural infrastructures that enable communities to evolve while maintaining identity.

The institutional scaffolding for gender transformation also includes digital networks that connect marginalized communities while protecting them from harassment, community organizing structures that mobilize collective action, and organizational development systems that embed equity considerations in institutional processes. Rather than starting from zero, these existing frameworks provide the necessary foundation upon which innovations can build.

Bridging to the Future

These early signals suggest that gender system change is already underway, in alignment with Hazara women's aspirations for gender transformation. However, the path to gender transformation is neither simple nor automatic. It requires deliberate action to amplify promising innovations, address implementation challenges, and navigate critical uncertainties.

The next chapter will translate these insights into concrete strategies for individuals, communities, and institutions seeking to foster gender transformation, using the unique challenges and opportunities within Hazara diaspora communities as a gateway.

Pathways to Gender Equality

Exploring the Possibility Space

Beyond Simple Solutions

Throughout this research, I have examined how limiting gender narratives constrain women's choices and perpetuate power imbalances within Hazara diaspora communities and the broader Canadian society. The horizon scan in the previous chapter revealed points of system breakdown and emerging innovations that suggest pathways toward more equitable futures. This chapter turns to the question that matters most: What can we do to transform these systems? How might we move from insight to impact, from understanding to action?

Before outlining specific interventions, it is important to acknowledge the complexity of this overwhelming endeavor. I have spent considerable time and energy learning about the roots of gender inequality, understanding how patriarchy connects with other systems like capitalism, religious beliefs, and historical power structures, yet there is more of the system to understand, as gender pervades nearly every aspect of human life. Furthermore, it is clear that there are many possible ways to act on the conviction that inequality is not our inevitable destiny, but these strategies cannot be considered without acknowledging the diversity in the experiences of women and men and that there are no single "best" strategies for all people. In addition, I believe that gender narratives profoundly shape our worldviews and decisions, but they never act in isolation. The pursuit of gender equality happens within the larger context of our search for meaning, our connection to others, and our spiritual journey – however we understand that. For some, this journey is framed through religion, for others, through a broader spirituality or ethical framework. Regardless of our path, we are all navigating questions of purpose and connection that transcend the specific constraints we address in this work.

I want to acknowledge, too, the real difficulties and suffering that exist in our world. While writing this report, I have witnessed the horrendous treatment of Palestinians, the oppression of women and girls in Afghanistan, the accelerating climate crisis, the erosion of democratic norms, and countless other disturbing developments around the globe. Many women in my family and community have no means to engage with anything beyond themselves because they are focused on daily survival – ensuring their children are safe, that basic needs are met, that they themselves can make it through another day.

This reality calls on those of us with the privilege of safety and capacity to advocate for change. We can all justify that we do not have the time, energy, or ability, but I believe this is where the consciousness of our connection to something larger than ourselves becomes vital. I call on those who feel an intuition that they have something to give, to join me in this work. When we give, we often receive in return – and that is a beautiful aspect of this journey.

With this context in mind, I propose framing our approach to gender transformation through the metaphor of climbing a summit – the summit of gender equality. Like climbing Mount Everest – which for some, represents their true calling and their ultimate purpose – the summit of gender equality for me is a goal to which I aspire most deeply. The journey is arduous, filled with pitfalls, unknowns, and uncertainties. There are multiple paths up the mountain, and climbers at different stages need different tools and strategies. Some may never reach the summit in their lifetime, yet their progress creates pathways for those who follow.

This metaphor has its limitations in practice because Mount Everest is a real and tangible experience and has been reached by many successfully. However, the summit of gender equality is not tangible, does not look the same for every individual or society, and we do not have people to rely on who have already scaled it before us. As we embark on this exploration, remember that our understanding of gender itself continues to evolve. Through studying history, we see that what appeared static has undergone massive changes and we now stand at the precipice of an even more profound evolution, facilitated through technology and rising consciousness.

This is a time of high uncertainty, where gender comes under scrutiny because it is one of the primary systems through which we understand ourselves and relate to one another. The technology-facilitated and consciousness-facilitated fight for gender equality enables us to imagine a future where gender (along with race and other social constructs) may not be the primary categories through which we engage with one another. It is challenging to detach ourselves from the conditions of the world we are born into, but the quest for equality pushes us to imagine beyond these conditions. This does not mean forgetting what we love – rather, it means tuning into our hearts, discovering what truly resonates there, and recognizing there is more to our experience than the limitations we have inherited.

With this understanding, let us begin our ascent toward the summit of gender equality, recognizing that the journey itself transforms us and those around us, even as we work toward a destination we may never fully reach in our lifetimes.

Two Pathways to the Summit

In this section, I shift to a more direct conversational tone, addressing readers as potential individuals on this journey with me. This change in voice reflects the practical focus of these strategies, inviting personal engagement with the pathways presented below. To navigate this transformative journey beyond the limitations we have inherited, we need a map that shows both accessible starting points and profound destinations. Systems theorist Donella Meadows offers such guidance through her framework of leverage points – places to intervene in a system where small changes can produce significant transformations. Meadows' twelve leverage points range from the most tangible and visible to the most profound and transformative:

Base Camp (10–12): The most accessible starting points include changing numbers and parameters (e.g., targets), strengthening buffers (e.g.,

support networks), and transforming material structures (e.g., physical environments). These concrete changes create immediate, visible improvements.

Lower Slopes (7-9): The second set of leverage points that affect system dynamics are adjusting delays and timing in feedback processes, creating balancing feedback loops that maintain equilibrium, and amplifying reinforcing feedback loops that accelerate positive change.

Middle Ascent (4-6): Next, we have information flows (the stories and data that shape perceptions), changing the rules that govern the system, and enhancing the capacity for self-organization and emergence.

Summit Approach (1-3): The most powerful yet challenging leverage points involve redefining system goals, shifting paradigms (the mindsets from which goals and rules arise), and ultimately developing the capacity to transcend paradigms altogether, seeing beyond any single framework.

Each leverage point offers different possibilities depending on your position, resources, and purpose. While higher-leverage interventions create more profound change, they often require more time and resources and face greater resistance.

With this expedition toolkit in hand, I will map out two complementary pathways toward gender equality:

1. **The Personal Climber's Path:** For individuals seeking transformation in their own lives
2. **The Collective Builder's Path:** For those working to create change in communities, institutions, and societal structures

These pathways are not mutually exclusive – many people move between both routes at different points in their journey. Understanding these distinct approaches helps us recognize the diverse contributions necessary for collective progress toward the summit of gender equality.

The Personal Climber's Path: Individual Transformation

Like any mountain climber, the individual seeking personal transformation must first prepare themselves for the journey, understand the terrain they will be traversing, and develop the skills necessary for each stage of ascent. This path focuses on how individuals can transform their own lives, relationships, and immediate environments.

A Note on Survival Summits

Before detailing the personal path, we must acknowledge that many women face immediate threats to their physical, economic, or psychological safety. For those experiencing poverty, domestic violence, or other forms of oppression, the journey looks very different. Their everyday acts of survival and resistance are profound contributions to challenging gender systems that enable violence and economic oppression. For these climbers, the summit might first be reaching safety, then stability, before broader transformation becomes possible.

The strategies outlined below should be adapted to individual circumstances, with the recognition that the most vulnerable climbers may need specialized supports and routes. The wisdom gained through navigating hostile terrain is invaluable to our collective understanding of gender systems.

Base Camp: Assessment and Preparation (Leverage Points 10-12)

Before beginning the ascent, climbers must establish a solid foundation. This involves understanding your current position, recognizing internalized narratives, and preparing for the journey ahead.

Constants, Parameters, Numbers (Leverage Point 12):

Like climbers who carefully measure altitude, oxygen levels, and weather conditions, those beginning their gender equality journey must first accurately assess their current position. Measuring concrete patterns in your daily life makes the invisible visible – revealing how gender shapes everything from time use to decision-making authority. These measurements create a baseline from which to track progress and identify high-impact areas for change.

One powerful starting strategy is conducting a comprehensive gender audit of your personal life. This may look like tracking time use over a couple of weeks, noting patterns of time use (for example, you might discover that you spend 14+ hours weekly on meal preparation while male family members use this time for education or leisure), documenting patterns of decision-making across domains like finances, child-rearing, and social planning, and establishing personal equity metrics like "each adult should have a minimum of 5 hours weekly for self-care".
The insights gained here often provide the emotional catalyst needed to begin more difficult conversations about change, turning vague dissatisfaction into concrete evidence of inequality.

Buffer Capacity (Leverage Point 11):

Mountain climbers rely on buffer systems – extra oxygen, emergency supplies, weather margins – to withstand unexpected challenges. Similarly, individuals seeking gender transformation must build personal reserves and safety systems before challenging entrenched patterns.

Building buffer capacity means creating the resources and resilience needed to sustain you through the challenges of change. This might begin with increasing financial independence, even in small ways – opening a personal bank account, developing marketable skills, or creating an emergency fund that provides options during difficult transitions. Equally important is building emotional and social buffers through supportive relationships outside your immediate family, developing resilience practices like journaling, meditation, or therapy that help you process challenging emotions, and identifying physical safe spaces you can access when tensions rise during periods of change.

These buffers function not just as safety nets but as foundations for courage for challenging limiting gender arrangements.

Material Structures (Leverage Point 10):

The physical environment constantly reinforces or challenges gender patterns through its design, accessibility, and symbolic meanings. Climbers know that having the right equipment – from proper footwear to suitable shelter – determines what routes become possible. Similarly, the material structures in your life can either reinforce gender limitations or create openings for new possibilities.

This might involve creating a dedicated space for yourself that symbolizes something important for you, like an exercise corner or a relaxation area. It could mean reorganizing household spaces to interrupt gendered territories (moving tools from exclusively "male" spaces to common areas or ensuring everyone knows how to operate essential household systems). For women seeking to develop their mobility and freedom, it might mean acquiring independent transportation options or developing comfort in navigating public spaces previously experienced as off-limits.

These material changes are powerful because they make abstract values tangible. When you create a visible workspace for your online business or place your educational certificates prominently on the wall, these physical artifacts tell a story about who you are becoming – both to you and to others. As the saying goes, "what we see, we can be". Material structures create environments where new identities can take root and flourish.

The Lower Slopes: Building Momentum (Leverage Points 7-9)

Once the foundation is established, we begin the ascent, focusing on adjusting patterns, establishing feedback mechanisms, and creating positive momentum.

Delays and Timing (Leverage Point 9):

On mountain expeditions, timing is crucial – knowing when to advance, when to wait out a storm, and how to pace yourself for the journey. Gender transformation similarly requires strategic timing and attention to the delays between actions and results.

One of the most powerful aspects of timing to address is the mismatch between gender-specific timelines imposed by culture and our authentic developmental needs. Many Hazara women reported feeling rushed toward marriage and motherhood during their educational. Recalibrating these timelines might involve creating a personal developmental roadmap that reflects your genuine readiness for life transitions rather than external expectations.

Equally important is patience with the gradual nature of gender transformation. Like altitude acclimatization, meaningful change often requires allowing time for adjustment between significant shifts. Celebrating small wins along your journey – the first time your partner takes full responsibility for a family gathering or the first time you get a day for self-care – creates motivation that sustains you through the inevitable delays in seeing larger systemic change.

Balancing Feedback Loops (Leverage Point 8):

Mountain climbers rely on feedback systems that signal danger – dropping temperatures, changing snow conditions, or physical symptoms of altitude sickness. Similarly, those working toward gender transformation need to establish feedback mechanisms that help correct course when old patterns reassert themselves.

This might begin with regular reflection practices that help you identify when you are slipping into gender-conforming behaviors that do not serve your authentic goals. This could take the form of a weekly self-check in where you ask yourself: "Did I make choices based on gender expectations rather than authentic desires? Was I able to successfully assert boundaries? What patterns of thought and actions am I noticing?"

Equally powerful is establishing accountability partnerships with others on similar journeys. An external perspective helps identify both progress and blind spots that might be difficult to see on your own. Feedback systems that integrate both self-awareness and trusted external perspectives are the most effective in maintaining movement toward your goals even when the path becomes foggy or challenging.

Reinforcing Feedback Loops (Leverage Point 7):

Mountain climbers benefit from positive reinforcing cycles that accelerate their progress – regular training builds strength, which enables longer climbs, which further builds endurance and confidence for more challenging routes. Similarly, gender transformation thrives on identifying and strengthening virtuous cycles that create momentum and sustained change.

One powerful reinforcing loop connects small acts of autonomy to expanded self-confidence. Each time you successfully express a boundary, make an independent decision, or challenge a limiting expectation, your sense of personal agency grows – making the next assertion of autonomy more likely and more effective. You might strengthen this loop by keeping a "victories journal" documenting each successful act of self-determination, no matter how small, and regularly reviewing it to remind yourself of your growing capacity.

Another vital reinforcing loop connects your actions to your values. When you explicitly link each gender-transforming choice to your deepest values, whether religious beliefs about human dignity, commitment to your children's future opportunities, or personal authenticity, each aligned action strengthens your sense of purpose and moral clarity. Identifying and consciously strengthening these positive feedback loops transforms what might otherwise be isolated actions into self-reinforcing cycles of growth, creating momentum that carries you up the mountain even when the climbing gets challenging.

The Middle Ascent: Deeper Transformation (Leverage Points 4-6)

As you climb higher, the work shifts to deeper changes in how you process information, the rules you live by, and your capacity for self-determination.

Information Flows (Leverage Point 6):

Mountain climbers depend on quality information – weather reports, route conditions, updates from other expeditions. Similarly, those working toward gender transformation must actively manage the information that shapes their understanding of gender and possibility.

The narratives we encounter – through media, community stories, religious teachings, and everyday interactions – powerfully shape our sense of what is possible and appropriate. Transforming these information flows might begin with a conscious diversification of your sources: seek out stories of women who have charted non-traditional paths, engage with feminist interpretations of religious texts that honor your spiritual tradition, or connect with communities (both in-person and online) where alternative worldviews are normalized. This is not about replacing one narrow information stream with another but rather expanding the range of narratives you encounter.

Equally important is becoming an active contributor to information flows by sharing your own evolving understanding and experiences. This might begin with private journaling to clarify your thoughts, then extending to conversations with trusted friends, and potentially growing into more public expressions through community discussions, social media, or mentoring younger women. As you articulate your journey, you not only solidify your own insights but contribute to expanded narratives for others navigating similar terrain.

Rules (Leverage Point 5):

Expeditions operate by explicit and implicit rules – when to rope up, how to communicate in dangerous conditions, who makes decisions in emergency situations. Gender systems similarly function through formal regulations and unspoken expectations that guide behavior. Transforming these rules represents a powerful leverage point for gender equality.

Begin by making the implicit explicit – identify the unwritten rules that govern gender in your family and community contexts. These might include expectations like "women serve food at gatherings while men socialize", "men make financial decisions and women make decisions about home decor", or "women's education is valued only until marriage".

With this awareness, you can begin renegotiating explicit agreements in your close relationships. Rather than broadly challenging "patriarchy" (which often creates defensive reactions), focus on specific arrangements that could better serve everyone involved. For example, you might initiate a calm conversation about redistributing household responsibilities based on preference and availability rather than gender or establish explicit agreements about financial decision-making that ensure equal control.

Perhaps most powerfully, you can develop your own ethical framework for gender relations based on your deepest values, potentially drawing from religious, cultural, and ethical traditions meaningful to you. This personal "constitution" might include principles like: "I will make major life decisions based on my authentic calling rather than gender expectations" or "I will seek relationships characterized by mutual respect and shared responsibility".

Self-Organization (Leverage Point 4):

Mountain expeditions must constantly adapt to changing conditions, with the most effective teams developing flexible systems rather than rigid hierarchies. Similarly, gender transformation involves developing the capacity for new patterns to emerge organically rather than imposing predetermined structures.

Rather than approaching gender transformation as a battle between rigid traditional and progressive prescriptions, consider it an emergent process of discovering arrangements that authentically serve wellbeing and flourishing. This might mean experimenting with removing gender-based constraints and noticing what naturally emerges. You might discover interests, aptitudes, or relationship patterns entirely different from both traditional and progressive gender prescriptions.

This approach creates space for genuine complexity and contradiction. You might find that you authentically enjoy certain cultural practices traditionally associated with your gender while rejecting others as constraining.

The Summit Approach: Fundamental Shifts (Leverage Points 1-3)

The final approach to the summit involves the most profound transformations – shifts in your fundamental goals, paradigms, and ability to hold multiple perspectives.

Goals (Leverage Point 3):

The highest purpose of a mountain expedition transcends simply reaching a physical peak – it involves what the climber hopes to discover, accomplish, or become through the journey. Similarly, gender transformation ultimately involves clarifying your deepest purposes beyond gender-prescribed achievements.

This leverage point invites you to distinguish between goals you have absorbed from gender expectations and those arising from your deepest values and authentic desires. This might involve honestly assessing aspects of your life goals to see whether they come from external gender prescriptions or your genuine aspirations. You might realize that while you genuinely desire partnership and family, your timeline for these milestones has been driven by community pressure rather than your authentic readiness.

With this clarity, you can develop metrics (going back to leverage point 12) for a fulfilling life that transcend gender-prescribed achievements. Rather than measuring success by marriage, motherhood, or other traditional gender milestones, you might create personal markers of fulfillment: meaningful contribution, authentic expression, quality relationships, or personal growth. This clarity does not guarantee easy choices, but it does ensure that your sacrifices and efforts are directed toward what truly matters to you, rather than externally imposed gender scripts.

Paradigms (Leverage Point 2):

Mountain climbers know that sometimes entire approaches to climbing evolve – from the heavy siege tactics of early Everest expeditions to today's lighter alpine style. Similarly, gender transformation often requires questioning fundamental assumptions and developing new conceptual frameworks.

Begin by identifying and challenging the basic premises about gender that underlie your worldview. Examine beliefs like "women are naturally more nurturing" or "men are inherently better suited to leadership" by seeking evidence that contradicts these premises and exploring their historical and cultural influences. This does not mean rejecting all gender differences, but rather developing more nuanced understanding of how biology, culture, and individual variation interact in complex ways.

For many Hazara women, engaging with religious traditions is an essential part of paradigm examination. Islamic teachings have been used to justify gender inequality, even though the core ethical principles in Islam support human dignity when properly understood. So, you might research emerging feminist interpretations or explore how historical context affected gender-related passages.

Rather than seeing gender through binary or biological deterministic frameworks, you might develop understandings based on human potential, shared capabilities, or spiritual equality manifesting through diverse expressions. These new paradigms create conceptual space for living authentically even when that authenticity does not fit neatly into traditional gender categories.

Transcending Paradigms (Leverage Point 1):

The most advanced mountain climbers develop a state of flow where they move beyond rigid techniques into intuitive responsiveness to the mountain. Similarly, the highest leverage point in gender transformation involves developing the capacity to exist beyond fixed frameworks altogether.

This does not mean rejecting all structure or belief, but rather developing comfort with uncertainty and the ability to hold multiple perspectives simultaneously. When faced with gender questions without clear answers, practice staying present with the discomfort rather than rushing to resolution. Journal about experiences where gender does not fit neat categories or where multiple valid perspectives exist without a single "correct" answer.

The ultimate manifestation of this leverage point is connecting to aspects of your identity and purpose that transcend gender categories entirely. Develop spiritual practices, creative expressions, or forms of service that connect you to a sense of meaning larger than gender roles. Notice moments when gender feels irrelevant to your deepest experience of purpose and connection – these glimpses of transcendence offer powerful perspective on the socially constructed nature of many gender limitations.

Reaching Your Personal Summit

The summit of your personal journey is not a fixed destination but a state of authentic living where gender no longer unnecessarily constrains your choices and relationships. From this vantage point, you can see both how far you have come and the broader landscape of possibility. This achievement does not mean perfect gender equality in all aspects of life, but rather a transformed relationship to gender expectations that allows for greater authenticity and fulfillment.

The Personal Climber's Path

The Summit Approach: Fundamental Shifts

At this highest elevation, you see beyond the fog of expectations. Here, you recognize that your value transcends gender categories entirely. You connect to purpose larger than prescribed roles, holding multiple truths simultaneously. From this vantage point, you reimagine what fulfillment means on your own terms—not as someone's wife, mother, or daughter, but as a complete human being pursuing your authentic calling.

The Middle Ascent: Deeper Transformation

On these challenging slopes, you actively reshape your inner landscape. You question whose stories fill your mind and begin seeking diverse voices that expand possibility. You renegotiate the unspoken rules governing your closest relationships, replacing "that is just how things are" with intentional agreements. Here, you discover your natural strengths and preferences beyond what gender prescribed, watching new patterns emerge organically from your authentic self.

The Lower Slopes: Building Momentum

The climb intensifies as you build momentum. You strategically time your challenges to gender constraints, knowing when to advance and when to rest. You establish personal checkpoints to notice when old patterns reemerge. Small victories—speaking up in meetings, sharing household responsibilities, pursuing a personal passion—create positive cycles that strengthen your confidence for the next challenge. Each step forward makes the next one easier.

Base Camp: Assessment and Preparation

Your journey begins with honest assessment. You measure how gender shapes your daily reality—the extra hours of housework, the deferred dreams, the unequal voice in decisions. You build safety systems before challenging limitations: financial independence, supportive friendships, emotional resilience practices. You transform your physical environment—creating a workspace, learning to navigate public spaces confidently, rearranging your home to reflect your equality.

The Collective Builder's Path: Community & System Transformation

Those who seek to create change beyond their personal lives take on the role of collective builders – creating the pathways, structures, and environments that make gender equality possible at community and institutional levels. This path focuses on transforming the social contexts that shape individual possibilities.

Base Camp: Building Foundations for Collective Change (Leverage Points 10-12)

Before attempting higher-level change, collective builders must establish solid foundations through community understanding, supportive structures, and material resources.

Constants, Parameters, Numbers (Leverage Point 12):

Collective builders need clear data about gender patterns in their communities and institutions. Without concrete information, conversations about gender often remain abstract and easily dismissed.

This might involve gathering concrete data about gender disparities within communities or organizations through appropriate methods to the context – perhaps informal surveys about time spent on household tasks, analysis of leadership patterns in community organizations, or systematic documentation of participation patterns in public events. Presenting findings visually through charts or infographics can make disparities unmistakably clear and moves discussions from opinion to evidence-based dialogue.

For institutional change, establish representation targets that create measurable parameters for monitoring progress, or creating transparency requirements regarding gender-related data that make inequality visible rather than hidden. These numerical interventions establish concrete parameters against which progress can be measured.

Buffer Capacity (Leverage Point 11):

Collective builders must develop support structures that reduce vulnerability for those challenging gender expectations.

Building community buffer capacity might begin with establishing practical resources that reduce the dependencies keeping women in limiting situations. This could include emergency funds for women facing financial hardship while pursuing education, informal housing networks offering temporary shelter during family conflicts, or childcare cooperatives giving mothers space for educational or professional activities. These practical supports create genuine options where previously there were none.

At an institutional level, this might involve developing comprehensive safety nets that reduce gender-based economic vulnerability, creating crisis response infrastructure for gender-based violence and emergencies, or establishing community resource hubs that provide accessible support beyond immediate intervention. These systemic buffers create practical pathways to greater equality.

Material Structures (Leverage Point 10):

Collective builders must create material environments that enable rather than constrain gender equality.

In community contexts, this might involve designing physical spaces where women and men can interact as equals, creating demonstrative events that model alternative gender arrangements in public settings, or developing practical resources and tools that support gender-responsive behavior. These environmental designs make inclusion practically possible rather than theoretically allowed.

At institutional levels, this might include implementing gender-responsive urban planning that considers diverse mobility patterns and safety needs, transforming workplace facilities to accommodate breastfeeding and childcare needs, or developing enabling technologies that reduce artificial gender divisions in both domestic and professional spheres. These material interventions recognize that physical environments significantly shape behavioral possibilities.

The Lower Slopes: Building Momentum for Change (Leverage Points 7-9)

As collective work begins, builders focus on creating conversations, feedback systems, and reinforcement mechanisms that catalyze broader change.

Delays and Timing (Leverage Point 9):

Collective builders must develop strategic timing for gender transformation initiatives, recognizing that when a message is delivered often matters as much as its content. In community contexts, creating intergenerational dialogues offers a powerful timing strategy that reframes gender evolution as continuous rather than revolutionary. Organizing storytelling events where older community members share how gender roles have already changed within living memory demonstrates that change is constant rather than new. These dialogues often reveal that what is defended as "traditional" today was itself an innovation within recent generations.

At institutional levels, redesigning career architectures to accommodate diverse life patterns addresses timing mismatches in current systems. Implementing "on and off ramp" career models allowing for care-related interruptions without permanent penalties, accelerating equity response systems when gender disparities emerge, or creating flexible institutional timelines that accommodate diverse life rhythms rather than presuming male-typical patterns all address the temporal dimensions of gender inequality.

Balancing Feedback Loops (Leverage Point 8):

Collective builders must create feedback mechanisms that help communities and institutions recognize and respond to gender imbalances before they become entrenched.

In community settings, establishing regular reflection processes creates opportunities to assess and adjust gender patterns. This might include facilitating community conversations about gender aspirations and challenges, establishing gender equity working groups within community organizations, or creating periodic "community health checks" that include gender dynamics among other aspects of community wellbeing.

At institutional levels, more formal systems might include establishing equity monitoring systems that create continuous awareness of gender patterns or creating institutional accountability mechanisms that ensure awareness translates into action. These accountability structures transform vague commitments into concrete changes.

Reinforcing Feedback Loops (Leverage Point 7):

Collective builders must identify and strengthen cycles that accelerate gender transformation progress.

In community contexts, highlighting positive examples already existing within the community creates powerful reinforcement for change. Creating recognition for those who model gender-responsive behavior, designing progressive acknowledgment systems that celebrate initial steps while encouraging further development, or connecting gender transformation to deeply held community values all create self-reinforcing cycles of change.

At institutional levels, implementing progressive recognition creates escalating incentives for gender-transformative organizations. Developing tiered certification systems with increasing benefits for advancing gender equity, creating funding incentives that direct resources toward equality-enhancing approaches, or establishing accelerating standards that continuously rise as progress is demonstrated all transform one-time compliance into continuous improvement.

The Middle Ascent: Transforming Narratives and Rules (Leverage Points 4-6)

The middle phase of collective work involves deeper engagement with the information systems, rules, and self-organization capacities that maintain current gender arrangements.

Information Flows (Leverage Point 6):

Collective builders must transform the stories, teachings, and communication patterns that determine what seems normal, possible, and desirable regarding gender.

In community contexts, creating storytelling initiatives offers a powerful approach to expanding gender narratives. Developing educational resources that present alternative perspectives in culturally appropriate ways extends these story-changing efforts. Producing materials featuring respected community members discussing inclusive interpretations of traditions, creating curriculum exploring gender from cultural and historical perspectives, or developing parent resources for raising children beyond gender stereotypes all expand the narrative environment.

At institutional levels, transforming educational curricula addresses fundamental information systems shaping gender understanding. Amplifying marginalized voices ensures that those most affected by gender inequality contribute to narrative formation. Organizing panels featuring women speaking directly to community leaders, creating publishing platforms for women's writing on gender issues, or developing mentorship programs where established women support newer voices all ensure that information flows include diverse perspectives.

Rules (Leverage Point 5):

Collective builders must engage with the explicit and implicit rules that structure gender arrangements through cultural norms, organizational policies, and legal frameworks.

In community contexts, facilitating norm evolution begins by making implicit gender rules explicit. Organizing discussions about "the way things are done" regarding gender in gatherings, family decision-making, or leadership selection makes unwritten expectations visible for evaluation. Once visible, communities can assess which rules truly connect to core values versus representing historical remnants or power imbalances.

At institutional levels, reforming discriminatory laws addresses formal rules that have codified gender inequality. Establishing organizational

standards creating explicit expectations for gender inclusion, developing regulatory frameworks ensuring compliance beyond voluntary commitments, or creating industry-wide guidelines for gender-responsive practice all transform rule structures at systemic levels.

Self-Organization (Leverage Point 4):

Collective builders must foster capacity for organic evolution rather than imposing predetermined gender arrangements.

Supporting emergent initiatives creates conditions where community members develop their own approaches to gender transformation. Establishing small grant programs for innovative gender equity projects, providing space and facilitation for self-organized groups exploring gender issues, or creating platforms where grassroots approaches can be shared all recognize that sustainable change emerges from within communities rather than being imposed from outside.

At institutional levels, supporting community-led institutional innovation creates space for approaches emerging from lived experience rather than imposed from above. Creating conditions for emergent governance that distributes power more equitably, developing collaborative leadership models transforming how authority operates, or establishing innovation incubators for women developing alternative economic models all reshape how institutions organize themselves around gender.

The Summit Approach: Transforming Fundamental Systems (Leverage Points 1-3)

The collective builder's most profound contribution involves transforming the fundamental goals, paradigms, and evolutionary capacity of communities and institutions.

Goals (Leverage Point 3):

Collective builders must help communities and institutions articulate aspirations beyond gender constraints.

Facilitating collective visioning creates space for communities to imagine their ideal future. Organizing workshops where members collectively develop their vision for the community in 20 years, with specific attention to how gender roles might evolve to support shared prosperity and wellbeing, can help shift focus from defending the status quo to creating a compelling future.

At institutional levels, organizational success metrics can be redesigned so that achievement is measured beyond gender-biased indicators. Similarly, developing economic indicators integrating unpaid care work alongside market production, can reshape what "counts" as achievement.

Paradigms (Leverage Point 2):

Collective builders must engage with the fundamental paradigms shaping how communities and institutions understand gender and human possibility.

Creating spaces for theological and philosophical exploration can facilitate community examination of cultural teachings about gender. For example, organizing study circles exploring inclusive interpretations within religious traditions, or hosting scholars presenting research on gender changes in history can create space for paradigms that support all human flourishing.

Institutionally, choices like establishing feminist economics frameworks for policy development, creating care-centered models of organizational success, or developing leadership theories based on relationship and collaboration rather than hierarchy can all change the paradigm.

Transcending Paradigms (Leverage Point 1):

Collective builders at their most advanced help communities and institutions connect to purposes that transcend gender categories entirely. By anchoring change in universal values like human dignity and collective flourishing, they create foundations that allow for continuous evolution without loss of core identity, transforming gender from a primary organizing principle to just one aspect of human experience.

The Collective Builder's Path

The Summit Approach: Fundamental Shifts

From this highest vantage point, communities envision futures where gender no longer determines human possibility. Here, success is measured not by conformity to gender roles but by collective wellbeing and individual flourishing. Faith traditions reconnect with their deepest values of human dignity, moving beyond historical gender limitations while preserving spiritual connection. This altitude reveals how gender equality enhances rather than threatens cultural identity, creating communities where all contribute their unique gifts.

The Middle Ascent: Deeper Transformation

The transformative work intensifies as communities reshape their collective stories. Diverse voices previously silenced now share their experiences, creating new narratives where many paths to fulfillment exist. Community discussions make implicit gender rules explicit, allowing thoughtful reconsideration of "the way things have always been." From these vibrant conversations, innovative approaches to care work, leadership, and family life emerge organically from within the community itself.

The Lower Slopes: Building Momentum

Momentum builds through strategic community efforts. Elders share how gender roles have already evolved within living memory, revealing that what's defended as "traditional" today was once revolutionary. Regular community reflections create awareness of gender patterns previously invisible. Every celebration of gender-responsive behavior - fathers nurturing children, women leading organizations, couples sharing responsibilities - creates ripple effects, normalizing new possibilities throughout the community.

Base Camp: Assessment and Preparation

The foundation of community transformation begins with making gender patterns visible. Surveys reveal concrete realities: women's unpaid work hours, leadership representation gaps, participation patterns in community events. Support networks form, providing practical assistance for those challenging gender limitations: childcare cooperatives, emergency housing, mentorship circles. Community spaces transform to enable equal participation: accessible meeting times, women's leadership training, inclusive decision-making processes.

Navigating the Climb: Implementation Considerations

Now that we have defined the pathways for reaching the summit of gender equality, it is also important to discuss practical considerations that must be taken into account along the way.

Strategic Sequencing

Gender transformation cannot be done in one shot; it requires thoughtful sequencing rather than attempting everything at once. Likewise, the leverage points described in the previous sections do not need to be used in order. For some, beginning with a personal paradigm shift may create a foundation for other changes. For others, practical adjustments in daily arrangements may create space for deeper transformation. Similarly, gender transformation at a community or organizational level may require awareness of social, political, and cultural context and changes. Periods of broader social openness to equity might allow for more ambitious advancements, while times of backlash might require securing existing positions.

On a personal level, gender transformation requires sustainable pacing to avoid burnout. Recognizing signs of depletion such as persistent fatigue and cynicism is crucial for long-term effectiveness. Celebrating small victories, taking periods of rest and consolidation, sharing leadership responsibilities across a team, and respecting the emotional toll of transformation can all be helpful to protect from burnout.

Addressing Resistance & Backlash

As discussed in previous chapters, certain forms of resistance to gender equality and associated narratives appear consistently across contexts, like appeals to tradition (“this is how we have always done things”), religious justifications (“God ordained these roles”), biological determinism (“women and men are naturally different”), zero-sum thinking (“if women gain, men must lose”), and individualistic dismissal (“some women choose traditional roles”). Arguments made in this report, and the body of literature, books, and activism towards gender equality can provide ready responses to these arguments, and it is worth being prepared.

Building Supportive Relations

Gender transformation thrives through connection rather than isolation. Identifying others on similar journeys can create mutual support, shared learning, and combined resources. Cross-generational partnerships are particularly powerful, combining elder wisdom with youth innovation. Embrace diverse transformation approaches – intellectual, artistic, practical, spiritual – as complementary rather than competing paths.

The View from the Summit

Throughout this research journey, a central insight that has emerged for me is that the gender constraints that often feel permanent – divisions of labor, expectations of care, definitions of success, frameworks of power – are in fact human creations that can be re-created to better serve our collective human success. This work of gender transformation ultimately forms part of our larger human journey toward meaning and connection.

The summit awaits not as a distant impossibility but as a journey already underway, each step creating new possibility for ourselves and those who follow. As one respondent reflected: “It is not one year or 10 years of journey, it is our generational journey”.

Reflections & New Beginnings

Summary of Research Journey

This research began with a personal quest to understand how gender narratives continue to shape the lives of women in Canada, through a deep dive into the intimately familiar lives of Hazara women. Through systematic investigation of theoretical frameworks, historical analysis, and Hazara women's lived experiences, I have learned how gender narratives operate within interconnected systems that span from individual psychology to community expectations to institutional structures.

Throughout this work, I have aimed to honor both the distinctive experiences of Hazara women and the broader patterns of gender constraint that exists across cultural contexts. The findings suggest that while the specific manifestations of gender limitation may vary across communities, the underlying mechanisms share important.

Key Insights & Contributions

The findings reinforce that gender is not merely an individual identity but a powerful system of social organization that shapes opportunities, resources, and life trajectories.

The research shows how gender systems maintain themselves through self-reinforcing cycles involving both narratives and power relations. When power imbalances (in resources, authority, and status) align with limiting narratives in the form of religious teachings, cultural traditions, scientific discourse, and familial expectations, they create mutually reinforcing patterns that resist change.

Understanding these system dynamics helps explain why surface-level changes – such as formal equality guarantees or individual success stories – often fail to transform the deeper patterns.

This work challenges the false dichotomy between cultural preservation and gender transformation that often hampers progress in diaspora communities. Rather than positioning gender equality as a Western imposition, this research demonstrates that cultures have always evolved in response to changing conditions, with gender arrangements shifting across time and context. This perspective locates the seeds of transformation within cultural traditions themselves – in core values of human dignity, justice, and community wellbeing that can support more equitable gender arrangements.

By applying Donella Meadows' framework of system leverage points to gender transformation, this research offers practical insights about effective intervention strategies. The findings suggest that effective transformation requires coordinated intervention across multiple leverage points, with particular attention to the paradigmatic assumptions that make current arrangements seem inevitable.

Personal Reflections

As my spouse observed at the end of this project, I have gained significant clarity about my own anger and frustration when it comes to the persistence of gender inequality. This research has enabled me to understand the systemic nature of the limitations I and other women have experienced, now allowing me to move beyond frustration toward a more productive phase in my fight for gender equality.

This project has also helped me to recognize the authority of my own experience and perspective. Initially, I hesitated to reach out to Hazara women in my community because I felt unauthorized to do so – as if I needed some external validation before engaging with their experiences. Through this project and my graduate studies, I developed the courage to initiate these conversations, discovering that this engagement was not only welcome but fruitful for everyone involved. I hope to continue these connections beyond the formal boundaries of this research.

Future Directions: Self-Worth & Imagination

An important insight from the research came through analyzing the letters from Hazara women describing their desired futures. Despite the opportunity to envision transformative possibilities, most described futures that remained within relatively conventional parameters – marriage, children, career success, and family approval, with modest adjustments to the distribution of domestic labor and decision-making authority. There were elements of non-traditional paths around them, but it was never themselves. I dismissed this pattern initially as natural, however, when I reflected on my own capacity to envision alternative life patterns, I felt constrained in my imagination as well. While I could theoretically conceptualize a different lifepath, I could not imagine applying them to my own life, not because I did not want to, but due to a creeping thought where I would tell myself, "but that is very unlikely to happen". This observation led me to exploring self-imposed imaginative restrictions.

Zemina Meghji, Founder of un.seen.futures and a graduate from the Strategic Foresight and Innovation (SFI) program, has developed a "self-worth audit" that provided to be a crucial missing piece in understanding these imaginative constraints. Zemina's preliminary analysis of the Hazara women's letters from this project suggests that the "good girl" narrative conditions women in ways that impact their self-worth.

The behaviors encouraged by this narrative – people-pleasing, self-silencing, selflessness, and reputation protection – subtly erode integrity by disconnecting women from their authentic desires and voices, which then constrain the range of futures women can imagine for themselves.

Further analysis through the self-worth audit revealed that while the women in this study wished for better conditions for future generations, their personal aspirations largely fell within "probable" or "possible" future scenarios rather than radical and/or "preposterous" futures implying a possible correlation between self-worth, the conditioning of gender narratives and our imaginations. This insight has great implications for gender transformation work. The audit recommends that if low self-worth constrains imaginative capacity, then it may be important to restore self-worth eroded by gender narrative before asking women to imagine different futures.

In collaboration with Zemina, I hope to work on understanding this connection between self-worth and imaginative capacity.

Concluding Reflections

This research journey has reinforced my conviction that the limitations imposed by current gender systems constrain not only individual women and men but our collective capacity to address the complex challenges facing human societies. The work of gender transformation involves navigating tensions between individual autonomy and community connection, between honoring cultural heritage and enabling evolution, between addressing immediate needs and pursuing deeper paradigm shifts, which seem to be at odds in our current systems.

As I conclude this formal research process, I carry forward both practical insights about effective intervention strategies and a deeper conviction about the importance of this work. The journey toward gender equality is indeed like climbing a mountain – challenging, sometimes discouraging, requiring both technical skill and spiritual fortitude. Most importantly, I carry forward a reframing of the work of gender transformation as not just a political project but a spiritual one – reconnecting with our authentic voices and desires, building communities based on mutual flourishing rather than domination, and creating systems that honor both our shared humanity and our beautiful diversity.

Thank you for coming along with me on this journey!

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Glossary

Hazara Canadian Diaspora – A subset of the Afghan Canadian diaspora, particularly of Hazara ethnic descent. Hazaras are an ethnic group in central Afghanistan, predominantly Shia Muslims in a majority Sunni country. Hazaras have faced historical persecution and discrimination, leading to migration patterns including resettlement in Canada. The Canadian Hazara community maintains connections to both homeland culture and Canadian society, negotiating complex identity formations across generations.

Gender – Socially constructed roles, behaviours, expressions and identities of girls, women, boys, men, and gender diverse people. It influences how people perceive themselves and each other, how they act and interact, and the distribution of resources and power in society. Gender identity is not confined to a binary (girl/woman, boy/man) nor is it static; it exists along a continuum and can change over time. Gender is often conflated with sex.

Sex – A set of biological attributes in humans and animals. It is primarily associated with physical and physiological features including chromosomes, gene expression, hormone levels and function, and reproductive/sexual anatomy. Sex is usually categorized as female or male but there is variation in the biological attributes that comprise sex and how those attributes are expressed.

Gender Narratives – The culturally transmitted stories, beliefs, and assumptions about gender that shape understandings of appropriate roles and behaviors for women and men. Operating at societal, communal, familial, and individual levels, these narratives influence life choices and trajectories. Though constantly evolving in response to historical and contextual changes, they remain powerful forces in structuring gender relations and personal possibilities.

Life Trajectories – The patterns of major life decisions and transitions that shape an individual's path, including choices regarding education, career, marriage, and reproduction, which are influenced by both structural factors (economic conditions, legal frameworks, institutional arrangements) and individual agency, though always within the context of available options and internalized narratives.

Gender Equality – A future state where individuals of all genders have equal rights, responsibilities, and opportunities regardless of their biological sex. In this report, the definition of gender equality acknowledges that biological differences exist between sexes, but rejects using these differences to justify unequal treatment, resources, or life possibilities.

Descriptive Gender Beliefs – Beliefs about how women and men actually are or how they typically behave in reality. These beliefs describe perceived characteristics, behaviors, and attributes of different genders as they currently exist, without necessarily making claims about how things should be. For example, a descriptive belief might be "women are more emotionally expressive than men", simply stating a perceived pattern without judgment about its desirability.

Prescriptive Gender Beliefs – Beliefs about how women and men should behave or what roles they should occupy. Unlike descriptive beliefs that focus on how things are, prescriptive beliefs focus on how things ought to be according to the believer. These beliefs involve normative judgments about appropriate behaviors, attributes, and roles for each gender. For example, a prescriptive belief might be "women should prioritize family over career" or "men should be the primary financial providers".

Gender Stereotypes – Widely held, simplified, and generalized beliefs about the characteristics, attributes, and behaviors deemed typical of women or men. Gender stereotypes involve cognitive shortcuts that assign traits (e.g., women are nurturing, men are aggressive) to individuals based solely on their gender category, often without accounting for individual variation or context. These stereotypes can be descriptive (beliefs about how women and men are) but often carry implicit evaluative judgments.

Gender Role Ideology – A coherent system of beliefs and attitudes regarding the appropriate roles, rights, responsibilities, and expectations for women and men in society. Gender role ideology ranges from traditional (supporting distinct and complementary roles based on sex) to egalitarian (supporting equal roles regardless of sex). It encompasses prescriptive beliefs about gender and reflects broader cultural, religious, or political worldviews about proper gender relations. Gender role ideology shapes individuals' evaluations of gender-conforming and gender-nonconforming behaviors and influences policy preferences regarding gender-related issues.

Patriarchy – A social system in which men hold primary power and predominate in roles of political leadership, moral authority, social privilege, and control of resources. In the context of this research, patriarchy refers to the systematic privileging of male authority and devaluation of femininity across multiple domains: religious interpretation, cultural practices, family structures, and individual psychology.

Traditional Gender Roles – Culturally defined sets of behaviors, responsibilities, and expectations assigned to individuals based on their sex, where men are primarily associated with breadwinning, leadership, and public sphere activities, while women are primarily associated with caregiving, domesticity, and private sphere activities, thereby emphasizing clear distinctions between masculine and feminine domains, support male authority in family and society, and prioritize complementary rather than identical roles for women and men.

Egalitarian Gender Roles – Gender arrangements that emphasize equal opportunities, rights, and responsibilities for all genders across all domains of life. Egalitarian roles reject the notion that certain activities, behaviors, or responsibilities should be determined by one's sex, instead supporting individual choice based on personal aptitude and preference, thereby promoting shared decision-making power, balanced distribution of domestic and economic responsibilities, and equal valuation of contributions traditionally associated with either gender.

Appendix

Shortened Gender Roles Belief Scale Assessment

Response Options: 7-point scale (Strongly agree – 1, Undecided – 4, Strongly disagree – 7)

Scale Results: Possible scores range from 10 to 70, with higher scores indicating more feminist gender role beliefs

1. It is disrespectful to swear in the presence of a lady.
2. The initiative in courtship should usually come from the man.
3. Women should have as much sexual freedom as men. (R)
4. Women with children should not work outside the home if they don't have to financially.
5. The husband should be regarded as the legal representative of the family group in all matters of law.
6. Except perhaps in very special circumstances, a gentleman should never allow a lady to pay the taxi, buy the tickets, or pay the check.
7. Men should continue to show courtesies to women such as holding open the door or helping them on with their coats.
8. It is ridiculous for a woman to run a train and for a man to sew clothes.
9. Women should be concerned with their duties of childrearing and house tending, rather than with desires for professional and business careers.
10. Swearing and obscenity is more repulsive in the speech of a woman than a man.

Questionnaire - Quantitative Prompts

Response Options: 5-point scale (Not at all – 1, To some extent – 3, To a great extent – 5)

Childhood:

1. Girls and boys were treated the same in my family (R).
2. I witnessed double standards in my family that were unfair towards girls.
3. Boys and girls were taught specific skills or behaviors considered appropriate for their gender only (ex: sewing for girls, sports for boys).
4. I had more responsibilities for house chores compared to my brothers.
5. I felt equally encouraged as my brother to follow my dreams (R).
6. I felt pressure to conform to my family's gender roles as a child.
7. Gender roles in my family were rooted in my family's religious beliefs.

Gendered Childhood Index (GCI): Possible scores range from 7 to 35, with higher scores indicating more gender bias/inequality in childhood.

Family:

1. My family upholds strict rules about how girls should dress and behave.
2. In my family, boys are seen as the future breadwinner, while girls are seen as caretakers.
3. My family encourages women to prioritize family responsibilities over personal ambitions.
4. My family encourages men to prioritize work over domestic responsibilities.
5. Career choices in my family are more limited for girls than for boys.
6. My family believes that women and men are equally valued (R).
7. My family believe that women and men are not equally valued.
8. Family decisions are often made by male members of my family.
9. Family decisions are often made by both male and female members of my family (R).

Gendered Family Outlook Index (GFOI): Possible scores range from 9 to 45, with higher scores indicating more gender bias/inequality in family.

Personal:

1. I feel limited in pursuing certain hobbies or activities because of my gender.
2. My career ambitions are hindered because of my gender.
3. I have support to pursue my goals as long as they align with my family's views.
4. I have support to pursue my goals even if they do not align with my family's views (R).
5. I feel encouraged to balance personal ambitions with family responsibilities (R).
6. I feel safe to question gender norms and expectations in my family (R).
7. I view becoming a mother a necessary milestone in a woman's life.
8. I view becoming a wife a necessary milestone in a woman's life.
9. I choose to follow my family's gender roles to avoid criticism.

Gendered Personal Beliefs Index (GPBI): Possible scores range from 9 to 45, with higher scores indicating personal beliefs with gender bias/inequality.

Community:

1. Women in my community are held to higher moral standards than men.
2. Traditional gender roles persist even within the Canadian Hazara community.
3. Life in Canada has allowed for different possibilities for women and men compared to Afghanistan (R).
4. Women feel safer to question traditional gender roles in Canada (R).
5. Men feel safer to question traditional gender roles in Canada.
6. Hazara women in Canada experience greater opportunities compared to those in Afghanistan.
7. Canada has changed my perspective on gender roles to become more egalitarian (R).
8. Canada has changed my family's perspective on gender roles to become more egalitarian (R).
9. Men adjust to changes related to gender roles in Canada better than women.
10. Women adjust to changes related to gender roles in Canada better than men.

Community Inequality Assessment (CIA): Possible scores range from 10 to 50, with higher scores indicating more perceived gender bias/inequality in the community.

Future:

1. The concept of a "good woman" needs to be redefined for modern times.
2. Men in my community will need to change their views to achieve gender equality.
3. Women in my community will need to change their views to achieve gender equality.
4. It is possible to honour Hazara cultural identity while promoting gender equality.
5. Cultural traditions must adapt to allow for more equitable gender roles.
6. Religious interpretations of gender will play a key role in shaping future gender roles.
7. In the future, being a "good woman" might mean something very different from what it means today.

Community Future Assessment (CFA): Possible scores range from 7 to 35, with higher scores indicating an outlook of hope and need for change.

Questionnaire - Qualitative Prompts

Childhood:

1. Can you recall stories or lessons you were taught when you were a child in your family about being a "good girl" or a "good daughter"?
2. Please share briefly about any female figures who you looked up to when you were younger. What did you respect about them?

Family:

1. What family traditions or practices today reinforce ideas about how a "good daughter" or "good woman" should be?
2. Are there moments when you feel pressure to conform to certain beliefs or behaviors because of your gender? How do you respond?
3. Does your family ever discuss or debate traditional gender roles? If so, what are those conversations like?
4. What are your family's views on traditional vs. egalitarian gender roles?
5. What are your personal views on traditional vs. egalitarian gender roles?

Personal:

1. How have your personal goals and aspirations about education, career, marriage, motherhood, etc. evolved over time?
2. If you could go back and make a different choice regarding your education, career, or relationships, what would it be and why?
3. With regards to how you have experienced gender roles, what is one practice that you will pass on to the next generation and one practice that you will not pass on?

Community:

1. How do you think Hazara communities' views about gender roles have changed (or stayed the same) after moving to Canada?
2. What are the biggest challenges Hazara communities face in adjusting to Canada's more egalitarian gender roles?

Future:

1. What changes do you think are necessary to redefine gender roles in Hazara communities?
2. How can Hazara women and men work together to challenge traditional gender narratives?
3. If you could rewrite the stories about what it means to be a "good woman" what would those stories say?