

Women's Security in Afghanistan

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JESSICA BODDINGTON, JUN 30 2011

The American-led War in Afghanistan in the fall of 2001 marked a historic event for international gender studies, as the U.S. government utilized the language of 'women's liberation' to partly justify their use of military force. In his 2002 State of the Union address, President Bush announced that such goals of liberation had been completed, by declaring "The last time we met in this chamber the mothers and daughters of Afghanistan were captives in their own homes.... Today women are free..." (2002). However, much debate has since ensued amongst feminists concerning this justification; in particular, many have argued that it constituted a political manipulation on the part of the U.S. government to further specific national interests, and had the potential to damage Afghan women's welfare by advancing a climate of instability and violence. In addition, despite political rhetoric, there has been little indication that women's security has improved in Afghanistan since the 2001 military intervention. This essay will aim to address these concerns, by answering the following questions; firstly, **did the U.S. utilise neo-colonialist rhetoric in relation to Afghan women's welfare to garner national public support for the 2001 U.S.-led War in Afghanistan?** And, secondly, **why hasn't women's security in Afghanistan increased substantially, as the U.S. government assured that it would, since the war?** It will be concluded that neo-colonialist discourses were present within the U.S. at the time of the Afghanistan War, and that they served to demonise and essentialise Islamic culture in general, whilst removing from debate the historical political landscape of Afghanistan. Such historical accounts are essential to understand the roots of women's insecurity in the nation, which persist to this day.

The United States government employed rhetoric concerning women's oppression under the Afghanistan Taliban regime as a political tactic to garner national public support, and in particular feminist support, for the 2001 Afghanistan War. Such feminist endorsement acted in part as a justification for U.S. military action, by redefining it in terms of a liberating force that aimed to improve the lives of women. In particular, prior to the military intervention, in a speech to Congress on September 20 2001, President Bush outlined the Taliban's oppressive treatment of women as a rationale for his ultimatum to the regime to hand over suspected al Qaeda terrorists within a certain timeframe. As Ayotte and Husain remark, the fulfillment of these demands would "have left gendered oppression in Afghanistan intact because... [it] would have kept the same regime in power"; therefore, it is argued that the remarks were formulated specifically in order to demonise the Taliban regime and stir popular domestic support, in case military intervention became a strategic necessity (2005). Similarly, First Lady Bush's remarks in the President's 'Weekly Radio Address', on the 17 November 2001, that "the fight against terrorism is also a fight for the rights and dignity of women" further sought to legitimize the United States' tactical security aims by aligning them with the 'fight' for women's liberation. Such rhetorical framing was largely successful as it resulted in the support of many United States feminists, including the Feminist Majority organization, who lauded the War in Afghanistan as a liberation of local women (Hirschkind and Mahmood 2002: 341). Whilst it is undeniable that the Taliban regime instigated oppressive and violent measures against women in Afghanistan, I argue that such "mobilization of women's bodies" is dangerous to the feminist movement (Ayotte and Husain 2005). The representation of Afghan women as gendered victims in need of liberation by U.S. military forces constitutes a paternalistic and neo-colonialist perspective of which feminists should remain wary. As Young argues, such constructions are an extension of Western patriarchal ideals, which emphasize women as vulnerable to subjugation by outside forces and in need of protection (2003). Historically, this justification of upholding women's security has previously been utilized as a neocolonial tool of statecraft, serving to frame military conflicts in terms of "the heroic, just warrior... against the malignant, often racialized, masculinity attributed to the enemy" (Tickner cited in Ayotte and Husain 2005). Such conceptions are dangerous because they can perpetuate and enhance conditions of physical and structural harm for women. Given

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that U.S. bombs killed an estimated 1300 Afghan civilians, approximately 3000 to 7000 people subsequently died during the initial military campaign, and conditions for Afghani women have scarcely increased since 2001, it is argued that the United States' actions did just this; that it served to augment and continue women's insecurity within Afghanistan (Ayotte and Husain 2005).

Furthermore, the above constructions were largely mirrored in U.S. media at the time, with debates concerning Afghan women's oppression often subject to orientalized and paternalistic discourses (Stabile and Kumar 2005). In particular, the image of Afghan women's forced 'veiling' under the Taliban came to be known as universal symbol of Afghani women's oppression (Abu-Lughod 2002, Ayotte and Husain 2005). It is argued that that such a simplified depiction of women's oppression served to de-historicize their political situation and mask the origins of structural violence in Afghanistan. As Abu-Lughod comments, these constructions inflicted epistemic harm and served to reify "culture... by...[plastering] neat cultural icons like the Muslim woman over messy historical and political dynamics" (2002). Such media support for Afghan women's 'liberation' at the hands of U.S. forces (Lacayo et. al. 2001: 36; Kristoff 2001: 24; Varadarajan 2001: 12; The American Prospect 2001: 6; Constable 2007;) removed women's agency by declaring them 'victims', whilst not taking account for the ways neocolonialist discourses can further create conditions for physical and structural harm. The widespread symbolism of the *burqa* as the epitome of the Taliban's oppressive policies is also troubling, because as Ayotte and Husain describe, much of U.S. media acted to "...demonize or deride the burqa itself, rather than the garment's imposition by the Taliban" (2005). Some outlets described the garment as a 'body bag for the living' (Lacayo et al. 2001: 36), or labeled those who wear it as 'ghosts' (Kristoff 2001: 24). By vilifying the garment rather than the policy of imposition, such texts act to rob Afghani women of agency, through labeling anyone who would choose to wear a *burqa*, even if they were free not to, as oppressed or as having internalized "patriarchal social values" (Hirschkind and Mahmood 2002). Implicitly, they also inflict patriarchal violence upon Afghani women, as such arguments deny women freedom of choice to wear religious garments; the very cause that the writers criticize the Taliban for.

Many feminists contended at the time of the military intervention that that veiling practices were inherently disempowering (Moghissi cited in Ayotte and Husain 2005, Badinter cited in Hirschkind and Mahmood 2002, Moghadam 2001), or declared that all forms of Islam are oppressive to women (Winter 2001). Such claims are in danger of reflecting neocolonialist viewpoints. However, and perhaps more importantly, they constrict definitions of feminism to purely Western values of liberation or freedom, and therefore deny other paths towards social equality, such as the possibility of Islamic feminism. To qualify this argument, it is not suggested that all feminists should adopt a position of cultural relativism; as cultural relativism in its extreme form disallows critique of other religions or even religious political movements (Abu-Lughod 2002: 4). As Winter states, "[the two sets of discourses, neocolonialism and cultural relativism] are different faces of the same essentializing and dehistoricizing of Muslim culture" (2001). Both viewpoints act to restrict the debate about Afghanistan women to amorphous concepts of 'culture', and by doing so, they therefore prevent any genuine understanding of the historical and political roots of women's insecurity in the region. In addition, the focus on 'culture' serves to create an artificial religiocultural divide between nations; transforming the debate into a struggle between 'West' versus 'East', or the 'liberal enlightened' versus 'oppressive Muslims'. This division removes from debate the ways in which the United States, and the West in general, may have been complicit in the development of authoritarian Afghani regimes. Thus, an alternative stance of 'pluralist' feminism should be celebrated. As Abu-Lughod eloquently phrases, such a stance would recognize that modern "Islamic movements themselves have arisen in a world shaped by the intense engagements of Western powers in Middle Eastern lives", and therefore seeks to understand the root causes of human suffering within their political and historical contexts.

The United States' so-called 'liberation' of Afghani women should be particularly subject to scrutiny because of the government's past involvement in Afghani politics. During the Cold War, the U.S. government was engaged in covert operations to supply arms and funding to Afghani *mujahidin* rebels, in an attempt to weaken Soviet occupation and overthrow the communist government (Oxfam International 2009: 9). Whilst United States writers largely celebrated the *mujahidin* groups as 'freedom fighters', such factions were characterised by an extreme form of Islamism that campaigned against the increasing participation and freedom of women within Afghani society (Moghadam 2004: 454). Furthermore, Oxfam International contends that whilst the groups "claimed religious grounding in Islam, this was not an ideologically-driven conflict nor was it one that enjoyed popular support... [rather] it was a war for power

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and control”; one in which the *mujahidin* introduced sexual violence against women as a weapon of war, in order to intimidate and undermine traditional patriarchal structures and establish positional superiority (2009: 9). During the 1980s and 1990s, strict Islamist codes were imposed in *mujahidin*-controlled areas that sanctioned the confinement of women to their homes, whilst denying them adequate healthcare or education; and in government-controlled areas, the rebels used sexual violence as a method to dishonor local families and undermine women’s legal rights. The *mujahidin* period has been described by UNAMA as “one of the darkest chapters in the history of Afghanistan women” (2009: 5). By contributing approximately three billion dollars (and training and weapons) to the *mujahidin* cause, the U.S. essentially facilitated the rise of such an oppressive and patriarchal government in Afghanistan; ultimately creating an environment conducive to the establishment of the Taliban regime (Stabile and Kumar 2005: 768). The fact that gross abuses of human rights, including extreme forms of gender-based violence, were barely noted until terrorism became a strategic priority to the United States should make feminists extremely wary. It also lends credence to the argument that military intervention in the name of humanitarian assistance, whilst contemporarily *du jour*, may be used as a sophisticated for the geopolitical tactics by dominant global actors. Therefore, the claims by certain feminists that the Taliban was the origin of oppression for women in Afghanistan, and was reflective of Islamic fundamentalists’ inherent misogyny or as a reaction to modernity, are refuted (Ehrenreich as cited in Hirschkind and Mahmood 2002, Feminist Majority as cited in Hirschkind and Mahmood 2002). As Moghadam exposit, such viewpoints do not take account of Afghanistan’s political history, which has been shaped not by factors of modernization but instead by several decades of chronic conflict that have been exacerbated through the funding and support of foreign states (2004).

In contemporary Afghanistan, nine years after the United States-led intervention, the status and conditions for women continue to be amongst the worst in the world. In 2008, Human Rights Watch approximated that around 87.2 percent of Afghan women have experienced gendered violence during their lifetime; such violence is ongoing and prevalent, and includes forced marriage, rape, domestic violence and ‘honor killings’ (2009: 6). In addition, roughly 57 percent of women continue to be married under the legal age of 16, and maternal mortality rates are amongst the highest in the world (at approximately 25,000 deaths per year) (AFP 2009). Furthermore, since 2005, conditions for women have been steadily worsening (Human Rights Watch 2009: 4). As Norah Niland, chief UN human rights officer in Afghanistan commented, “...the space for women in public life is shrinking. The trend is negative.” (cited in AFP 2009). In August 2009, the Afghanistan parliament contributed to this negative trend by passing the Shia Personal Status Law, a law that severely restricts the rights of Shia women (Human Rights Watch 2009: 3). Passages within the legislation impose, amongst others: the legal requirement of wives to seek their husband’s approval before leaving the house; a grant of sole guardianship of any children to fathers and grandfathers; and an allowance for rapists to avoid prosecution once they have monetarily compensated their victim for any physical injury (Boone 2009). Even within existing non-discriminatory laws, women have very little genuine access to justice, as courts and police often “do not know the law but penalize women according to customary law, which places great emphasis on notions of female ‘honor’ and chastity” (Human Rights Watch 2009: 8). As such, it is not surprising that United Nation’s “findings reveal that Afghanistan women are subjected to an increasingly insecure environment” within the nation; a condition that is not likely to change in the near future (UNAMA 2009: 1).

However, it would be misleading to characterise the persistent insecurity of women as resulting solely from unchanging entrenched cultural norms. Instead, it is argued that decades of devastating and enduring conflict have fundamentally altered traditional practices and familial structures, resulting in extreme female vulnerability. As Kandiyoti comments, “the gender biases inherent in the kinship practices of various ethnic communities are aggravated by the loss of cushioning effects of family ties and obligations, which may be eroded through poverty, displacement and the drug economy” (2007: 11). It is refuted that

Years of turmoil have... left communities to their own devices, strengthening the inherent distrust of external authorities and increased reliance upon conservative values. The remarkable social cohesion, which has brought the Afghan population through the years of turmoil with less scars than could be expected, also includes strict social norms and control of conformity with these norms (World Bank 2005: 2).

Instead, it should be recognised that Afghani citizens have generally suffered from extreme displacement over previous decades, with 250,000 citizens currently remaining internally displaced and almost three million suffering in

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external refugee camps (Oxfam International 2009: 14). In addition, those left within Afghanistan have not survived with minimal 'scars', but suffer from overwhelming institutional ruin and its accompanying poverty- to the extent that the country now ranks 174th out of 178 countries in the Human Development Index (UNAMA 2009: 8). In a post-conflict society that is characterized by violent turmoil and communal ruin, social dislocation has resulted in number of heightened gender-issues such as the commodification of women, prostitution, forced labour, kidnappings, and sexual violence (Kandiyoti 2007). As UNAMA reports, "what to Western eyes looks like tradition is in many instances, the manifestation of new and more brutal forms of subjugation of the weak, made possible by a commodified criminal economy, total lack of security, and the erosion of bonds of trust and solidarity that were tested to the limit by war, social upheaval and poverty" (2009: 19). Often, families impose stricter limits on female freedom due to such fragmentation and instability, rather than as a result of increased conservatism. As such, the escalating violation of women's rights should not be blamed on the perceived inertia of Afghani cultural norms.

According to a study done by Caprioli and Douglass, international military interventions aimed at 'nation building' fail to improve women's security within a society (2007). Such a result is not surprising, given that interventions necessarily entail an imposition of procedural democracy upon a state, and therefore do not represent a natural development of egalitarian norms within a national polity. As Stabile and Kumar point out, perhaps a tad extremely, it is not surprising that "militarism by the world imperialist powers never improves the lives of women and children" (2005). In Afghanistan's case, it is evident that this holds true; since 2001, the U.S.-led intervention has not increased the rights of women within society. Fundamentally, the forces present within Afghanistan have not sought to strengthen the government institutions that are in ruins after decades of conflict; rather, they are focused on pacifying Taliban and Al Qaeda forces that continue to threaten the United States' hegemonic global strategic dominance. Furthermore, international donor assistance has largely been implemented without the engagement of the Afghani government; for example, in 2004 to 2005, only \$1.4 billion out of a total \$4.9 billion of public expenditure was directed through the national budget (Rubin 2006: 179). This method of aid dispensation "fails to build the legitimacy and capacity of the recipient government", as it stunts their ability to construct a stable formal economy (to replace the dominant informal illicit economy), and therefore rebuild the infrastructure needed to raise Afghani citizen's standard of living (Rubin 2006: 182). Most revealing, however, was the decision to pursue 'warlord democratization' by the U.S.-led forces, whereby the international community rearmed and transferred power to "the same commanders and warlords who had previously dominated the country" before the Taliban; namely, to the *mujahidin* factions (Rubin 2006: 180). Such a move by the international forces assured that women's insecurity would persist, as it relocated power back to the conservative warlords that had initially instituted systematic and structural violence against females before the Taliban (Human Rights Watch 2009: 4).

In conclusion, it is argued that the concept of military intervention as a method of increasing women's security should be carefully scrutinized and questioned by feminists. In Afghanistan, it is evident that the U.S.-led intervention, whilst lauded by the international community and United States feminists, did not substantially improve the rights of women within society. In fact, it may have enhanced and perpetuated women's insecurity; via the physical violence and instability caused by invasion, and also as a result of transferring government power back to conservative and power-hungry *mujahidin* warlords. Feminists should therefore be wary of such justifications for military conflict by government, and alternatively seek to understand the root causes of women's injustice in a global interconnected world. As discovered, women's security in Afghanistan is the result of specific historical political factors, such as chronic stability and conflict, in which the U.S. government has played a large part. The neo-colonialist discourses that were evident within United States society at the time of the Afghanistan war misrepresented this national landscape and wrongly located the Taliban regime as the sole oppressor of women. It is easy for feminists to be implicated, as Kandiyoti says, "in the geopolitical maneuverings of powerful global actors"; therefore, it is important that we should constantly seek to deconstruct the hidden meanings behind international political tactics.

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