How Does Violence Against Women Manifest? The Case of Post-Conflict Afghanistan

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In the context of external intervention, women in Afghanistan have been instrumentalised as part of foreign policy agendas that seek to appease geo-strategic interests. For the purpose of providing a deeper analysis of violence against women, this essay will conceptualise violence and aims to explore how it has developed and been utilised. In particular the post-2001 conflict reconstruction period will be prioritised to explain how violence against women (VAW) manifests in Afghanistan. This area is particularly significant as in spite of the inclusion of a gender mainstreaming approach that aims to move away from focussing on women in isolation, Afghanistan is listed as 171 out of 188 countries on the UNDP's gender inequality index (UNDP, 2015). To begin a theoretical approach will outline how VAW manifests, these concepts will then be applied to the more specific case of Afghanistan. In addition to analysing how it has been instrumentalised and consequently portrayed, the development of VAW under both conflict and non-conflict conditions will be explored. Before finally examining the degree to which VAW has been effectively integrated into conflict resolution.

How VAW Manifests Theoretically

To analyse how VAW manifests, it is first necessary to conceptualise violence. Often the focus on physical violence can lead to a neglect of non-physical and structural violence. Here structural violence is understood as being natural and normative, it is the systematic prevention of opportunities through social, political and economic deprivation. It is directly linked to the concept of social justice but is broader in its scope of responsibility so more difficult to solve. Galtung (1969) argues that the narrow conceptualisation of intended and physical violence must be expanded to include structural and indirect violence. As Galtung (1969, p173) states, the 'tranquil waters' of structural violence are silent and invisible, for example inequality and poverty are embedded in the status quo but must not be overlooked as direct and indirect violence are interrelated and mutually reinforcing. In particular VAW, as argued by Kelly (1998), can be considered as a continuum. The use of the term continuum refers to range and extent of violence which is inter-connected and non-linear. Thus there is not only one direct perpetrator, but a wider system of structural violence where all are complicit to some degree (Kelly, 1998). An example of such conceptualisations is Pateman's (1988) work on marital sexual contracts, where the woman is expected to perform sexual duties as a part of the marital contract. As such issues like coercive sex and inter-marital rape are understood as private matters. Such unwritten social contracts are not seen as gendered violence and have the effect of further entrenching patriarchy. Therefore, throughout this essay this conceptualisation of direct and structural violence, violence as a continuum and violence in the public and private sphere will be considered.

Applying VAW to the Afghanistan Case

The conceptualisation of VAW and how it manifests in Afghanistan can be analysed through three patterns of violence outlined by Kandiyoti (2016). First, VAW in the private sphere is characterised as being traditional violence that features the perceived defence of honour as the base of social order and is thus used to justify the beating and killing of women who are held accountability for societal morality. Whilst it is most common that the perpetrators of privatised violence are family, kin or partners, Kandiyoti (2016) highlights how the state also plays a role in facilitating it through more flexible legal mechanisms. In Afghanistan for example there is more leniency granted to the rapist if

he were to marry his victim. Secondly, it has been used as a conflict tool where the politicised and subsequently securitised nature of VAW can shift from an informal tactic to become part of a systemic strategy of war inflicted upon entire populations; including boys too reflecting the necessity to conceptualise VAW within the broader topic of Gender Based Violence (GBV) (Kandiyoti, 2016). Thirdly, within the public sphere VAW is again instrumentalised as a political tool to establish control through fear, in this case by the Taliban's interpretations of fundamentalist Islamic rhetoric to legitimise their barbaric punishments including public stoning and amputations (Kandiyoti, 2016). These patterns are evident when examining statistical research of the development of VAW post-2001. Findings show that in the context of structural violence where isolation, fear and limited educational and professional options are available; the daily occurrence of direct violence is paramount despite the end of the 2001 war. In particular direct violence within the private sphere is highlighted as 90% of cases are reported as being from with the victims own family (Hasrat and Pfefferle, 2013). Violence has been categorised into five groupings, although as Kelly (1998) outlined in her theoretical approach, these often intersect and should be considered as a continuum, not as separate entities. But for the purpose of analysis, Hasrat and Pfefferle (2013, p26) state that violence manifests as physical ('beating, injuring, burning, poisoning and amputating'), sexual ('forced sexual intercourse, forced prostitution, forced pregnancy, forced abortion, demands for illegitimate sexual acts, husband's extramarital relations, sexual insults and humiliations and forced watching of pornographic films'), verbal and psychological ('bad language, playing a prank or mocking, threats to remarry or to take another wife, to leave, rape or even kill them'), economical and other occurrences of violence. One concern they share is the media coverage of physical violence only, but failure to take into account verbal and psychological violence, and I would add structural violence too. The manifestation of violence economically is fundamental to solution finding, likewise other forms of violence are largely characterised by the prevention of basic rights such as education and free movement (Hasrat and Pfefferle, 2013). Human Rights Watch states how the risk of sexual violence on the journey to school is a motivation not to send their teenage daughters. Thus the threat of direct violence contributes to lack of opportunity that feeds into structural violence. This is exacerbated by the obstacles for women participating in political institutions, as Human Rights Watch (2004, p1) have reported*:*

'Regional military factions and religious conservative leaders, as well as the Taliban and other insurgent forces, are limiting Afghan women's participation in society through death threats, harassment, and physical attacks. They threaten women active as government officials, journalists, potential political candidates, and humanitarian aid workers simply because they are women, and because they advocate for women's human rights.'

Therefore it is clear that the intersection of patterns and categories of violence contribute to the wider system of structural violence which must be considered when approaching conflict resolution.

How has VAW been Instrumentalised and Portrayed?

The nature of the US led external intervention in Afghanistan being within a colonial discourse of liberation has negative impacts for advocating gender empowerment as the conditions of conflict are both continual and corrosive. In particular the instrumentalising of women for geostrategic foreign policy purposes is a character of the US invasion in 2001; whereas previously there has been a 'strategic silence' when the alliance with the mujahidin was self-serving during the Cold War. (Kandiyoti, 2007). George Bush's liberation of women rhetoric, freeing 'women of cover,' has dangerous implications for the reproducing of stereotypes (in Viner, 2002, p1). Especially as the same rhetoric is not applied to other countries, an example is China's one child policy and its impact on girls, and Britain's low rape conviction rate, and Bush's own comparisons made or terrorism and abortion being evil. The facilitation of Western feminism for imperial style intervention implies that such feminism has worked as colonial handmaid (Ahmed, 1992). An impact of this is an increased rejection of Western-style feminism as it has been promoted and thus associated with the intervening forces. This don't equate to non-Western women accepting subordination, but rejecting the penetrative Western model. Lughod (2002) indicates the danger of using cultural symbols such as veiling to overlook broader geostrategic and historical events. By focussing on reductionist understandings of entire societies being epitomised by a single item of clothing that is assumed to represent lack of agency, the context of foreign policy agendas is lost. Thus Lughod's (2002) central argument is that Muslim women do not need saving, firstly as this implies that there are from an inferior culture and should be transformed to the model of the superior hero. Secondly, because the dynamic of bottom up solutions and female agency are the crucial bases for improving women's rights.

A counterproductive element reproducing stereotypes is the media framing of VAW in Afghanistan. The stance taken when Afghani women are mentioned is often reductionist and often in line with foreign policy agendas. As Rasul and McDowell (2015) argue, the wider issue of the journalistic approach is reducing issues to single issue thematic events that provide a snapshot of the situation, having the effect of neglecting the historical context. In regards to Afghanistan, VAW is portrayed as being perpetrated in a direct form by the Taliban enemy alone against weak and oppressed women who are in need of being liberated from the burqa; 'Ah, if only all Afghan women enjoyed the dignity Western women are offered to be judged not by the hem of their burqas but by the size of their breasts' (Winters: 2003, in Rasul and McDowell, 2015, p31). It is true that the wider patriarchal power structures that dictate systems globally must be addressed with the discussion of combatting VAW, however the tendency to reduce this issue to an US-THEM dichotomy that is lined with both orientalist and occidentalist connotations is unproductive. As Lazreg (1988) has argued, such judgemental generalisations about the 'other' have the impact of enforcing static and surface level imagery. Thus said, sensitivity regarding not adopting an ethnocentric approach must also not dissuade from criticising harmful cultural practises. It is important to consider the local context whilst also reinforcing the point that VAW are part of global normative frameworks and are not culturally exceptional (Kandiyoti, 2016).

How has VAW Developed under Conflict Conditions?

The impact of foreign intervention must be considered in depth to analyse how VAW manifests in an environment still characterised by conflict (Kandiyoti, 2007). The gendered legacies of conflict are evident when examining the economy. The previously rural based, subsistence farming economy has transformed as a result of war into an opium-based criminalised one. Within the circumstance of arms, kidnapping and trafficking; warlords are able to thrive in this situation of insecurity. Consequently poverty and the breakdown of livelihoods leads to 'extreme forms of female vulnerability' (Kandiyoti, 2007, p511). The shift from wheat to poppy cultivation has had critical impacts on social interactions. Even in non-Taliban areas, the so-called 'Taliban effect' has tightened social conservatism and the impact of the economic shift for women can be seen in their increased involvement in poppy cultivation which requires a labour intensive workforce. For example the annual profit from opium cultivation is 1,000-2,000 lakhs compared to just 20 lakhs for wheat cultivated, and farmers are encouraged to plant more poppy by being offered soft loans (Goodhand, 2000). However, the taxes by local commanders are characterised as being semi-feudal and these commanders benefit from and have a vested interest in maintaining the weakness of the state. Furthermore, the shift to an opium economy aggravates the already erosive conflict effects on poverty and criminal activity, but in addition the centrality of one source of livelihood induces cycles of dependency that are difficult to break.

The criminalisation of the economy and the weakness of the state capacity to create a secure environment result in social ruptures. Within a history of a traditional weak state and strong society (Moghadam, 1994), social networks and kinship prove the fundamental social units. However, the impact of war is erosive to these systems which lose community autonomy. One example is the shift from the community monitoring of moral standards such as modesty to armed young men in the Taliban. This shift disintegrates local hierarchies, oppressing women and disempowering non-Taliban men (Kandiyoti, 2007). The instigation of social change is deeply problematic, as Kandiyoti has shown, men are no longer fulfilling their obligations to women but are still able to exert their authority over them. The key point here is to comprehend how certain practises of VAW that are manifesting presently are specific to the conflict conditions, and as such the dynamic of reactions in war should be analysed rather than assuming that VAW is a natural extension of Afghani culture.

How has VAW Developed Under Non-conflict Conditions?

Whilst arguments made by Kandioyoti (2007), Rasul and Mcdowell (2015) regarding the misconceptions of oppression of women within Afghani culture being used to distract from the impact of external intervention and foreign policy agendas are convincing. They do not provide sufficient detail as to where patriarchal local customs are discriminatory and how this intersects variably to different ethnicities, tribes and religions. Although it is beyond the scope of this essay to explore this issue in great depth, the work by Moghadam is useful here to provide an insight into traditional practises. It is true that the present treatment of women in Afghanistan must be understood with the context of continuing conflict conditions where social reactions do not necessarily represent societal norms. However, by examining cultural practises in the pre-Soviet occupation era, the nature of VAW now can be better

understood. Patriarchy in Afghanistan is integrated to subsistent forms of living such as herding and farming which are organised along patrilineal lines. Within this agricultural setting, the association of women as property and a labour force is common. For instance, the Pahstun tribal culture Pushtunwali are cited as being particularly masculinist, the Durrani Pashtuns located in northcentral Afghanistan are described as such; 'The members of the community discuss control of all the resources – especially labour, land, and women – in terms of honour' (Tapper in Moghadam, 1994, p86). Likewise, the intersection of Islam and tribal ethnicity is important to deconstruct, whereas in the Islamic tradition the dowry is provided for the intention of supporting the wife should she be widowed or divorced, in Pushtunwali culture the dowry is reserved for the father of the bride as compensation for his loss in labour. In brief, the domestic context and traditional customs must not be overlooked in lieu of the focusing of external intervention as a contributor to the current situation in Afghanistan. Likewise, the progressive reforms promoting further liberty for women should not be lost in the discourse of the Soviet-invasion. It is thus important to consider both the domestic and international, and how they have interacted together to fully comprehend the nature of VAW.

The role of VAW in Conflict Resolution

In order to establish positive peace that is defined as the absence of structural violence, or the 'integration of human society'; conflict resolution must look beyond establishing negative peace meaning the 'absence of violence, absence of war', (Galtung, 1964, p2). However, when the external state builders rarely ask what are the best practises for development and for whom, then the strategic environment characterised by competing motivations or at least varying tactics distract from the ultimate goal of positive peace. An example of this being the Bush administration pushing for an 'exit strategy' (Rubin, 2006, p184). The further challenge for conflict resolution in Afghanistan is this centrality of the state centric-approach as the collapse of the state institution prevents it from advocating reforms. Consequently the interest-driven and internationalised character of state-building distracts from the originally stated goal of female emancipation. Rather, neoliberal financial institutions' aim to establish a state apparatus that is functioning enough to provide for markets and private sector growth. Furthermore, the Bush administration's 'War on Terror' rhetoric frames the priority within Afghanistan as the targeting of terrorism. And donor's strategies for good governance are focussed on implementing a de jure framework which works towards fast track state building. However the fundamental issue is that these strategies do not reflect the de jure power balances on the ground or secure legitimacy. So whilst it is a positive step within the post-war consolidation process to establish power sharing agreements and sign conventions such as the Universal Convention of Human Rights, if this does not transfer even to a limited degree to the reality then its value is questionable (Kandiyoti, 2007).

In line with Wardak's (2004) integrated justice approach, it is essential that the external framework of judiciary procedures and universal human rights are assimilated into the Afghanistan's rich legal culture. Including firstly, the traditional and informal Jirga/Shura systems that function in particular within tribal contexts in rural areas, dealing with matters within the private realm via community hierarchies built on kinship and trust; these are vital platforms for grassroots agency. Secondly, Afghanistan being a Muslim majority, the Islamic law from a non-sectarian popular interpretation of Shia is a further element that must be included. Although the Bonn Agreement does factor in Islam, it does not provide clear space for the traditional court systems that have the potential to act as a necessary local institution bridging the culture gap between urban and rural Afghanistan and providing a platform for the population to access the more central judicial bodies. Notwithstanding the flaws in the Jirga/Shura and Sharia legal systems which are also inherently patriarchal, but to genuinely build legitimate systems of human rights including principles of restorative justice to comprehend the 25 years of conflict that the country has experienced, the integration of these bottom up systems with the top down legal institutions must be done in order to apply universal principles of human rights in a flexible manner that is culturally particularistic and led by representative agents of Afghanistan. Thus, 'democracy by design' is not an approach that works towards building mechanisms to tackle direct and indirect VAW (Kandiyoti, 2007, p514).

Conclusion

In conclusion, the case of post-conflict Afghanistan has been the focal point in which to deconstruct VAW and how it manifests. In particular, the concept of structural violence has been necessary to examine the broader issue of oppressive conditions for women that have resulted both as a direct result from conflict but also to a degree as a

continuation from traditional patriarchal customs. A central problem in addressing VAW in Afghanistan has been the skewing of the approach to post-conflict reconstruction in light of foreign policy agendas and external actors competing interests. Furthermore, media framing of violence has been counterproductive by neglecting geostrategic and historical contexts to focus on reproducing stereotypes of discrimination and the veil. Therefore, the success of conflict resolution has been inherently limited by the approach being too heavily dominated by external actor's notion of 'democracy by design', and not enough attention to Afghani agency. In particular in regards to tackling VAW, thus understanding the way that it manifests is a crucial element in tackling how it can be stopped.

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