Truth and Reality: The Plight of Afghan Women's Rights Explained

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#### **INTRODUCTION**

Following the September 11 attacks, American foreign policy took on a more interventionist tone in an effort to protect itself from threats to its national security. Among these efforts was the invasion of Afghanistan (popularly known as 'The War on Terror') in October 2001 in which American forces sought the removal of terrorist organizations such as Al-Qaeda and Islamic fundamentalists such as the Taliban. The American armed forces were successful in the intervention's early stages; however, Taliban resurgence turned what was initially assumed to be a brief intercession in to a lengthy and expensive war. The war against terror soon evolved to become a peace initiative. Among these initiatives was to protect women's rights and further progress them to include the right to education, and the freedom to engage in economic activity. Although US-backed reports demonstrate that Afghan women are steadily on their way to the attainment of such rights as a result of foreign interventions, academic work suggests otherwise. Therefore, this paper will argue that the US-led intervention in Afghanistan has not brought forth significant gains for women's rights because of the construction of Afghan women as 'gendered slaves' further subordinates them, the Western ideal of universal human rights problematic within the cultural context of Afghanistan, and the process of emancipation of women furthers their insecurity by promoting various forms of neocolonial violence.

The paper, throughout its course, will examine the historical circumstances of the rights of Afghan women. It will then be argued in the post-9/11 era, the rhetoric employed by the West, which frames the image of the female victim that would be "saved", is harmful in nature. This statement will be followed by a critical analysis of the "universality of

human rights", and question its applicability in the Afghan context (with regards to cultural and ideological opposition). Lastly, the paper will end with a critical analysis of how the process of *emancipation* further increases the insecurity of women by homogenizing an entire female population, and demonizing significant cultural identities such as the burqa.

## WOMEN'S RIGHTS IN AFGHANISTAN: BEFORE AND AFTER

To understand the cause of the conditions of Afghan women, a succinct historical analysis is needed. After the power vacuum following the defeat of the Soviet Union, a new group came forth, called the Taliban. Supported by the Government of Pakistan, they provided hope for the Afghan people. They condemned the militant groups fighting for power, they provided security to different territories, and introduced a conservative version of Islam<sup>i</sup>. However, the acceptance of the Taliban into Afghan society had a devastating effect. As the power of the Taliban grew, their agenda revealed that they wanted to establish a state based on Islamic radicalism that would provide sanctuary for enemies of the West. The deaths and injuries of millions during the Soviet occupation, along with the Islamist movement drastically deteriorated the condition of Afghan women through a strict interpretation of *Sharia* Law.

The early 1990's marked a critical point in the plight of Afghan women as Islamic fundamentalists declared the assassinations of women who worked for humanitarian organizations. During this time, the Taliban also established four main policies in regards to women: (1) they were forbidden to work, (2) they were forbidden to go to school, (3) they were forced to wear the *burqa* (full body garment), and (4) women could only leave

their homes if accompanied by a male relative. The penalty for breaking the policies meant public beatings or even death<sup>ii</sup>. Yet, the US government, responsible for the upbringing of the Taliban and thus the condition of women, did not intervene. In 1995, reports by humanitarian organizations described the condition of Afghan refugees as the "worst refugee crisis in the world". Oxfam estimated that 5.5 million Afghans were at risk of experiencing food shortages, and UNICEF predicted that 100,00 children would die during the winter<sup>iii</sup>. However, the conditions of Afghan refugees during winter still remain the same in the post 9/11 era, as thousands of children freeze to death in their makeshift tents every year.

While horrible conditions still exist, we should not disregard the advancement of women's rights after the intervention. For instance, over 33% of children who attend school are female. In addition, women can now freely step outside their homes without a male relative. Women were also allowed to participate in the 2004 Afghan Presidential election. Nonetheless, most situations have gotten worse since the US intervention. Before 9/11, the Kabul Jail had no female prisoners, yet after 9/11, women were being imprisoned, tortured, and even executed for 'crimes' such as divorce. One year after the intervention, women faced the second highest maternal mortality rate in the world; it is currently estimated that 1700 out 100,000 women die each year<sup>iv</sup>. In addition to this, the literacy rate for women is almost zero in many rural areas of the country<sup>v</sup>.

This begs the question: what has changed for Afghan women? Before 9/11, the Taliban first gained attention by throwing acid in the faces of women who refused to wear the veil. However, women still face the same threats as schools are riddled with bullets and cases of acid attacks are ongoing. Furthermore, the overall

condition of women in rural areas has deteriorated substantially. Women in those regions are denied universal healthcare, and they are victims of rape, strip searches, and other means of sexual chastisement<sup>vi</sup>. Research has shown that more than ever before, Afghan women are more likely to be victims of trafficking, forced into prostitution, and gang rape<sup>vii</sup>. Turmoil following conflict provides the ideal environment for women's rights abuse. Similar research studies have found that women's rights have decreased during the U.S. led occupation of Afghanistan largely because previously suppressed groups violent towards women began asserting themselves through insurgency. The human rights violations inflicted upon Afghan women suggests that the matter of "liberating" Afghan women has worsened their conditions. The following two segments lead us to the analysis of how the use of rhetoric and images of Afghan women are harmful in the "construction" the victim.

#### THE IMAGING OF WOMEN

Weeks after the 9/11 attacks, American media began to discover what human rights organizations had been battling against for years: the systemic oppression and subjugation of Afghan women<sup>viii</sup>. However, shortly after 9/11, *Burqa*-clad women were featured on the covers of many general interest magazines and newspapers, such as the New York Times<sup>ix</sup>. The sudden attention to the oppression of women in Afghanistan was unprecedented in American media. A year before 9/11, only 33 televised programs featured the oppression of women in Afghanistan, however, just months after the attacks that number increased to 628 programs<sup>x</sup>. The sudden attention to Afghan women in the post-9/11 era shows the deliberate unawareness of the American government and the media. For example, before 9/11, the Washington Press claimed that the reports from

feminist rights organizations were "exaggerated and emotional"<sup>xi</sup>. However, after 9/11 politicians consistently brought up the state of Afghan women and turned their attention in assisting their betterment. In November 2001, Laura Bush *pleaded* to:

"...kick off a world-wide effort to focus on the brutality against women and children by the al-Qaida terrorist network and the Taliban... children aren't allowed to fly kites; their mothers face beatings for laughing out loud...Only the terrorists and the Taliban threaten to pull out women's fingernails for wearing nail polish"<sup>xii</sup>.

The images of Afghan women in burqas after 9/11 were intended to provide the American people, and the international community, with the "moral" and "ethical" justification to intervene in Afghanistan. The liberation of Afghan women served as the foundation to sell the war in order to fulfill their interests. However, the manner in which Afghan women and their culture were portrayed is what is vital in understanding their continued plight.

#### **ORIENTALISM AND THE MEDIA**

Orientalism was a crucial part of the rhetorical framework that justified the war in Afghanistan. However, for the purpose of this essay, we shall assess orientalism in the context of imaging women and how such a process essentially constructs the victim. In several of his publications, Edward Said states that orientalism is the concept or the perception of "us" (the West) versus "them" (the "others" or the Easterners)<sup>xiii</sup>. He laments that orientalism pertains to:

"the idea that some races and cultures have a higher aim in life than others . . . it gives the more powerful, more developed, more civilized the right therefore to colonize others, not in the name of brute force or raw plunder, both of which are standard components of the exercise, but in the name of a noble ideal [protection of women]"<sup>xiv</sup>.

Thus, the concept of the burqa versus the *bare faces* of Western women was a tool used by the Bush administration, with support by the media, to provide a contrast between the oppressed, "hidden" women of Afghanistan compared to the "liberated and individual" Western women. This is a classic case of the gendering of nationalism<sup>xv</sup>.

This notion of the "protection" of women can be traced back to the 17th century when European colonialists sought to colonize indigenous lands under the guise of rescuing the "exotic brown women" from the barbaric villains<sup>xvi</sup>. Additionally, in the 1880's in Egypt, the British Empire sought to liberate Muslim women through Christianity from the "barbaric" Muslim men. Such neocolonial undertones were prevalent in generalizations made in popular magazines such as *Time*, which stated, "no where in the Muslim world are women treated as equal<sup>xvii</sup>".

In the case of Afghanistan, American politicians and media blamed the Afghan society in that the oppression of women was simply as a result of their "uncivilized" nature. However, they did not mention the fact that the American government was responsible for arming and training the Islamic fundamentalists in the 1980's, who were eventually a major factor in the plight of Afghan women. Nonetheless, the conditions of Afghan women proved rhetorically useful for American intervention in the region.

Such subordination of women is cannot be ignored, and as Stabile and Kumar address this concern:

"...Afghan women, work well, especially when they are not allowed to speak for themselves. As long as women are not permitted to speak for themselves, they provide the perfect grounds for an elaborate ventriloquist act, in which they serve as the passive vehicle for the representation of US interests"<sup>xviii</sup>.

After the fall of the Taliban in December 2001, President Bush announced the "liberation" of Afghan women. Yet, Human Rights Watch reports found ongoing violations of women's rights<sup>xix</sup>. Thus, it can be concluded that despite bringing "awareness" to the issue at of women's rights, the US media and intervention in general has caused a greater setback for the liberation of Afghan women. By presenting women as vulnerable and dependent, it essentially depoliticizes their plight and reinstates various paternalistic roles to be played by external actors.

#### UNIVERSALISM VERSUS RELATIVISM AND HUMAN RIGHTS

The gender equality movement in the West focuses mainly on the religious traditions of Afghanistan, rather than to investigate the narration of the development of oppression in the country and the Western role in this paradigm<sup>xx</sup>. Attacking the cultural and religious facets of Afghanistan creates more issues by further embedding the concept of the "West" versus "them" in the psyche of Afghans. Thus, this brings us to the discussion about the cultural relativity of the human rights policies pursuant to Afghan women. It was common knowledge by Western politicians and scholars that the toppling of the Taliban would mean the emancipation of Afghan women through the unveiling of

the burqa, for example. However, to their surprise, Afghan women continue to wear the garment. Historically, the burqa was worn across the Middle East, Asia, and parts of Europe as a form of covering in a way to signify a women's modesty<sup>xxi</sup>. In addition, Afghan women also view the garment as an emblematic partition of the private spheres between men and women. For instance, the burqa is in fact seen as a liberating tool because it enables women to move freely while still observing their religious practices and safeguarding themselves from outsiders<sup>xxii</sup>.

To have policies and rhetoric developed and aimed at demonizing such a symbolic cultural garment is unwarranted and offensive. The burqa only becomes an issue when it is forced upon a woman, such as during the Taliban rule. Otherwise, it is completely optional. In addition, not only does the burqa present an opportunity to be closer to God, it is also worn to display a woman's respectability by allowing them to unveil their faces to whom they feel most comfortable with. Contrary to popular Western feminists, this garment appears to give more rights and protection to a woman than without it.

This paper is not suggesting that cultural relativism should stand as an obstacle to better human rights; rather it should be seen as a way to progress *with* Afghan women without demonizing an important aspect of their culture. There must be more open dialogue about the possibility that Afghan women want to attain different things than the West wants for them<sup>xxiii</sup>. The rhetoric developed by the West, mainly by the US administration, is irrespective of the diverse history and language of numerous cultural circumstances of Afghan women. For example, women's activists in Afghanistan will suggest rebuilding Afghanistan in accordance to an Islamic form of governance, contrary

to the liking of the West. Reports indicate that most Afghan women look to Iran as a model nation. Where the West views Iran in a negative light, most Afghan women appreciate the economic and academic gains made by Iranian women<sup>xxiv</sup>. That being said, feminist discourse along with foreign policy must engage with the differences in opinions regarding approaches to social and political change. This brings the discussion to the final argument that past and current approaches to advancing women's rights in fact reinforces various forms of neocolonial violence. An analysis of the language used by Western actors will also be included.

## **REINFORCING NEOCOLONIAL VIOLENCE**

This essay is not arguing against the acts committed by the Taliban, rather that US foreign policy discourse "homogenizes a very diverse population of Muslim women in Afghanistan, romanticizes the unveiling of Afghan women, and it demonizes" significant cultural practices such as wearing the burqa<sup>xxv</sup>. The process of framing the victim neglects the origins and underlying languages of religious practices that have spanned across the region. Simplifying oppression to cultural practice problematizes the issue further not only by hindering Afghan's views towards the West, but also by drawing closer to the "neocolonial politics of US efforts to emancipate Afghan women according to a Western model of liberal feminism"<sup>xxvi</sup>. Such colonial practices are akin to those employed by French colonialists who described the unveiling of North African woman as a form of eroticism.

Following 9/11, Western governments demonized the Burqa by comparing it with freedoms enjoyed by women in the West. However, by doing so, such representations of cultural identity removes the option for women to choose to wear it out of preference or

as a custom<sup>xxvii</sup>. Furthermore, such neocolonial language promotes the violence on Afghan women by neglecting them the option for agency through the simple choice of choosing what to wear. After the fall of the Taliban, American news outlets and politicians suggested that many Afghan women were wearing the burga because they "wanted to wait for the approval" of the Northern Alliance fighters<sup>xxviii</sup>. This, in fact, was not the case. And to belittle Afghan women in such a way hurts their cause and further subordinates them to men. In addition, a common theme in this matter is that neocolonial language tends to repeatedly reduce the female population in Afghanistan simply as victims of male agency<sup>xxix</sup>. As a result, this creates a very dangerous environment because women are then systematically developed to become 'subjects' of men and thus, exploited to violence. Such violence can occur in the form of rape, assault, and murder<sup>xxx</sup>. Following the US intervention, Laura Bush stated, "because of recent military gains in Afghanistan, women are no longer imprisoned in their homes"<sup>xxxi</sup>. This statement concerning the security of Afghan women through US military gains was not only deceitful, but also destructive in its language. The unrelenting insecurity and human rights abuses in Afghanistan are mainly a result of the actions and policy carried out by the US and other external forces, rather than perceived inevitable social factors within the country<sup>xxxii</sup>. Lastly, it is crucial to understand that Afghan women faced structural violence prior to the wars. However, the homogenization of females, paternalism of Afghan society, and neocolonial rhetoric contributes significantly to the existing structural violence<sup>xxxiii</sup>.

## CONCLUSION

In summation, the state of Afghan women has not experienced the gains that is perceived in the West mainly due to the harmful rhetoric of emancipation and by the process of framing the victim, the inapplicability of universal human rights to the cultural and religious context of Afghanistan, and the oversimplification of a diverse female population and demonization of a cultural identity enforces elements of neocolonial violence.

The problem with the interventionist agendas of the West is that they are historically, culturally, and politically insensitive in an Afghan context. Their solutions might work in the Western world, but in the Afghan context, they need to tailor their approach. For example, the traditions of the Pashtun people involve the seclusion of women and rigid codes of family honour, so government attempts to change these ingrained traditions were inevitably ill-fated<sup>xxxiv</sup>. Failure to tailor interventions to the history, culture, politics, and economy of the country will ultimately be counterproductive as it would also 'fuel further anti-Western resentment', such as the ideals of universal freedoms<sup>xxxv</sup>. Additionally, although studies prove that intervention leading to democracy improves women's conditions<sup>xxxvi</sup>.

Finally, it should be eminent that discourses of Afghan women's rights are rarely held amongst Afghan women themselves. Afghan women know what is better for them than anyone else. They know the obstacles and weaknesses in advancing their socioeconomic and political conditions. Afghan women, from first-hand experience, know

how to deal with their complex circumstances (from patriarchal systems, to oppressive experiences under the Taliban, their current situation, and how their ancient culture may play a part in their subordination). The plight of Afghan women will continue unless the international community does not stop the perpetual state of oppression.

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