

AMERICAN UNIVERSITY OF BEIRUT

MARGINALIZED ISLAMIC FEMINISM FOR TALIBAN-  
APPROVED POLICIES: PEACEKEEPING AND ITS  
CONTRADICTIONS IN AFGHANISTAN

by  
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This work would not be possible without the incredible resilience demonstrated daily by Afghan activists and scholars who continue to publish and challenge the Taliban's dictate and western imperialism despite all the dangers of doing so.

To all the women who stand high despite the crushing efforts of misogyny.

# ABSTRACT

## OF THE THESIS OF

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The following thesis tackles Afghan women's safe access to the public sphere in general and dignified employment in particular after the Taliban's insurgency. Using frameworks of Islamic feminism to challenge the Taliban's dominance over Islamic jurisprudence and, therefore, women's rights highlights the need to consider frameworks that act upon the local context- even if shouldered by international actors such as the UN. While stressing that the primary focus should be on local feminist activism and frameworks, the thesis also highlights the realistic need for international involvement- specifically in the form of the UN peacekeeping mission to secure the Taliban's accountability.

The existing academic production on Afghan women from the West is often entangled with a narrative that supports the war on terror, and I aim to challenge it. While many publications managed to highlight the struggles of Afghan women, few actively engage with policy proposals to advocate for effective change. This thesis aims to take the existing knowledge and realities on the following issues- Afghan women's rights through the diverse historical periods, Islamic feminism as a policy tool, gender and peacekeeping and Afghan women's access to the public sphere in order to produce policy recommendations. While international actors caused incredible damage to Afghanistan and Afghan women in the name of "security", the final policy recommendations focus on the possibilities of UN peacekeeping while stressing its significant shortcomings and the specific ways in which Islamic feminism could be used as an advocacy and policy tool for fighting for women's rights within the local frameworks, which also actively challenges the lazy western excuse of cultural relativism. The findings indicate that while the struggle for women's rights under the Taliban is incredibly challenging and strategies need to be reassessed regularly based on recent developments, it is not impossible.

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# CHAPTER I

## BRIEF SUMMARY & INTRODUCTION

This thesis 'primary aim is to provide policy recommendations for Afghan women's safe access to the public sphere and dignified employment. After the insurgency, the Taliban promised the international society that they would respect women's rights within the framework of Islamic jurisprudence. Nevertheless, nine months have passed since and women still cannot travel without a mahram, go to work or to school. Given the current situation under which any argumentation with regard to secularism and international treaties such as CEDAW will not have any effect on the Taliban, I have chosen to tackle the issue of women's rights from within the Islamic framework. Islamic feminism, or simply arguing for women's rights from within the Islamic framework, is not only an effective tool against the Taliban that twisted Islam into a misogynistic weapon. Instead, Islamic feminism can also offer a tool for policymaking that is more relevant to Afghan women than most forms of western feminism that are often not as intersectional as they would like to appear. Further, by creating policies from within the framework, one also challenges western imperialism and western passivity on the pretence of cultural relativism. I argue that there is nothing Islamic about the Taliban's restrictions on women, and they need to be effectively challenged.

Nevertheless, "fighting from within" for women's rights is not sufficient if there is none to secure the Taliban's accountability. Therefore, I am arguing for a UN peacekeeping mission that would provide monitoring. The most extensive chapter of my thesis focuses on the issue pertaining to the international presence, highlighting the past military invasions of Afghanistan under the pretence of "protecting women" and the UN

peacekeeping's previous violations of local women and neglect of the indigenous activism and policy preferences. I argue that while security and military aspects of peacekeeping are essential, they actually need to tackle the security of the whole society- including women and their specific needs and daily realities, which usually go completely disregarded in such missions in the name of international geopolitics.

While proposing policy recommendations for Afghan women's rights under the Taliban seems like an impossible utopistic mission, I argue that with a precise organization between the international actors providing monitoring and resources and the local actors providing expertise and policy recommendations relevant and realistic to the local context many changes can be achieved. However, it is essential to stress that the international actors must finally recognize their place and enhance the local voices rather than silencing them with the superior assumption of knowing better.

### **A. Opening Section**

Since the Taliban's insurgency in August 2021, the civilians have paid the price in the geopolitical game of power and greed. Nevertheless, the price is never the same for everyone, and as in the war on terror, Afghan women once again pay for the cruelty of others with an extra tax. My thesis aims to establish a policy proposal for Afghan women's safe access to the public sphere in general while focusing on policies for ensuring dignified employment in particular. The research primarily highlights the local scholars and narratives aiming to challenge the existing problematic discourse on "saving Muslim women". I aim to challenge the Taliban's dominance over Islamic jurisprudence by introducing frameworks from Islamic feminism while highlighting the pragmatic- and

problematic need for the involvement of the UN's peacekeeping mission since the Taliban will not stand true to its promises without strict international monitoring.

This research aims to identify gender-inclusive policy recommendations that are relevant to the local context and realistic to the limitations posed by the Taliban's dominance. My argument is that while international involvement is inherently problematic, it allows for stretching the very limitations and, if done correctly, can offer dignified access to the public sphere for women.

This chapter aims to provide an introduction to my research by discussing the background and contemporary context, followed by stating the research problem, my aims and objectives, the research's significance and limitations and finally offering the structural outline where I mention the major points for each chapter.

## **B. The Study's Background**

When it comes to the background of Afghan women's fight for their rights in Afghanistan, there are many specific historical periods to look at, and each of them carries dozen of diverse narratives. Nevertheless, when examining the end of the Cold War and the geopolitical plays between the US and the Soviet Union in Afghanistan, the mass media usually portray only the US's part of the story. The third chapter of my thesis discusses the historical realities and their implications on women and geopolitics in detail. However, it is essential to note that Afghan women were active agents struggling to obtain their rights long before the Soviet Union's occupation, and the following American invasion certainly did not aim to "liberate" them.

As noted in Parenti's outstanding paper "America's Jihad" from 2001, the US heavily funded the Mujahideen and supported the unprecedented growth of Islamic fundamentalism as their perfect weapon against the Soviet Union. He quotes the former

US national security advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski, when he expressed his complete lack of regret towards the Afghanistan war: "What is most important to the history of the world? The Taliban or the collapse of the Soviet Empire? Some stirred-up Moslems or the liberation of Central Europe and the end of the cold war?"<sup>1</sup>

I highlight the events of the Cold War and the US's support- and their effective creation of the Taliban as we know them to dismiss the War on Terror narrative of saving Afghan women. Afghan women are the most obvious representation of white male imperialist dominance over geopolitics, military and security. These structures care little for women in their own countries, leave alone abroad. Nevertheless, the US had no shame in mobilizing American feminists to sustain the War on Terror to "save Afghan women" from the misogynistic nightmare they actually created to defeat the Soviets.

I focus on these specific events because it is vital to engage with the local academic production and the narrative of local activists. However, engaging international actors, particularly the UN, is essential to ensure the Taliban's accountability. By noting these events, I am highlighting two issues. First, Afghanistan has been colonized and occupied by diverse western forces for over a century and, therefore, when drafting a policy that includes any western presence in Afghanistan, it is essential to establish rigid boundaries. Second, since the diverse countries- and the US in particular, with its reckless withdrawal, repeatedly failed Afghan women, it should be primarily Afghan women establishing their proposals for preferred policies, frameworks and approaches.

Since the US's military withdrawal from Afghanistan, the Taliban executed an insurgency that escalated in August 2021, with Kabul's conquest. During my thesis, I often use sources that tackle the period between 1996 and 2001 when the Taliban was in

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<sup>1</sup> Parenti, "America's Jihad."

power the last time. While the group tries to appear more moderate to the international actors and seeks international engagement, I argue that their misogyny and cruel practices did not change a bit. The group substituted the Ministry of Women's affairs with the one of "Virtue" which practically aims to eradicate women from the public sphere while treating them as mere objects in the private one. Further, they banned girls from going to school and prohibited women from any form of employment except "cleaning female bathrooms". Every week, the situation worsens with new bans on travelling without a mahram or visiting a male doctor.

Nevertheless, in their international discourses, the group promised that Afghan women would have their rights within the frameworks of Islamic jurisprudence. For this reason, I dedicated a detailed part of my literature review and one entire chapter to Islamic feminism. I argue that in order to challenge the generic western passivity built on excuses of cultural relativism on the one hand and to challenge the Taliban's misogynistic dominance over the interpretation of the religion on the other hand, it is crucial to use the Islamic framework and challenge the Taliban's highly questionable interpretations from within.

The development since August 2021 posed significant challenges in tackling women's rights in Afghanistan, given the ever-changing restrictions imposed on women by the Taliban and the dynamic developments in the international approaches and increasing engagements with the Taliban. While the events in general posed an immense challenge- and some might say unpenetrable barrier when it comes to arguing in favour of women's rights policies, I have decided to argue otherwise. By examining Afghan women's active agency and advocacy for their rights throughout the diverse regimes in the last century- focusing especially on the last Taliban insurgency and women's

resistance on the one hand, and examining the Taliban's desire for international recognition and cooperation, on the other hand, I argue that there are still ways how to argue for women's rights.

### **C. The Research Problem**

Under the Taliban's dictate, there is no single aspect of women's lives that would go untouched. Therefore, deciding which issue should be prioritized poses a problem on its own. Finally, I have decided to tackle women's access to the public sphere and employment rights in specific. Most international actors channel media coverage only on the issue of girls' access to education. While I cannot stress how fundamental girls' education is- for individuals and a healthy society, it does not suffice. Opening schools for girls does not help if they cannot even walk safely for their lessons. Further, what is the point of fighting for girls' education if the international actors generally do not push in the same way for women's access to university or their employment rights? Suppose girls study at school the same way as boys- and here I argue that they inherently must study harder and demonstrate greater skills in a society that is always ready to consider their education as a secondary luxury. Given the daily struggles of Afghan women for education and resources, it is unacceptable that they get banned from higher education and employment, leading to complete negation of any prospects for improvement of their current standing.

Women in Afghanistan were standing high during the Soviet occupation, the Mujahideen, the Taliban and the US invasion. They demonstrated an incredible form of resilience that should not need to exist in the first place. I argue that the international actors owe Afghan women more than empty praises for how tall they can stand when



beaten and empty condemnations of the beating with no effective counteractions. My emphasis on the essentiality of women's access to the public sphere derives from the recognition that all women- Urban, rural, conservative, progressive of diverse ethnicities, educated or illiterate need safe access to the public sphere in some ways. Safe mobility should not be a privilege of one gender while the other one is imprisoned at home in the name of honour, which is actually misogyny polished with a twisted narrative of religion.

Safe access to the public sphere means having the possibility of moving without a mahram (which many Afghan women do not even have). It is absurd that in the 21st-century, women must fight for dignified access to healthcare or even mundane tasks such as groceries. Taliban treats women as less than second-class citizens in Islam's name when the religion explicitly states the equality of humans and established precise rulings on women's rights more than 1400 years ago. There is nothing religious about the Taliban's restrictions and cruelty; however, when a group is utterly incapable of governance and effective state-building, the control of terror is their only option to hold citizens silent and obedient. Of course, this proves significantly easier when half of the citizens can get beaten even for simply leaving their house.

A public sphere is a place of resources, power and control. Employment specifically is essential. While addressing violations in the private sphere under the Taliban is almost impossible, if a woman has access to dignified employment with an accurate salary (noting the incredible gender wage gap that existed even prior to the Taliban's insurgency), it gives her at least a certain form of a leverage and possibility to leave the abusive environment. However, if the unconditional requirement for Mahram is not challenged, a woman can have her own house and income and still be in danger every time when leaving her house unaccompanied.

Therefore, my primary aim is to argue for women's safe and dignified access to the public sphere and employment under the Taliban's "governance" by challenging their discourse on women's rights through Islamic feminism. The topic is rather unexplored. While some articles tackle the Islamic point of view pertaining to access to the public sphere, it is usually done only on the theoretical and anthropological platform, rather than including policy proposals to challenge the situation in specific circumstances. In my regard, access to the public sphere- while in diverse degrees is fundamental for all women. Therefore, my goal is to offer policy recommendations, that aim to better inform international actors of local voices and narratives that are challenging the Taliban's hegemony. The existing policy proposals pertaining to Afghan women's access to employment are mostly from the period of the last government and are not vast, specific or considerate of the local context; therefore, I sought to consider the international actors- and the UN specifically, questioning what they have to offer on the matter- tackling the possibilities of monitoring, reporting and funding.

While many non-academic articles and vague UN condemnation of the Taliban's treatment of Afghan women exist, they are not effectively proposing specific policies to ensure a change. It is one thing to condemn the violations of women's right to maintain an appearance of specific values in public. Nevertheless, it is entirely different from advocating for specific proposals that could challenge the current post-Taliban insurgency realities. Therefore, my research aims to address this research gap.

The current playground is very limited to mitigate women's access to the public sphere. However, being limited does not mean impossible. Tackling this issue matters immensely, for Afghan civilians and women especially suffer from misogynistic geopolitical games that use them only as tokens. Women in geopolitics are always

symbols- either of the Islamic oppression in the western media or the American immorality in the Islamic ones. However, I want to discuss women as they are- as humans that have been negated equal access to all the important places. The absence of women in the public sphere and employment should be alarming simply for the injustice. Nevertheless, patriarchy and women's exclusion is not hurting only the female part of the society but the society as a whole while dragging Afghanistan's economy even deeper.

#### **D. The Research Aims, Objectives and Questions**

The primary research aim is to examine the current state of Afghanistan's public space under Taliban dominance and offer insights from Islamic feminism against Taliban's control of the public sphere and women's rights. After examining the daily realities and the heavy implications on women's mobility and their basic rights, I aim to examine the diverse variables that could provide mechanisms for challenging the current status focusing on the international pressure on Taliban and the possible roles the UN could play instead of its current empty denouncements. Considering the Taliban is utterly deaf towards any negotiation on women's rights based on international conventions such as CEDAW, I aim to highlight how Islamic feminism, usually present in the academic sphere, could be effectively used in Afghanistan's policy recommendations and proposals.

The research objective focuses on collecting the currently available literature relevant to the research aim. In particular, I will focus on topics such as Islamic feminism, gender-inclusive peacekeeping and peacebuilding processes, Afghan women's resistance during the 1996-2001 period and Afghan women's access to employment in diverse periods- noting the specific focus on rural areas that often get neglected in policymaking. By evaluating and challenging the existing narrative, my objective is to create a new

discourse responsive to the current context and realistically evaluate the possibilities and circumstances needed for its implementation. I am identifying the present discourses in the western media and challenging it- with specific focus on whether the engagement with the Taliban and financial support is gaining legitimacy to the group and whether the civilians- and women in particular need to be sacrificed in such processes. I am also comparing and contrasting the strategies of policymaking on the local level that engages religious actors and tackle female Islamic representation on the one hand and the possibilities and dangers of involving the UN peacekeeping mission on the other hand.

The specific research questions of my research are: How can we implement a gender-inclusive policy under the Taliban's dictate? Could Islamic feminism be used as an effective framework for feminist policy advocacy under the Taliban? Is UN peacekeeping needed for ensuring responsive Taliban accountability? If so, what are the shortcomings of the UN mission and their implications on civilians that have to be assessed prior to the mission?

### **E. The Significance of my Research**

One thesis- even if taken into consideration and implemented, cannot challenge the Taliban's misogyny on its own. Nevertheless, I hope to offer a certain middle ground of realistic need for including international actors on the one hand and stressing the need for primarily focusing on local actors, activists and effective needs of Afghan women from within a framework that is respectful to the local culture and religion. First, the thesis will contribute to the body of knowledge on feminist activism under dictatorship, gender agency and Islam and the focalization of gender problems within peacekeeping and peacebuilding processes. Nonetheless, I hope that the significance of my research

will not be limited only to academic discussions but rather will provide value and ideas pertaining to feminist policy advocacy within a context where the (dominant) western take on feminism and gender mainstreaming cannot be realistically implemented.

I should not need to note that women's rights matter. Unfortunately, geopolitics are inherently patriarchal, swindling with pretty terms such as "stability", "security", and "international cooperation" while remaining silent about the Taliban's cruelty towards women for strategic interests. On the one hand, western countries do not provide any effective response based on lazy cultural relativism. On the other hand, Muslim-majority countries fail Afghan women even more so by remaining silent while others suffer in the name of their religion, interpreted in highly questionable ways.

Afghan women have been suffering for nine months under the Taliban, and yet the international actors and the US, in particular, appear to be punishing and starving the civilians rather than acting.

The significance of my research lies in its insistence on a proactive approach from every mentioned actor while identifying the precise issues. Hopefully, the UN will finally recognize that UNAMA is not enough to mitigate all the violations and that a specific focus on negotiating peacekeeping presence is needed. Despite my arguments on the lackings and shortcomings of UN peacekeeping, I cannot stress enough just how essential the mission is for holding the Taliban accountable.

## **F. Limitations**

The limitations are tackled in detail in the methodology chapter. In the bigger picture, the issue of lack of relevant data was quite significant. When policy drafting, I would have appreciated greater details on Afghanistan's demographics and reliable

national statistics on women's employment, illiteracy, early marriages, access to education and further. Unfortunately, with these quantifiable sources missing, my recommendations always seek to address this issue before drafting policies since having as much information as necessary on the target to produce a great-quality proposal are fundamental.

Another limitation that I tackle in methodology pertains to ethical considerations- and my decision not to conduct interviews based on my assessment vulnerability which I elaborate on in methodology. A further challenge is connected to my positionality, which is also tackled in detail in the third chapter.

As per the scope of my research, it has been significantly challenging to continuously update and modify diverse sections based on my desire to produce policy recommendations that are as up-to-date with the current developments as possible. The final framework of research tackled events between August 2021 and March 2022, and some of the most significant reconsiderations were connected to Biden's "release" of 7\$ billion in frozen Afghan funds and the Oslo talks with the Taliban.

While my research is highly specific to the case of Afghanistan and, therefore, cannot be generalized (without reasonable modifications), I do not consider this the most significant limitation. I argue that the section on Islamic feminism and advocacy for women's rights within employment, in particular, can also be applied in the case of Pakistan- since there are significant cultural similarities, and it has the second-largest Afghan diaspora (after Iran) and other countries with Muslim-majority.

## **G. The Structural Outline**

The first chapter is a literature review divided into the following sections: "Islamic feminism", "Feminism, Islamic feminism and its applications in Afghanistan", "Gender-sensitive peacekeeping and peacebuilding", "Evaluating geopolitics and the UN's possible involvement", and "Taliban and the legitimacy trap". Each chapter aims to review the already existing academic works that are in ways relevant and interconnected to my research. The chapter is finalized with a hypothesis that analyzes the key findings and identifies the research gaps that are highly relevant for producing a new knowledge rather than repeating existing ones.

The second chapter tackles my methodology, highlighting the conceptual framework, research design, ethical considerations and positionality.

The third chapter, "Changing the narrative- War on terror, white feminism and the origins of Taliban", seeks to be a more elaborated study's background. I am firmly convinced that being aware of the history of Afghan women's struggle, the realities behind the War on Terror, challenging the notion of the Taliban being a Pashtun movement and highlighting the intersectionality of Afghan women's fight for their rights while also challenging the imperialistic notions of white feminism being the saviour are all essential. It is impossible to grasp the entangled problematic of arguing for international support when one does not consider the trauma of past violations. I argue that historical awareness is essential for producing relevant policy proposals.

The fourth chapter, "Islamic feminism as a policy tool in Afghanistan", elaborates in more depth on the section on Islamic feminism in the literature review. I seek to move beyond the theoretical narrative in academia. I also seek to move beyond the efforts to discredit women for using this framework out of pragmatism rather than faith. The

chapter discusses the advantages and problematics of arguing from within the framework. Further, it focuses specifically on the issue of public space and employment access while considering how the theoretical framework could serve feminist policy advocacy under the Taliban.

The fifth chapter, "Potential UN peacekeeping presence in Afghanistan after the Taliban's Insurgency", is quite vast and has two sections. In the first one, I focus particularly on the lack of gender-inclusive policies within UN peacekeeping and inadequate prevention and persecution of the peacekeepers' violations and abuses of local women. Highlighting these issues is not done to argue against peacekeeping missions but rather to stress that essential changes must be made if the mission is to sustain Afghan women instead of further worsening their situation. The second section of this chapter deals with gendered issues significantly less and engages with the technicalities of the missions putting emphasis on the Taliban's consent and whether it is essential for the mission, the robustness of the mission, which countries could engage and which I believe should not be included and the inherent dilemma of direct interaction with the Taliban

The sixth chapter, "Women's access to the public space and employment under the Taliban", tackles the feminist negotiation of gendered public space and the policies that need to be established. While it primarily challenges the patriarchal dominance of the public space in general, I am highlighting the incredible struggle of women when seeking adequate healthcare, the understudied case of rural women and the underappreciated work of professional women in the urban setting. Prior to offering policy recommendations, I am highlighting the agency of women in the 1996-2001 period under the Taliban, expressing my wish that while the Taliban did not become less cruel,



the international actors should create significant pressure to ensure that this time, Afghan women's resistance and work does not need to remain hidden in their living rooms.

The conclusion summarizes the policy recommendations while also reassessing whether the aims established in the introduction were met and proposing specific areas that need more attention in further research.

## CHAPTER II

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### **A. Background**

This chapter assesses and synthesizes existing academic literature and discourses on the specific topics relevant to my thesis. While identifying research gaps in the specific categories is essential for challenging the narrative and moving forward, it is no less important to give credit and express gratitude to the academics, scholars and writers for the immense work in the field prior.

Since I believe my topic requires an intersectional approach, I am conducting the literature review using this lens by bringing in three streams of literature together. The academic focus is on "Islamic feminism", "Application of Feminist approaches in Afghanistan's policymaking", "Gender-sensitive peacebuilding and peacekeeping", "Evaluation of geopolitics and UN's involvement", and "Taliban with the legitimacy trap". The hypothesis at the end of the chapter identifies the research gaps and the relevance of my research.

#### **B. Major Specific Categories**

##### ***1. Islamic Feminism***

The discussions on women's rights in Islamic jurisprudence have existed for centuries, together with the historical notions of women defying the patriarchal society while staying true to their religion. However, the very concept of "Islamic feminism" emerged with its controversies around 1990. This section seeks to introduce the thoughts of the most important scholars and supporters of Islamic feminism as much as introducing

the opposition that questions whether the fight for women's rights within the Islamic framework should include the term "feminism" that for many is interlinked with western colonialism.

The first piece I want to mention is Fatima Seedat's "Islamic Feminism: Between Inadequacy and Inevitability" from 2013.<sup>2</sup> While there are significant points of Seedat's discourse I disagree with, this paper offers an amazing evaluation of the diverse narratives and approaches introduced by diverse scholars. She notes Laila Ahmed, Fatima Mernissi and Amina Wadud as those in support of the new concept of Islamic feminism on the one hand and Zeenath Kausar, Haideh Moghissi and Reza Afsari as scholars who wish to keep these two frameworks separate. As per the author, she questions the relevance of Islamic feminism as a tool. While Badran, whose work I will discuss further in this section, highlights the analytical opportunities, Seedat disagrees, pointing out the colonial atrocities conducted in the very name of feminism. Seedat acknowledges that struggles for gender equality are present in diverse cultures, but nevertheless, she refuses Badran's opinion of feminism not being a western construct. Between these scholars that are strictly against or in favour of using the concept of Islamic feminism, she notes Wadud's work as a compromise since she uses and benefits from the feminist methodologies and yet refuses the "neocolonial hegemony of feminism." Seedat notes that her fundamental issue with the concept of Islamic feminism" is that with its language, it inherently legitimizes western and liberal feminism as the normative standard. While my personal view on the matter differs from Seedat's take and is closer to the scholarship introduced by Badran, her work is fundamental and raises important questions. Nevertheless, the author's

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<sup>2</sup> Seedat, "Islam, Feminism, and Islamic Feminism: Between Inadequacy and Inevitability."

reoccurring inconsistencies between the terminology not properly distinguishing sex and gender call for a revisit on the matter.

Since Islamic Feminism (whether we agree with the name or not) seeks a more equal and just form of religious interpretation, it still appears to focus primarily on cisgender heterosexual women. While it is true that most of these authors started publishing on Islamic Feminism in the 90s when the rights of cisgender heterosexual women were a valid starting point on the scale of being controversial, it is essential to address these issues now.

Seedat's paper is from 2013, and yet it discusses "sex equality in Islam".<sup>3</sup> I argue that this concept is no longer sufficing the discussions. On this matter, even though there are researches dealing with issues such as LGBT rights or the bioethics of gender transition from the Islamic point of view, in none of the readings mentioned in this sections I have seen acknowledgement of inclusivity towards any woman that "strays" outside of the conservative framework of what a woman should be. I am convinced that there is much space for improvement. Indeed, to discuss topics such as homosexuality and feminism from within the Islamic framework is incredibly challenging and will inherently lead to a backlash of criticism from conservatives, but I am strongly convinced these topics must be addressed. If feminism, and therefore Islamic feminism, is intersectional, how is it fair to leave the very women most likely to experience violence in conservative society behind? Finally, while many of the scholars dealing with Islamic feminism discuss its relationship with third-wave feminism, I have not found any academic articles dealing with fourth wave feminism and Islamic feminism. This intersection would surely offer exciting discussion focused on the notion of deconstructing

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<sup>3</sup> Seedat.

systems of power on the one hand and probably a sharp debate on the meaning of "sex-positivity" on the other.

Amal Grami, in her piece "Islamic feminism: a new feminist movement or a strategy by women for acquiring rights?" focuses less on the movement's vocabulary and more on the women behind the movement and their agenda. Grami starts by stating that Islamic Feminism overcame the East-West agenda by pragmatically using frameworks from both worlds, which according to Seedat, did not occur. She notes that despite the diverse scholarships, the phenomenon emerged due to women's increasing education that boosted the awareness of their rights. On the other hand, Badran<sup>4</sup> links it also to the emergence of new technological possibilities for mobilization via the internet. If the principles of Islamic feminism are applied in peacemaking processes in Afghanistan, a question highly relevant is whether the Quran should indeed be the only source of authority or whether international human rights can be inserted. Grami further calls out the hypocrisy of opposing the western concept of feminism, asking whether it is not a convenient choice that symbolizes the movements failure to "set free" from western influence.

She asks whether the emergence of Islamic feminism isn't defensive in its nature, was it the fear of being accused of loyalty to the West that made women in the Middle East dress up their feminism in a religious robe?<sup>5</sup> While Grami's challenge of the possible opportunism behind the emergence of Islamic feminism, I believe there is a gap in the discourse called "And so what" that should be addressed, especially in the case of Afghanistan. Not all women under the Taliban want to argue from the religious point of

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<sup>4</sup> Badran, "Between Secular and Islamic Feminism/s: Reflections on the Middle East and Beyond."

<sup>5</sup> Grami, "Islamic Feminism."

view; however, if in the current situation it is a way how to regain their rights, there should be no reason for opposing their fight. For this specific reason, Islamic feminism is the cornerstone of my literature review. Further, the framework adds to the intersectionality of my research by establishing a policy fight from within the religious culture relevant to the local context and cannot be openly opposed by the Taliban in the same way as policies based on western feminism.

Margot Badran, with her books and papers on Islamic feminism, has been my immense inspiration for years, and here, in particular, I want to focus on her paper "Between Secular and Islamic feminism/s: Reflections on the Middle East and beyond."<sup>6</sup> This paper is highly relevant also to the section on the history of Afghan women, focusing on the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the projects of state feminism. While some see the views of Secular and Islamic feminism as mortal enemies, she highlights their historical complementarity and coexistence. In her perception, Islamic feminism emerged as a fight against the resurging fundamentalist interpretations of Islam. Badran is the prominent voice among scholars when it comes to the argument that feminism is not a western construct and emerges in diverse cultures independently. Actually, she directly critiques the lack of awareness in the region on the issue and the refusal to move beyond the idea of colonialist feminism. Badran stresses that we must be wary of the conservatives that call Islamic Feminism a "western tool" just to discredit its teachings. Nevertheless, her statement that feminism needed a new edge, which Islamic Feminism provided, does resonate with Amal Grami's questions on opportunism. Interestingly, I see Badran owning this with pride when she offers a historical contextualization of women's (secular and Islamic) appropriation of Islam in order to regain their rights.

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<sup>6</sup> Badran, "Between Secular and Islamic Feminism/s: Reflections on the Middle East and Beyond."

Finally, as per research- and more importantly, advocacy gap in the discourse, she notices that there is no mobilized social movement behind Islamic feminism.<sup>7</sup> In my opinion, this matter cannot be solved through academic papers available to a few, but rather with mindful advocacy campaigns.

Valentine M. Moghadam's "Islamic Feminism and its discontents: Towards a resolution of the debate" highlights the disagreements between expatriate Iranian Islamic feminists and leftists. Further in the thesis, I also debate the rift between the expatriate and local perceptions while also noting the diverse discourses between leftists and those in support of Islam with the relevant implications for policy drafting. The Iranian scholarship on Islamic feminism is incredibly vast and colourful and flourished after the Iranian revolution. While the origins and reasons behind the emergence of this vast scholarship are rather dark, they might imply a possibility for a revival of Islamic feminist discourse and mobilization in today's Afghanistan. Moghadam does not shy away from engaging with the criticism- specifically, the one in Iran towards the movement and many arguments are highly relevant. For example, does Islamic feminism only conform to, legitimize and reinforce the state's repressive gender policies? Specifically to Iran, she notes Afsaneh Najmabadi, Nayereh Tohidi and Ziba Mir Hosseini as those in favour. On the other hand, Haideh Moghissi, Shahrzad Mojab and Hamed Shahidian believe that the movement undermines and delegitimizes secular trends and social forces. I believe this complaint is highly relevant to the case of Afghanistan, and I shall examine it in a particular section. Further, Moghadam quotes Tohidi insisting on the distinguishment of those who genuinely care for women's rights and those who seek dogmatic implementation.

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<sup>7</sup> Badran.

As per those, who oppose the idea, there is Haideh Moghissi (author of the controversial book "Feminism and Islamic fundamentalism"). Moghissi states that the achievements of Islamic feminism obscure the political, social and religious differences among Iranian women. Unlike Islamic Feminism in the US, the problem for her is, that we are not discussing a personal spiritual choice, but rather a legal and political Islam imposed on the whole nation. Further, Moghissi, unlike Badran, does not seek any possible reconciliation or union between the secular and Islamic feminists since she states that the movement is directly responsible for diminishing any efforts for secularization. Shahidian agrees with her but further states that the "fight from within" Islamic feminists undertake is futile due to the strong basis of the fundamentalist institutions and interpretations. Further, Shahidian states the same research gap I noticed prior, hence the inadequacy when it comes to addressing gender and sexuality.<sup>8</sup>

Anouar Majid's article "The Politics of Feminism in Islam" is quite a famous one, given that only on jstor he is quoted 203 times. However, I believe he is one of those people we must be wary of when advocating for women's rights from within the Islamic framework. While his article claims to care for women's rights, he argues against any form of secularization and harshly critiques any Muslim author who dared to critique political Islam in the diaspora, together with women who publish memoirs abroad "sharing realities of women on whose behalf they were never allowed to speak" and is bashing even Fatima Mernissi for desacralizing Quran by treating the scripture as a "mere historical document."<sup>9</sup> In her utterly spot-on comment on Majid's paper, Elizabeth Mayer states that Majid critiques Mernissi for not maintaining boundaries of personal freedoms

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<sup>8</sup> Moghadam, "Islamic Feminism and Its Discontents."

<sup>9</sup> Majid, "The Politics of Feminism in Islam."



that are determined by the divine, only because she dared to challenge men- exactly like Majid on transgressing these very boundaries.<sup>10</sup>

Finally, Ziba Mir-Hosseini's paper "Muslim Women's Quest for Equality" recognizes the Iranian Islamic revolution as a catalyst for an engagement between Islam and feminism. She transmits her immense expertise from an anthropologist's point of view and from the point of an internal activist. The key framework of her thought is the necessary differentiation between challenging fiqh and Sharia. Precisely, she states that while Sharia is divine, we need to challenge its patriarchal man-made interpretations at the level of fiqh.

Mir-Hosseini also notes how the rise in anticolonialist narrative and nationalist initiatives puts Muslims on the defensive towards traditional gender roles in which women serve as a symbol of cultural authenticity. Similarly to Badran, she recognizes the complementarity between secular feminism and Islamic one, highlighting the advances achieved at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>11</sup>

While discussing all the diverse papers on Islamic feminism- or any fight for women's rights from within the Islamic framework would take a whole thesis on its own, I wish to mention a few more books that shaped and challenged my ideas on the matter. Mai Yemeni's book "Feminism and Islam: Legal and Literary Perspectives,"<sup>12</sup> Margot Badran's "Feminism in Islam: Secular and Religious Convergences,"<sup>13</sup> Abu-Lughod's "Remaking Women: Feminism and Modernity in the Middle East."<sup>14</sup> Beyond the academic work, I wish to mention the memoir of Ayaan Hirsi Ali "Infidel"<sup>15</sup> that

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<sup>10</sup> Mayer, "Comment on Majid's 'The Politics of Feminism in Islam.'"

<sup>11</sup> Mir-Hosseini, "Muslim Women's Quest for Equality: Between Islamic Law and Feminism."

<sup>12</sup> Yamani and Allen, *Feminism and Islam*.

<sup>13</sup> Badran, *Feminism in Islam*.

<sup>14</sup> Abu-Lughod, *Remaking Women*.

<sup>15</sup> Hirsi Ali, *Infidel*.

challenges any ideology of convergence between Islam and feminism, and Negar Mottahedeh's "Whisper Tapes: Kate Millett in Iran"<sup>16</sup> that highlights the common inability of Western feminists to listen to the discourse of women, who fight for their rights without disregarding their religion. To conclude this section, I also want to mention the organization Musawah which fights for equality in the family and provides comprehensive papers on women's rights in the private sphere quoting Islamic sources.

## ***2. Feminism, Islamic Feminism and its applications in Afghanistan***

This section of a literature review will be brief since I am noting only the sources that directly discuss the idea of Islamic feminism related to Afghanistan or engage in a productive discussion on what can feminism offer to this particular peacebuilding process. While there are many articles (not many of them academic) when researching "Feminism in Afghanistan", most of the works are interlinked with orientalist narrative within the concept of War on Terror and proposals for seemingly quick fixes without any substance.

The first work I want to highlight is Javier Fabra-Mata and Muzhgan Jalal's "Female religious actors as peace agents in Afghanistan." The authors start by describing the research gap in the intersection of peacebuilding and religion, which predominantly focuses only on male figures. By conducting quantitative interviews with 20 female religious actors, they seek to illustrate the importance of religious literacy among Muslim women and the possible positive impact on peacebuilding. The authors argue that religious actors have diverse roles (advocate, mediator...) in peacebuilding processes and can shift the social structures. Further, the authors critique the UN security council

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<sup>16</sup> Mottahedeh, *Whisper Tapes*.

resolution 1325, which seeks to boost women's role in peacebuilding, but fails to acknowledge the centrality of Islam and followingly female religious actors in Afghan's society. As per the findings, all interviewed agreed upon the importance of male religious actors and their role in mediating conflicts in the public sphere. On the other hand, the interviewed women agreed that they have better access to mediating other women's issues in the private sphere. The authors concluded that research examining the power dynamics among female and male religious actors in Afghanistan is needed.<sup>17</sup> In my opinion, while the initiatives of women gaining religious knowledge are plausible, "female religious actor" does not necessarily mean an Islamic feminist, nor does it mean promoter of women's rights, and we must be critical of distinguishing these two terms.

The second paper I want to highlight is "Feminism, peace and Afghanistan", written by Sima Samar, whom I admire greatly for her work at the (now eliminated) ministry of women's affairs in Kabul. She argues that there will be no feasible peace negotiations in Afghanistan if women are not included. Unlike some of the previously mentioned scholars, she clearly states that feminism must play a fundamental role in paving the way forward. The article was written in 2019 when the peace negotiations were going on. The author notes the inconsistent behaviour of the West approaching the Taliban. While in 2001, everyone was hyper fixated on women's rights, during 2019, the issue of women was barely noted. I shall discuss this matter in the following sections since it demonstrates how easily women's rights are tossed away in the name of geopolitical gains and "international security".

Sima Samar's recommendations for securing a peacebuilding process in Afghanistan focus on the concept of inclusivity. She calls for a representation of Afghans

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<sup>17</sup> Fabra-Mata and Jalal, "Female Religious Actors as Peace Agents in Afghanistan."

in peacebuilding irrespective of their sexual orientation, ethnicity, or economic background. Her recommendations for creating an inclusive peacebuilding process were highly relevant in 2019; however, now, under the Taliban "government", they feel too hard to reach. While the call for healthy democracy feels almost impossible at this stage, as scholars, we can still apply her recommendations for an honest narration of the history and avoiding any policies that operate only as quick fixes rather than long term sustainable solutions.<sup>18</sup>

When discussing the implementation of feminist strategies in Afghanistan, we must be aware of the western tokenization of Afghan women in the War on Terror narrative, as discussed by Lila Abu-Lughod<sup>19</sup>, Rafia Zakaria<sup>20</sup>, Janine Rich<sup>21</sup> and Kim Berry<sup>22</sup> in order not to repeat previous mistakes.

## 2) *Gender-Inclusive Peacekeeping and Peacebuilding*

The main resource for this particular section is the UN's documents, such as meeting reports and relevant resolutions of the security council. As much as I am convinced that we must know the history behind the War on Terror and the Taliban's emergence, we must also be critical of the UN's colonialist past and shortcomings. While the UN as an institution is not perfect, many of its frameworks and past operations in Afghanistan offer relevant sources for drafting a new policy. For example, a meeting report by the UN women, "Gender-inclusive peace processes: Strengthening women's meaningful participation through constituency building", does a good job in transmitting the critical definitions of

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<sup>18</sup> Samar, "FEMINISM, PEACE, AND AFGHANISTAN."

<sup>19</sup> Abu-Lughod, "Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving?"

<sup>20</sup> Khan, "Against White Feminism by Rafia Zakaria — Experience over Empathy."

<sup>21</sup> Rich, "'Saving' Muslim Women: Feminism, U.S Policy and the War on Terror."

<sup>22</sup> Berry, "THE SYMBOLIC USE OF AFGHAN WOMEN IN THE WAR ON TERROR."

gender perspectives and offers ways for strengthening women's participation in the peacemaking processes. The report stresses that despite the UNSCR 1325 from 2000, women's representation in formal peace processes and negotiations remains critically low. The report explores the links between constituency building and formal peace processes considering relevant variables such as TSMs (Temporary special measures). As per the issue of Gender quotas, participants expressed concern with a local backlash which is crucial to consider in the case of Afghanistan.<sup>23</sup> As per the shortcomings, while the UN women report summarizes the main problematics, the language of recommendations falls relatively short with its everlasting "must be used" or "must be created" without actually identifying the stakeholders and relevant strategies for doing so. This reality is especially heartbreaking regarding reports and articles from 2019 and 2020 where Afghan activists such as Zarqa Yaftali express their hopes for women's inclusion in peacebuilding.<sup>24</sup>

As per academic writings on the matter, gender is finally discussed within the framework of post-conflict resolutions in the last ten years. Nevertheless, as shown in the following examples, the academic discussion is often not transmitted into practice. Swarna Rajagopalan's Reflections on feminism and foreign policy asks how to adapt a feminist perspective. She also meditates on the issue of representation, focusing primarily on the case of India. When discussing the UNSCR1325, she expressed surprise at emphasizing institutionalizing mechanisms and signing institutional treaties.<sup>25</sup> I believe it is fundamental to question the practice of peacebuilding mechanisms since they often disregard women's unconventional participation.

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<sup>23</sup> UN Women, "Gender-Inclusive Peace Processes."

<sup>24</sup> UN Women, "Safeguard Women's Rights and Participation in Peacebuilding Now, Says Afghan Activist Zarqa Yaftali to the UN Security Council - Afghanistan."

<sup>25</sup> RAJAGOPALAN, "REFLECTIONS ON FEMINISM AND FOREIGN POLICY."

Pamela Scully, Erin McCandless and Abu-Nimer Mohammed in "Gender Violence and Gender Justice in Peacebuilding and Development" also discuss the impact of the UNSCR1325, highlighting that institutional and structural arrangements are needed on a local and international level to enhance the resolution's full potential. Nevertheless, they note that the resolution marked a new era and is directly linked to the establishment of Ministries of women's affairs in diverse countries. This point is highly relevant to my case, given the Taliban's abolishment of this very ministry in Kabul. However, similarly to Rajagopalan's note on institutionalization, the authors critique the neoliberal framing, which considers only formal law as a default. Authors suggest that the local entities should frame their realities and decide upon possible solutions.<sup>26</sup>

Jacqueline Ismael, Shereen Ismael and Chris Langille's paper "Post Conflict Reconstruction and Women in the Muslim World" <sup>27</sup>elaborates on the diversity of post-conflict realities, agreeing with the previous writing on the western origin of the framework. Further, they go deeper into discussing why peacebuilding in its nature is in no way altruistic. They state that what we call "Post-conflict reconstruction programs" are programs focusing on developing economic and political institutions, caring only for the international financial interest. Elaborating on their interviews, they highlight two findings. First, in the policymaking on women's issues, there is a disproportionate representation of western-educated women while the informal sector- and women, in particular, are not represented at all. Subsequently, this leads to immense differences in how

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<sup>26</sup> SCULLY, MCCANDLESS, and ABU-NIMER, "GENDER VIOLENCE AND GENDER JUSTICE IN PEACEBUILDING AND DEVELOPMENT."

<sup>27</sup> Ismael, Ismael, and Langille, "POST-CONFLICT RECONSTRUCTION AND WOMEN IN THE MUSLIM WORLD."

policies influence rural and urban women. Authors elaborate on how the individualistic approaches relevant to certain women do not address the cultural collectivism in the informal sector.<sup>28</sup> This topic is explored in-depth in Koa Beck's "white feminism" chapter four "Thinking as a collective."<sup>29</sup> Finally, the authors identify a recent prevailing gap in the inadequately addressed informal sector, specifically the women and their contribution to the peacebuilding process.<sup>30</sup>

Cheryl de la Rey and Susan McKay in "Peacebuilding as a gendered process" also noted that if women contribute to formal peacebuilding, it is primarily via local or regional NGOs and very rarely through the international ones.<sup>31</sup>

Another phenomenon the authors identified through the interviews was the increased phenomenon of domestic violence during the post-conflict resolution process. While this issue is usually not discussed within the post-conflict resolution framework, other researchers such as Moghadam confirmed this phenomenon. She noted that events such as foreign occupation lead to a masculinity crisis, leading to restriction of women's mobility and increased gender violence. Even though Moghadam wrote "Peacebuilding and reconstruction with women" in 2005, her notes on hegemonic masculinity in Afghanistan's occupiers, resistance and state are still relevant. She further expressed concern about the treatment of widows under the Taliban and systematic retaliatory raping of Pashtun women by non-Pashtun men, which should be addressed now, more than in 2005.<sup>32</sup> Matt Waldman's "Community peacebuilding in Afghanistan" argues that

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<sup>28</sup> Ismael, Ismael, and Langille.

<sup>29</sup> Beck, *White Feminism*.

<sup>30</sup> Ismael, Ismael, and Langille, "POST-CONFLICT RECONSTRUCTION AND WOMEN IN THE MUSLIM WORLD."

<sup>31</sup> De la Rey and McKay, "Peacebuilding as a Gendered Process."

<sup>32</sup> Moghadam, "Peacebuilding and Reconstruction with Women: Reflections on Afghanistan, Iraq and Palestine."

the "top-down" approach is inadequate if not accompanied by nationwide peace work at a local level. <sup>33</sup>While I appreciate the author's initiative to propose tackling certain issues at a local level, I argue that this initiative would be feasible for women's rights in a patriarchal society and without a specific gender-sensitive strategy.

Richard Strickland and Nata Duvvury's "Gender Equity in Peacebuilding" also acknowledge the many shifts in the peacebuilding processes. Nevertheless, they note that there is still a gap to address in policies on political exclusion, economic marginalization and sexual violence. While women suffer immensely during conflicts and post-conflict periods, authors stress that we need to shift the narrative from highlighting them as victims when women can also be powerful agents of change. The authors also highlight a research gap concerning a general lack of understanding of the interplay between power, gender identity and violence.<sup>34</sup>

Even though there are a plethora of outstanding articles on the diverse struggles concerning gender and peacebuilding, I will finish this section by highlighting Marjaana Jauhola's "Decolonizing branded peacebuilding." The author focuses on women's symbolic value during and after the conflict. She notes the symbolic female representation of culture and its implications on restricting female sexuality on the one hand and the emergence of increased sexual violence on the other.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Waldman, "Community Peacebuilding in Afghanistan."

<sup>34</sup> Strickland and Duvvury, "Gender Equity and Peacebuilding."

<sup>35</sup> JAUHOLA, "Decolonizing Branded Peacebuilding: Abjected Women Talk Back to the Finnish Women, Peace and Security Agenda."



### ***3. Evaluating Geopolitics and the UN's Possible Involvement***

UN's Role in Rebuilding Afghanistan by Nadia Sarwar deals with Afghanistan's history and proxy wars stating that while the UN is essential, it cannot be treated in isolation. While I do not entirely agree with her statement that the UN substantially supported Afghanistan through the years, the paper offers a summary of relevant UN conferences and the background behind the creation of UNAMA. The paper seeks to assess the effectiveness and challenges of the UN's work in Afghanistan. Given that the article was written in 2010, much has changed that needs to be considered now. As per challenges, she states that peacebuilding can take place only in a secure environment which is definitely not today's situation in Afghanistan. However, I shall argue in the relevant section against this statement. Followingly, she highlights the slow bureaucratic practices of the UN when appointing the UNAMA mission, which is a highly relevant problem. Finally, the author states the UN is doing its bests and blames shortcomings on the local corruption.<sup>36</sup>

Jonathan Goodhand's "Aiding Violence or Building Peace? The role of international aid in Afghanistan" from 2002 states that the aid is unlikely to have a relevant impact without a meaningful peace process and investment. He states that aid is still driven by US interests and military objectives, which is true even 21 years from the publishing. As per recommended approaches, Goodhand recommend a combination of top-down and bottom-up strategies<sup>37</sup>, which I personally find highly relevant.

Followingly, I want to mention Anthony H. Cordesman's "New Challenges in Aid to Afghanistan. While Cordesman is a relevant figure as a US's national security analyst, the text has a heavy colonialist undertone when stressing the necessity for Afghanistan to

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<sup>36</sup> Sarwar, "UN Role in Rebuilding Afghanistan."

<sup>37</sup> Goodhand, "Aiding Violence or Building Peace? The Role of International Aid in Afghanistan."

"coexist with the modern world." Further, his idea of how the international community should help Afghans only focuses on 1. providing incentives to Taliban to oppose extremist movements and 2. supporting humanitarian and political reform with small and short initiatives. I use Cordesman's article as an example of an article that veils national agenda and complete indifference toward women's rights behind the narrative on providing aid and security. For example, Cordesman directly states that the US should not try to change the Taliban's treatment of women because the Taliban "is not ready" and "it might make matters worse"<sup>38</sup>. Further, and this does not concern only Cordesman, while on the one hand, the US claimed that the Taliban's takeover was unexpected<sup>39</sup>, it is curious that this article directly discusses the Taliban's government, despite being written in 2020. Hikmatullah Fayez notes in his article that much aid in Afghanistan is supply and donor-driven, with the donors often failing to stay true to their commitments.<sup>40</sup>

Gerard Russel, in his article, asks what role the UN could play in the peacebuilding process while analyzing UNAMA's shortcomings and possible ways how to re-boost its credibility. The author discusses how the international actors could push for greater inclusion in the government. Nevertheless, it turns out that he is talking only about ethnicity rather than Afghan women's place in high politics.<sup>41</sup>

As per the specific consideration of implementing a new peacekeeping mission, there have been articles from the US military background, such as Ryan

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<sup>38</sup> Cordesman, "The New Challenges in Aid to Afghanistan."

<sup>39</sup> Van Wie, "A Peacekeeping Mission in Afghanistan."

<sup>40</sup> FAYEZ, "The Role of Foreign Aid in Afghanistan's Reconstruction: A Critical Assessment."

<sup>41</sup> Russell, "Peacemaking in Afghanistan:"

Van Wie's "A peacekeeping mission in Afghanistan- A pipedream or path to stability?"<sup>42</sup> and "Could Multinational Peacekeepers Prevent Worst-Case Outcomes in Afghanistan?"<sup>43</sup> While the US's military perspective comes with little to no consideration for the civilian's rights (especially women), articles from an academic background such as Lisa Howard and Charli Carpenter's "How not to lose peace in Afghanistan" comes with their own shortcomings in terms of not considering regional politics and stakes when arguing who should shoulder eventual peacekeeping mission<sup>44</sup>

#### ***4. Taliban and the Legitimacy Trap***

"Legitimacy and International development in a Taliban-dominated Afghanistan" by Mark Cogan discusses the dangers of external forces granting various degrees of legitimacy to the Taliban. The author further seeks to navigate the options for the UN and the NGOs that are still active in the country. Cogan concludes that while engagement with the Taliban is inevitable, that does not inherently imply legitimacy.<sup>45</sup>

"Have the Taliban changed?" by Thomas Ruttig is an article from the US's military background written prior to the Taliban conquest. Ruttig seeks to examine whether the Taliban changed in the last 20 years and in which way their ideology might be reflected in policymaking and potential power-sharing. The author concludes that the Taliban nowadays appears to be more open to cooperation with foreign actors and assesses that if the Taliban would establish a government, they will need aid from NGOs.<sup>46</sup> While I disagree with Ruttig's hopes for democratic Taliban and see all Taliban's

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<sup>42</sup> Van Wie, "A Peacekeeping Mission in Afghanistan."

<sup>43</sup> Van Wie, "Could Multinational Peacekeepers Prevent Worst-Case Outcomes in Afghanistan?"

<sup>44</sup> Howard, "Op-Ed."

<sup>45</sup> Cogan and Gill, "Legitimacy and International Development in a Taliban-Dominated Afghanistan."

<sup>46</sup> Ruttig, "Have the Taliban Changed?"

promises to the international community only as opportunistic lies to gain legitimacy, given the narrative's current dominance in international politics, it needs to be examined.

On the other hand, Adnan R. Khan's "How the world is legitimizing the Taliban" is a brilliant article that explores the HR Afghan activists' outrage over the Oslo meeting on the one hand and the surprise of the UN officials over the negativity on the other. He quotes Rangina Kargar, who states that the issue is not engagement with the Taliban per se, but the lack of firm dealing and demanding precise actions. Khan is critiquing the UN and others for basically holding the Taliban's hands through the insurgency. He calls on the UN and others to implement only a bare-minimum engagement for humanitarian reasons. While this would be incredibly hurtful to the civilians in the short term, he argues that it might force the Taliban to play by the international rules in the long term.<sup>47</sup> While this take is controversial considering the immediate HR violations and humanitarian needs, it is definitely more reasonable than recent papers recommending capacity building programs for the Taliban's government.<sup>48</sup>

Soumyodeep Deb's "The rise of Taliban and its security implications" seeks to establish the eventual security threats for the region while stressing that the UN could play a role in establishing mechanisms to increase security. Imran Khan and Karim Haider Syed's "Afghanistan under the shadows of Taliban and Implications for Pakistan and regional security." immerse deeper into the matter and question how the possible events might influence China, Russia, Pakistan,

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<sup>47</sup> Khan, "How the World Is Legitimizing the Taliban."

<sup>48</sup> Ahmad and Ihsan, "ANALYZING THE HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE OF TALIBAN IN ORDER TO UNDERSTAND THE RE-EMERGENCE OF TALIBAN AND FUTURE PROSPECTS FOR NEIGHBORING COUNTRIES."

Iran and India. The paper's goal is to introduce policy options for the mentioned states.<sup>49</sup> Further, being aware of the regional political dynamics helps assess who should or should not be present in an eventual UN peacekeeping mission.

Finally, on the topic of the Taliban's legitimacy, I want to highlight Niko Pavlopoulos and Paddeu Federika's "Between Legitimacy and Control", which discusses in detail the international practice of government recognition and the current status of the Taliban in Afghanistan.<sup>50</sup>

These are some of the scholarships concerning the contemporary dilemma of legitimacy. However, I want also to discuss the readings on Pashtun history and the emergence of the Taliban. In the same way, we must challenge the narrative of western feminism in Afghanistan; we should also challenge the misconception of the Taliban being a Pashtun-nationalist movement. To mention a few, Daud Bilquees' "Project Taliban: An anti-Pashtun initiative?"<sup>51</sup>, Kriti M. Shah's "The Pashtuns, the Taliban and America's Longest War"<sup>52</sup> and Ahmed Rashid's "The Taliban: Transformation from Pashtun Nationalism to Religious Nationalism"<sup>53</sup> are critical pieces on the history.

### **C. Hypothesis**

Based on the research and identification of research gaps, my thesis argues for an establishment of a policy from within the UN's framework for a more inclusive policy by the UN to tackle obstacles women face. In the following paragraphs, I include research gaps and limitations that will be tackled in the following chapters.

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<sup>49</sup> Khan and Syed, "Afghanistan Under the Shadows of Taliban and Implications For Pakistan and Regional Security."

<sup>50</sup> Pavlopoulos and Paddeu, "Between Legitimacy and Control."

<sup>51</sup> Daud, "Project Taliban."

<sup>52</sup> Shah, "The Pashtuns, the Taliban, and America's Longest War."

<sup>53</sup> Ahmed, "The Taliban: Transformation from Pashtun Nationalism to Religious Nationalism."

First, the concept of Islamic feminism does not address the needs and ideology of every Afghan woman. Nonetheless, as demonstrated by the Iranian activists after 1979, Islamic feminism can be a powerful tool for "fighting within". Given the Taliban's promise to respect women's rights within Islamic jurisprudence, women's literacy on their rights in Islam is essential. The shortcoming of Islamic feminism lies in its divisive nature. Can we address women's rights in Afghanistan within the Islamic framework without inherently discrediting secularisation efforts? Further, while there is a rich academic scholarship on Islamic feminism, there is barely any social movement behind it. How can we change this reality and introduce the movement beyond the urban middle class? To conclude on Islamic feminism, the current narrative focuses on the realities of cisgender heterosexual "good Muslim" women. Can the movement offer more inclusivity for Afghanistan's most vulnerable women, that are often neglected by the conservative frameworks?

As per literature that discusses feminism and women's rights in Afghanistan, we cannot ignore the damages and effects of the prolonged war on terror when it comes to women's rights and the prevalence of international frameworks that end up being biased without drawing on Islamic feminism that the Afghan women are championing.

Diving into feminism in post-conflict resolution, the first gap that needs to be addressed is the vocabulary. While everything revolves around the UNSCR 1325, how should we call things? Is "Gender-sensitive" just a subtle cover for "feminist"? And can we even talk about peacebuilding in current Afghanistan? If

not, can UN peacekeeping with its military section even be gender-sensitive or feminist?

While there is little to no substantial research on gender, peacebuilding, and contemporary Afghanistan, research from different countries still provides a highly relevant tool that can be applied under the UN's shield. However, the shortcoming of UNSCR1325 needs to be addressed, precisely its western framing that often does not respond to local realities or acknowledges women's informal participation. As per any UN involvement, it is necessary to include a combination of bottom-up and top-down approaches to secure the mission is compelling and addresses the needs of Afghans rather than the needs of the US and other international stakeholders. However, there is a thin negotiation line between international engagement with the Taliban to mediate women's rights and humanitarian aid on the one hand and the legitimization of the insurgency without any effective change for the civilians on the other.

## CHAPTER III

### METHODOLOGY PERTAINING TO MY THESIS RESEARCH

#### **A. Introduction**

The focus of my study is a provision of a policy proposal for Afghan women's safe access to the public sphere in general and dignified employment opportunities in specific. As per the recommendations to the international actors, it is to focus on policies advocated by local actors and feminists within the contemporary context of Afghanistan. Given the Taliban's insurgency in August 2021, the negotiating space and possibilities for effective implementation have been strictly limited. Therefore, my methodology relies on considering variables relevant to the local context on the one hand and mechanisms of international entities such as the UN on the other hand in order to ensure the Taliban's accountability and effective monitoring of women's rights. By highlighting the atrocities of the US's previous invasion, I aim to stress that any international interference must clearly aim to support Afghan women's effective needs rather than seeking to impose western models. The UN, US, and EU might have the negotiating power and economic assets, but Afghan women know best what they need from a public policy.

The chapter is divided into sections. "Conceptual framework" notes all the variables of my research and their relationship. "Research design" analyzes in detail the methods and technicalities of my research, while the ethical



considerations and positionality tackle the challenges and problematics of European academic production on Afghan women's rights.

## **B. Conceptual Framework**

Based on the previous literature review, this section identifies the key concepts relevant to my study and maps the relationships between them. The primary goal of my thesis is to offer policy recommendations to fight for Afghan women's safe access to the public sphere in general and dignified employment in specific. Given my positionality, on which I will elaborate further on in this chapter, and considering the plethora of problematic western literary production tackling Afghan women, I considered it essential to evaluate the issues from as many positions as possible.

First, it is impossible to grasp just how complex the intersectional approach for tackling Afghan women's rights has to be without looking into the history of Afghan geopolitics on the one hand and Afghan women's fight for their rights on the other. In this case, I decided to highlight Afghan women's advances, agency and methods for fighting for their rights in the 20<sup>th</sup> century (focusing on issues such as the division of the public and private sphere, mandatory veiling, divorce rights and access to education). The advocacy strategies changed significantly if we compare the earlier periods and the one under soviet occupation. Further, I stress that diverse groups of women have easier access to their rights under diverse regimes. For example, during the (performative) state feminism period, the advances were relevant to/benefited the upper-class women primarily. Examining the agency of Afghan women through history is relevant to my research because it depicts the women as active agents, which directly challenges the war on terror narrative. This narrative and its specific victimization of Muslim women that

need to be saved by western men (and implicitly culture) is an essential variable because without fully grasping its implication on the meaning of feminism and the mistrust for western "aid", any policy proposal risks to fall into this discourse's trap.

Looking at Afghan women's agency through the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the war on terror scars- engraved into Afghans both physically and mentally, I wondered, does feminism still have its space in Afghanistan's policymaking? Standing for Afghan women's rights is highly different from any concept of white feminism based on individualism. Specifically, Standing for Afghan women's rights is not only aiming to challenge the patriarchal structures of the Taliban (and the society in general) but also to challenge the imperialistic and orientalist notions implying that Afghan women should abandon their culture, religion and principles when seeking rights.

While this might come as a surprise, I did not decide to tackle Islamic feminism and its almost undiscovered potential as a policymaking tool because of the Taliban's insurgency and would insert it into the thesis even if the previous government was still in place. Despite Islamic feminism's limitations that I tackle in the relevant chapter, and even though not every Afghan woman is Muslim, it is essential to introduce this concept that so boldly challenges the mainstream western perception of feminism. Even prior to the Taliban, tackling policy proposals in Afghanistan without considering Islam as a significant variable was unrealistic. Islam is entangled in the daily lived realities of women and in jurisprudence. Islamic feminism offers the notion that to challenge the Taliban and patriarchy does not mean to challenge Islam; instead, it is a framework

offering to argue for women's rights with the very religion that the Taliban weaponized into a misogynistic rope tied around female necks.

Now, given the hard lessons of the war on terror, it would have been splendid to tackle Afghan women's rights on a local level. Unfortunately, with the Taliban's insurgency and the group's blatant disregard and direct violence towards women, local initiatives and agencies are not enough to hold the Taliban accountable. Therefore I argue for the involvement of international actors (while still stressing their significant shortcomings) and, more specifically, the UN.

The UN's peacekeeping mission could realistically be an option for holding the Taliban accountable for their atrocities. Offering the concept of UN peacekeeping goes directly with a detailed examination of the military discourse on women's rights, highlighting the lack of accountability of the peacekeepers concerning SBV, the need for gender-balanced participation and seeking other alternatives.

I argue that the UN should hold the Taliban accountable in order for women to have safe access to all the services of the public sphere while also stressing the need to cooperate with the local activists and NGOs closely. The UN should be present as much-needed support for Afghan women rather than as a force dictating foreign principles that cannot effectively work in the specific environment.

Instead of examining peacekeeping as a singular variable, I immersed deeper in seeking research pertaining to peacekeeping and peacebuilding that acknowledges the female experience of war and reconstruction differently, highlighting that women's needs must be specifically addressed.

Other variables include ethnicity and the Taliban; I specifically challenge any notions made by certain scholars of the Taliban being a Pashtun nationalistic movement by examining its history and ideology. However, ethnicity is relevant when discussing women's rights since women of diverse ethnicities might experience violence and restrictions under the Taliban differently. On that, I tackle the public sphere under the Taliban, focusing on the 1996-2001 period that is often analogically relevant to the current case. While the Taliban want the international society to believe that they have changed and become more moderate, the comparison demonstrates otherwise.

To conclude, the logical structure of my conceptual framework is not precisely linear since diverse variables intersect at different timelines. However, I did move from the more abstract discourses such as theoretical frameworks of Islamic feminism and Afghan women's history into the more specific ones, such as preventing legitimization of the Taliban in the international geopolitics and evaluation of gender quotas' effectiveness with the goal of establishing well-rounded policy recommendation, that hopefully does not miss any considerable variable.

## **C. Research Design**

### ***1. Research Philosophy***

As per the research philosophy when conducting my thesis, given the prevalent qualitative nature and considering the number of narratives and variables that will inherently be interpreted differently by diverse scholars, I am primarily inclined towards the interpretivism approach. Tackling policymaking

for Afghan women's access to the public sphere does not have a singular reality independent of the researcher's perception.

However, I would want to believe that examining the misogyny the Taliban inflicts on women is a singular positivist reality that exists and is perceived independently of who the researcher is. Given these two conflicting perceptions when mitigating my research, I am considering my philosophy as a pragmatist, taking from both views during diverse sections of my research. Specifically, when tackling and interpreting previous quantitative research, I apply positivism, while the qualitative sections usually incline towards the interpretivism approach.

## ***2. Research Type***

The type of my research is strictly inductive since it aims to develop a new theory rather than testing/confirming an already established one. As per the data and existing researches that I tackle, examine and further elaborate on in my thesis, a mixture of quantitative and qualitative sources are present. However, the qualitative sources have significant dominance. As per the quantitative data on most variables pertaining to Afghan women's access to the public space are incredibly hard to obtain in Afghanistan given the security implications, need for female intermediaries for male researchers, linguistic barrier and difficulty to reach certain rural areas, I am incredibly grateful for the very few that were available.

## ***3. Research Strategy***

A mixture of research strategies was used. My primary approach was to be critical of the already existing knowledge- especially if it was research on Afghanistan produced

post-2001 and tackled Afghan (or Muslim in general) women's rights. The critical type of research strategy was especially significant when examining sources from the military background, the Taliban's promises to the international society and the discourses of white feminism.

Given that there was no previous production on feminist policymaking on the state level in Afghanistan, leave alone under the Taliban and considering the need for an international presence to assure accountability, the most significant strategy was the analytical approach. I have taken the diverse variables- such as studies on Afghan women conducted during the previous government and then examined whether/and how they can be reapplied in the current context while also analyzing which aspects of these studies are no longer relevant. I argue that while analytical use of already available information and researchers is often seen as less important than collecting quantitative data in the field, in the case of this specific research, it was the most suitable strategy that proved to bring new points of view.

#### ***4. Time Horizon***

The collection of resource materials for this research, given the time constraints, was cross-sectional. However, collecting all the data at one point in time certainly has its limitations given how diverse variables of my study developed during the writing of my thesis. Therefore, certain modifications were necessary. For example, during the writing, the Taliban issued new restrictions on women, further violated human rights without being held accountable, the US took over Afghanistan's economic assets and the humanitarian crisis- with

implications on starvation and healthcare worsened to unprecedented levels. Even though the decision of expanding my bibliography and modifying my policy proposals based on the newest events caused certain time delays and more academic labour, I considered them non-negotiable.

My aim for this thesis was to offer policies as relevant to the present context as possible, leading to the constant observation of the day-to-day changes and development until the latest date possible. The last modification based on significant international geopolitical development occurred on March 17<sup>th</sup> 2022. The UN voted to establish a new UNAMA mandate despite the Taliban's presence and an implied need for interaction.

While the source collection was cross-sectional for pragmatic and time constraints reasons, I sought to implement as longitudinal horizon as possible when picking up the existing sources that I wished to analyze. As per the primary focus timeline, my narrative highlights the Taliban's insurgency in August 2021 and continues until March 17<sup>th</sup> 2022. Given how recent these developments were, the secondary longitudinal timeline of research that can be analytically applied tackled vast events from the 20<sup>th</sup> century, while of course, paying specific focus on the 1996-2001 period to comprehend what were the previous implications of the Taliban's dominance and whether we can deduce relevant lessons.

As per future researchers, I am convinced a longitudinal approach to quantitative and qualitative data collection pertaining to Afghan women's experience when accessing public space and the diverse variables such as ethnicity, economic class and family support under the Taliban would be highly beneficial.

## *5. Sampling Strategy*

Given my research's prevalently qualitative and specific nature, the selection strategy focused on purposive sampling. Considering that the prevalent narrative on Afghanistan in the mass media is usually produced from the western point of view, I sought to focus primarily on the local narrative, searching specifically for the production of female Afghan scholars. On this matter, I hoped that my fluency in Dari would be beneficial since I could examine the papers that were not translated into English. Unfortunately, I have found little to no relevant sources with the exception of Iranian scholars on Islamic feminism. While I believe that the production of papers tackling women's rights in Dari and Pashto would be essential since it would offer more access to the knowledge to Afghan women disregarding their English level, it is comprehensive for scholars wanting to reach broader amount of readers.

Considering my preference to highlight local scholars as a counter-narrative to the war on terror and the tendencies of white feminism to "save" and "empower" Muslim women, I felt highly uncomfortable when using the discourses from the US military on a possible peacekeeping mission. I argue that the mainstream military narrative only strengthens patriarchal structures and consciously leaves women behind in the name of abstract security and national agenda. While challenging all these issues, I did tackle articles from the western military point of view. Even though the US military used Afghanistan as a geopolitical playground with almost no accountability, these articles handle the diverse scenarios of peacekeeping technicalities that are essential for ensuring a successful mission. Nevertheless, I was pleasantly surprised with the rising



production of feminist articles that challenge the predominantly white male dominance over the security and military narrative.

As evident from my literature review, I sought the female narrative on war, violence, peacekeeping, and the rebuilding process to stress the essentiality of having women- especially local women participating.

The data collection method of this thesis is built on secondary data collection and investigation since the existing knowledge production was suitable for the purposes of my research. The existing documents and records proved to be highly applicable in most cases. Given the security situation in Afghanistan during my research, it was the only realistic sourcing.

## ***6. Data Analysis Technique***

When analyzing the collected secondary sources, the two essential techniques were content and discourse analysis. "Discourse" or "narrative" is a dominant term in every chapter since I sought to challenge the superficial interpretation of "saving Muslim women" and the in-depth colonialist implications. While this matter is very easily see-through for most people in the global south, the imperialist entitlement in the West sometimes runs too deep for people to differentiate between reality and US military-political propaganda.

## ***7. Methodology Limitations***

Prior to the Taliban's insurgency in August 2021, I hoped to conduct interviews concerning Afghan women's access to employment. Given the transformation of

Afghanistan's security and ethical considerations that I shall list in the following section, I decided not to. While I argue that the use of secondary sources on its own is not a limitation per se, including interviews with my thesis would certainly elaborate on the human and emotional experiences and therefore stress the urgency to ensure the policies and promote effective actions.

I openly disclose that arguing for women's rights under the Taliban can be an incredibly messy project. Despite my very best efforts to consider every variable imaginable and highlight that diverse sections of women suffer differently under the Taliban, the policy recommendations are still tricky. For example, ensuring that the Taliban respects women's rights is unfortunately linked to the international pressure inherently linked to international interaction (not legitimization!) with the Taliban and the crucial need for international presence. Me arguing in favour of the peacekeeping mission is built on the hope that mechanisms that prevent SBV and other exploitation of local women will be in place. A peacekeeping mission that would not consider the particular vulnerability of local women and would not be gender diversified in its military troops is not relevant to my argument. It is not enough for the international actors to cooperate with the Taliban only in the name of political and security mediations, while social, economic and humanitarian matters that pressure the civilians and women specifically are entirely disregarded.

As previously noted, I was aware of specific source limitations since the beginning of the research. Sometimes, during my writing, I wondered whether arguing for women's rights under the Taliban is too utopistic; I questioned whether I should scratch the policies that argued for anything more than the bare minimum

so my thesis would not be dismissed as a mere wishful thinking. However, I decided against it. As women globally, we would hardly obtain any rights if we just adhered to society's need to be "realistic". Therefore, I argue that the Taliban has already stolen so much from girls and women and continue to do so on a daily basis. Fighting back should not resemble begging for scarce breadcrumbs of dignity.

As per the sources, they posed limitations since I did not find any similar study that would tackle policymaking, approaches of local feminism (in this case Islamic feminism), or stressed the need for international actors to ensure Taliban's accountability. I mitigated the issues by conducting research either on the issues specific to Afghanistan while modifying them into the relevance for today's situation or tackling cases from diverse countries- especially pertaining to Islamic feminism in the case of Iran and the diverse UN peacekeeping experiences, asking how could they fit into Afghanistan's context.

Finally, tackling Afghan women's rights under the Taliban can be incredibly frustrating since the Taliban constantly changes/does not stand true to their commitment and international promises. Also, during the last few months, it has been outrageous observing the ways in which the international society engages with the Taliban without seeking effective accountability on their part.

Finally, my methodology acknowledges that the international actors- such as the UN must engage and negotiate with the Taliban in order to negotiate women's rights. For the Taliban, women's rights are just a negotiation bait, a means to an end that does not really matter. I was seeking to find a realistic and sustainable way to secure Afghan women's rights without the need to deal directly with the Taliban; however, I did not find any pragmatic response. Therefore, while my research aims to fight for Afghan women's

rights, if the recommendations are not handled delicately, the UN would only be lending the Taliban a certain degree of legitimacy and recognition in the eyes of the international society.

#### **D. Ethical Considerations**

The biggest ethical consideration pertains to my positionality, which will be discussed in detail in the following section. Apart from evaluating whether the discussion on Afghanistan's policymaking should be left exclusively to Afghan scholars, the issue of interviews posed another ethical consideration. Primarily I wanted to conduct interviews with working Afghan women who currently live in Afghanistan from diverse economic and ethnic backgrounds, asking them about their experiences, their daily struggles under the Taliban and what changes they think would improve their employment experience. Except for the issue of security and lack of time pertaining to conducting interviews, I have decided against it for the following reason. Afghan women are currently going through an incredible traumatizing period; when the Taliban was conquering cities in summer, women were burning their university degrees from abroad or any property appearing western or compromising in Talibans' eyes. In the contemporary situation when I could not fly to Afghanistan and conduct interviews in person, the idea of tackling such sensitive issues from a distance felt impersonal and dangerous. Even though I would keep the interviews anonymous, the situation seemed too vulnerable for conducting interviews.

Further, I see myself first as a feminist activist and a woman, and only secondly as a researcher. Therefore, I am against the ways in which interviews are sometimes conducted in academia- especially when it comes to women's and

refugees' rights. I do not wish to treat any woman undergoing traumatic and dangerous experiences as a statistic in my thesis without having the possibility to sit down, drink tea together and talk even about the hardships that are unimportant to my thesis. As researchers, our time might be limited, but I argue that if one is not willing to offer empathy and listen for one more hour, then that person should not be conducting in-person research pertaining to the most vulnerable people in the first place.

### **E. Positionality**

“Western liberals who rightly condemn imperialism [are] yet are blind to the cultural imperialism they are performing when they silence my critiques of misogyny. They behave as if they want to save my culture and faith from me, and forget that they are immune to the violations about which I speak.” Mona El Tahawy

Who produces knowledge matters since the final product reflects the author's narrative and beliefs, even if not explicitly. As a white European woman, I have been shying away from speaking up for a significant amount of time. Despite years living within an Afghan household, studying Dari and Afghanistan's geopolitics at university, I was always aware that Afghan women themselves should primarily tell the story of Afghan women. Therefore, prior to questioning my positionality, I questioned the positionality of western scholars in general when tackling women's rights in other cultures. Cultures that Europeans often colonized in the past which has substantial implications on western academia's power dynamics.

However, since I cannot speak for other scholars, let me note some of the things I do not wish to do in the following thesis-

- I do not want to save Afghan women from their culture, religion, men or identity.
- I do not want to empower them- for that would mean I consider myself a superior entity with more power in the first place.
- I do not want to tell them that western secularism and models are the only right answers for effective state-building.
- Moreover, I do not want to "give voice to the voiceless" for Afghan women have a strong narrative that has been unnoticed only due to the western mass-media hegemony.

My positionality poses limitations. I will never have the direct personal experience Afghan women do. The famous feminist saying "personal is political" is especially relevant for policy drafting, and that is why Afghan women must be listened to carefully when stating their effective needs. Therefore, I tried to mitigate this limitation with as thorough and responsible research as possible, especially when challenging the war on terror implications and the patronizing way some western scholars treat Muslim women with in general. While my bibliography notes predominantly academic works, I want to stress Instagram accounts of Afghan activists and artists (mostly in diaspora) such as Sonita Alizada, Madina Wardak (burqasandbeer), Avizeh, Hila Hamidi, Sayed Muhammad and Omar Haidari. While quoting Instagram stories in an MA thesis might not be professional, I argue that for those who wish to be informed on the events in Afghanistan and its rich culture on a daily basis, following local activists will create a more well-rounded perspective than simply sticking with Al Jazeera.

Further, I did not finally decide to write about Afghan women despite my privileges. I decided to write about Afghan women precisely because of them. When Afghan women in Kabul can get death threats, beaten and raped for speaking up, how is it right for western feminists to remain silent? I do have the privilege of speaking up safely, and I have the privilege of (hopefully) publishing my writings in Europe. I wish to use the privilege to demand accountability from all activists and politicians who claim to support women's rights but look away from Afghan women's suffering on a pretence of "cultural relativism". The western medias' normalization of Afghan women's rights abuses and tragedies needs to stop. Further, the Instagram posts showing only Afghan women in miniskirts from the 70s as liberated must stop, since it implies that Afghan women deserve sympathy only if they look and behave "western enough".

Finally, Americans and Europeans should not be silent about the matters that are currently happening in Afghanistan. However, they should be intentional and informed on the matter prior to speaking up in a way that comes out as patronizing and orientalist. While the world is (rightfully) condemning Russia's invasion of Ukraine, very few challenged the US's bombing of Afghanistan, Syria, Iraq or Yemen. Empathy should not be a selective tool applied only if cultural similarities exist. This is my call on Americans and Europeans to demand accountability from respective governments. If there is one chapter of my thesis I particularly wish for western readers to read, it is the one on Islamic feminism. I want to challenge the passivity on the pretence of cultural relativism. First, fighting for women's rights does not have to fit western frameworks. Second, as noted by Mona ElTahawy, when one remains silent on the pretence of cultural relativism, one supports only the most fundamentalist and patriarchal version of the culture.

To conclude my positionality, working on this thesis has been an intimate struggle pertaining to my constant negotiation of belonging "somewhere between" the two cultures. I noticed that as women when we live between diverse cultures, we are always too much of something. Too much revealed, too much veiled, too immoral, too prude... The list goes on, but we are always considered too outspoken between the outdated narrative of "west" and "east". I cherish my Slavic heritage (which is never "western enough" for Americans and western Europeans), and I also cherish the rich Afghan culture and Afghan people who showed me nothing but kindness in the last years. However, I am committed to actively challenging any patriarchal attacks on women, be it from Europe or Afghanistan.



## CHAPTER IV

### CHANGING THE NARRATIVE- WAR ON TERROR, WHITE FEMINISM AND THE ORIGINS OF THE TALIBAN

#### **A. Drifting from Orientalist Feminism**

On August 16 2021, Joe Biden posted this statement on Twitter concerning the US's withdrawal from Afghanistan: "We went to Afghanistan almost 20 years ago with clear goals: get those who attacked us on September 11, 2001—and make sure al Qaeda could not use Afghanistan as a base from which to attack us again. We did that—a decade ago. Our mission was never supposed to be nation-building."<sup>54</sup> This post brings more questions than answers concerning the US's genuine geopolitical reasons for staying in Afghanistan for such a long period of time. Furthermore, rather than questions, Biden's narrative certainly brings a lot of justified anger and a sense of repetitive betrayal from Afghanistan.

I regard it impossible to discuss Afghan women's rights under the Taliban since the US's withdrawal if we do not critically examine all the historical narratives, stakeholders, how the Taliban emerged, and the reasons behind the War on terror narrative and its abuse of feminist narrative. A plethora of policy briefs, articles, and research on Afghan women's rights (especially those produced in the West) offer a simplistic narrative that fails to depict the complexity of the issue. Women's rights in Afghanistan cannot be divided into two boxes titled "before" and "after" Taliban. Any narrative that portrays the US's military intervention as a liberator of Afghan women only promotes orientalist and neo-colonialist narrative we should have overcome decades ago.

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<sup>54</sup> Biden, "Remarks by President Biden on Afghanistan."

Therefore, this chapter offers the historical background considering diverse variables such the role of white feminism, ethnicity, Muslim women's tokenization and western support for Taliban that often do not get enough space in Academia behind the neverending discussions on Afghan women's veiling.

Diverse narratives have been written on veiling. While anthropologists such as Lila Abu Lughod and Islamic feminists such as Leila Ahmed challenge the orientalist narrative of Muslim women's oppression by veiling, the mainstream western narrative still focuses on the veil as a symbol of patriarchal fundamentalist oppression. Not only does this narrative promote an idea that women's choices of clothing are valid and empowering only as far as our bodies remain under the male gaze, but what is worse- the discussion on veiling diverts the international attention entirely from discussing the geopolitical reasons (and the US's role) in Taliban's emergence. Further, if international society wants to help women in Afghanistan, certainly discussing health care, safety, education, and economic participation to the workforce would be a better starting point than discussing their attire- whether one thinks of it as a symbol of oppression or not.

I argue that the everlasting pressure of the War on Terror depicting the idea that once Afghan women are unveiled and conform to the western (non-intersectional) ideas of feminism, they become liberated only creates more Afghan resentment of the constant international intrusions.

Even though this might be a hard pill to swallow for Western NGOs promoting women's rights in diverse cultural environments, women's rights are not "one fits all" and should not be approached as such. As women, we are everlasting tokens in the geopolitical battlefield. If we wear miniskirts, we are the

representation of capitalistic corrupted western immorality. If we wear hijab, chador or burqa, we are voiceless entities oppressed by our faith and men. Our individualistic choices are constantly discussed and politicized by men in power. One way or other, we (or, more precisely, our bodies) are the symbols spoken about in the geopolitical arena. One of the objectives of my thesis is to challenge this idea of women as a symbol without an agenda.

Addressing the very diverse needs of Afghan women with policy-making was challenging even before the Taliban conquest, and now, it appears to be an impossible mission. Some of the challenges pertaining to policy-making were posed by the corruption, lack of effective feminist representation in the government to push for the policies, and NGOs' general focus on humanitarian aid rather than challenging the constitution and laws.

The Taliban's current dominance leaves us immensely limiting space for drafting policies promoting women's rights. Nevertheless, the Taliban seeks international recognition and a seat at the UN General Assembly. None of this should be even considered by the international community unless they take adequate steps by allowing women their rights. Given that the Taliban internationally promised to respect women's rights within the frameworks of Islamic jurisprudence (which is an area dominated by patriarchal structures for centuries and interpretations vary immensely), I will argue in the following chapters in favour of the approach of Islamic Feminism, since it offers a framework that challenges Taliban's misogyny without the need for women to feel like their faith and culture is being compromised in the process. Islam is entangled in every aspect of Afghanistan's daily life, and policies promoting women's rights should not fight

this reality but rather work within its framework since there is a plethora of untapped potential.

### **B. The US's Relegating of Women's Rights to the Taliban**

Prior to discussing the possibilities of Islamic feminism, let us focus on the origins of the War on Terror narrative and the US's massive campaign to spread the imagery of Americans saving Muslim women. The US's narrative (as we can observe it in the discourses of the American presidents) on why did the US decide for military intervention in Afghanistan was to eliminate Osama Bin Laden and "punish" the Taliban for providing a shelter for al-Qaeda. Nevertheless, it was not that long ago since the US was more than willing to cooperate and fund the very movement in its fight against the Soviet Union. This section discusses the events that preceded the War on terror in order to challenge the simplistic narrative of the US as a liberator of women and the Taliban as the monster. The immense funding of the Mujahideen by the US demonstrates that the US does not shy away from supporting movements that violate women's rights in order to achieve its strategic goals. Further, the historical link between the emergence of an unprecedented version of political Islam in Afghanistan and the US's support that made this possible is not highlighted enough in the mass media.

I was impressed with the amount of research that challenged the War on Terror narrative during my research. Christian Parenti's *America's Jihad: A history of origins* is one of them. He starts the paper by stressing that in order to comprehend the War on Terror, we must examine the role the US played in nurturing the very Islamic military networks that are now portrayed as the

international villains. He acknowledges that even though political Islam has origins that go way deeper into history than the 20<sup>th</sup> century, in the case of Afghanistan and the events during the Cold War, the origins of Islamist movements lead us directly to the US policies.<sup>55</sup>

When seeking to establish the exact date, since when did the US support the Islamic movements in Afghanistan, the sources differ. Parenti quotes Zbigniew Brzezinski, the national security advisor of Carter, that claimed that the US was supporting the tribal and Islamist uprisings as early as July 3, 1979, which was actually six months prior to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Opinions also vary on whether the Afghan War determined the Cold War outcome, but it is highly probable. Parenti describes the major network of aid that flowed into Afghanistan to support the Mujahideen, who fought the Russians. Just between 1979 and 1992, the US supported the various Mujahideen fractions with at least \$3 billion. Approximately the same financial support arrived from Saudi Arabia, in addition to financing from China, Iran, various Islamic charities, drug operations, privatized CIA funding sources (such as Bank of Commerce and Credit international) and diverse Arab millionaires such as Osama Bin Laden. As per the weapons, many were donated from Egypt (ironically, primarily soviet weapons). Concerning the elaborate network of money, arms, training, information and drugs coming from and to Afghanistan, that was the responsibility of the Pakistan Inter-Services Intelligence Agency.

As shocking as this amount of funding might seem, the immense American funding of the Mujahideen increased with lobbying groups such as the Afghan American Educational Fund.

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<sup>55</sup> Parenti, "America's Jihad."

One of the many side effects of the US's support of the Mujahideen was increased heroin consumption. In the mid-80s, the narcotics in the US skyrocketed by \$10 billion annually. As per the death by overdose, the amount increased by 93% between 1979 and 1983.<sup>56</sup>

As per the current statements of the Taliban since the conquest of the country in 2021, they promised to ban the production of drugs entirely. However, it is essential to address the role drugs played in the Taliban's consolidation of power. As discussed by Felbab-Brown, the Taliban did not need to exploit the drug economy out of financial needs since these were covered by the aid flowing from the outside. While Vanda Felbab-Brown's article is highly informative, she highlighted only the aid flowing from Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, which leads us back to the western narrative that often fails to hold the US accountable. Apart from that, she notes that the Taliban's support for the narcotics economy came after their military expansion when they needed to effectively consolidate their political power. She further stresses that apart from facilitating procurement, logistics, and salaries, the money obtained from the illicit traffic also allowed the Taliban to buy off some of its opponents.<sup>57</sup> Even though the narcotics economy is seen as anti-Islamic by the Taliban, looking at their opportunistic past use of drugs for further consolidating power, it will be curious to observe whether the ban on narcotics will last and if it will not, what would be the implications for the international legitimacy?

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<sup>56</sup> Parenti.

<sup>57</sup> Felbab-Brown, "Pipe Dreams."

The narcotics industry is a significant variable in the historical geopolitics of Afghanistan, and the Taliban's decisions on how to deal with the issue will significantly impact the foreign stance on what degree of international legitimacy should the Taliban government have.

Going back to the question of the US's cooperation with the Mujahideen, it is quite fascinating that while till the present day, the matter is painted over by the War on Terror ideology and is not discussed in the western media, there is little to no remorse from the USs when it came to funding militant Islamists for a strategic advantage during the Cold War.

Zbigniew Brzezinski (date?) when asked whether he has any regrets concerning this issue, asked: "What is more important to the world? The Taliban, or the collapse of the Soviet empire? Some stirred-up Moslems, or the liberation of Central Europe and the end of Cold War?"<sup>58</sup> In this argumentation, we can see the everlasting reflections of the American self-serving imperialist policies that care only about the well-being of the US and often fail to evaluate the long-term consequences.

### **C. Muslim Women as a Token in the Geopolitical Game of War on Terror**

One of the main topics of the US's agenda when it comes to the War on Terror is the promise of saving and liberating Muslim women. The amount of western feminists that were cheering for the US's military intervention in 2001 is alarming, and it feels like 2021 is repeating this history. The history of women's rights in Afghanistan is far more complex than "before" and "after" the Taliban. Many researchers wrote extensive papers challenging the "before" and "after" Taliban periodization and Afghan women's role in

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<sup>58</sup> Parenti, "America's Jihad."

the War on Terror narrative. Some of the works on this matter that were an amazing inspiration for starting this thesis are Huma Ahmed Ghosh's "A History of Women in Afghanistan" <sup>59</sup>, Kim Berry's "Symbolic use of Afghan women in the war on terror"<sup>60</sup>, Janine Rich's "Saving Muslim Women: Feminism, US Policy and the War on Terror"<sup>61</sup> and of course the everlasting "Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving?" from Lila Abu-Lughod<sup>62</sup>

In terms of women's rights, Afghanistan's 20<sup>th</sup> century prior to the Soviet invasion was defined by a constant pull and push dynamics between progressive leaders and threatened religious authorities. Even the very founder of modern Afghanistan, Abdur Rahman Khan, who ruled from 1880, established laws promoting women's rights, such as increased age for marriage and divorce for women (still only under specific circumstances), the more significant changes came with Amanullah Khan, who campaigned against polygamy and promoted female education even beyond Kabul. However, in 1920, when he sought to increase the age for marriage to 18 for women and 21 for men and abolish polygamy, the tribal leaders fought back. Due to the pressure, Amanullah reversed some of the policies. Schools for women were shut down, and veiling was re-established as mandatory. Other eras in which women were gaining significant rights were the 50s and 70s. Ahmed-Ghosh further stresses that women in Afghanistan are not an isolated institution, and therefore, their fate is entangled

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<sup>59</sup> Ahmed-Ghosh, "A History of Women in Afghanistan: Lessons Learnt for the Future Or Yesterdays and Tomorrow: Women in Afghanistan | Request PDF."

<sup>60</sup> Berry, "THE SYMBOLIC USE OF AFGHAN WOMEN IN THE WAR ON TERROR."

<sup>61</sup> Rich, "'Saving' Muslim Women: Feminism, U.S Policy and the War on Terror."

<sup>62</sup> Abu-Lughod, "Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving?"



and determined by historical, political, social, economic and religious forces.<sup>63</sup> Further, when we look at the history of promoting women's rights in the region, such as in neighbouring Iran during Muhammad Reza Pahlavi, it is important to stress that many leaders promoted women's rights as a part of a secularizing nation-building project. While state feminist projects such as these certainly improved the lives of many women, its policies usually focused only on liberal urban middle-class ones.

The realities described in the previous paragraph were ignored entirely by the "feminist" narrative promoting military intervention promising to retrieve women's dignity back to the state they were "before the Taliban". Was this a result of ignorance or intentional change in a narrative in order to raise empathy among the American masses? And if so, why? As an answer to this question, I want to directly quote Rafia Zakaria's outstanding article "How the War on terror became America's first "feminist" War.

She writes: "American feminism—once a movement that existed in opposition to the state, as a critique of its institutions and mores—was recast as one that served the state's interests through any means imaginable. This identification with state interests, and the idea of going out to conquer the world with the same mindset of subjugation and domination possessed by white men, seems to have become a warped feminist goal. Put another way; white women wanted parity with white men at any cost, including avidly taking on the domination of Black and Brown people. As white feminists have progressed within their societies and begun to occupy increasingly important positions, they are constructing feminism that uses the lives of Black and Brown people as arenas in which they can prove their credentials to white men."<sup>64</sup> While Zakaria's writing have been

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<sup>63</sup> Ahmed-Ghosh, "A History of Women in Afghanistan: Lessons Learnt for the Future Or Yesterdays and Tomorrow: Women in Afghanistan | Request PDF."

<sup>64</sup> Zakaria, "How the War On Terror Became America's First 'Feminist' War."

critiqued for being “too harsh” I believe her writings are essential for fully comprehending the problematic of white feminism and why it has no place in foreign policy making.

In the section on Islamic Feminism, I shall question whether "feminism" is inherently a western concept and whether we can move beyond the West's immense damages to Afghanistan and Afghan women in the name of feminism. In her article on Colonial Feminism in Afghanistan, Ruhi Khan recalls the events of 2001, stating that Afghan women were given only two choices: oppression under the Taliban or freedom by the Western invasion. There was no alternative.<sup>65</sup> In her brilliant evaluation on the history of colonialist influence on women in Afghanistan, she further stated that the identity of global south women is constructed through the western lens and their agency disavowed within a global discourse. She critiques the ideology of Huntington's Clash of Civilizations, stating that the dualistic principle of East vs West is simplistic and fails to acknowledge that also western culture fails to tackle a plethora of structural intersectional inequalities and gender violence.<sup>66</sup> When Laura Bush stated, "Because of our recent military gains in much of Afghanistan, women are no longer imprisoned in their homes. They can listen to music and teach their daughters without fear of punishment. The fight against terrorism is also a fight for the rights and dignity of women." she probably failed to see (or did not care much) of the privileged position of her assumption of what is fundamental for Afghan women. Certainly, as in every other country, the socio-economic realities

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<sup>65</sup> Khan, "Afghanistan and the Colonial Project of Feminism."

<sup>66</sup> Khan.

of women vastly vary based on diverse variables. However, the privilege of worrying whether one can listen to music does not meet the living reality of most. Especially in the rural areas, questions of security, healthcare and access to food have priority over even considering access to education. (one of the reasons why I am convinced that when drafting any policy, we must not focus only on the women in Kabul)

As a western scholar and a feminist, I wonder- what can the West do, to effectively advocate for change and policies in Afghanistan without further promoting the notions of colonial "feminist" discourse? When everyone is seeking ways to "empower" Muslim women, I believe that we first need to check our privileges and accept that policies advocating for women's rights in Afghanistan would significantly differ from those in the US. Women and their desires are not monolithic, and therefore before trying to "empower" a woman in a cultural context and daily realities so different from ours, we need to work on our humility and listening skills. That being said, effective policies for promoting women's rights under repressive regimes are not built on vague slogans and generic condemnations that do not offer any viable solutions. (looking at you, UN women!) If the War on Terror's abuse of women as a token should have taught us anything, let it be the condemnation of western "empowerment" of Muslim women. While there might be good intentions behind it, we do need to check on our white saviour complex first and then acknowledge that even the mere notion of empowering someone derives from the presumption that Muslim women actually need to be given power from an entity that already has it- the West, which even further stresses the geopolitical power disbalance.

To conclude this section, I want to quote Shabana Mir from Rich's paper: Feminism is local and has many colours, And isn't always called feminism because feminism is owned and ran by white women, who bring white men in fighter planes."<sup>67</sup>

#### **D. Of Saviors and Monsters- the Vilification of Pashtuns**

Drafting a policy on women's rights under the Taliban calls for challenging some myths on the movement that further fragmentize the Afghan society and create ethnical biases even from abroad.

Prior to discussing the incorrect perception that the Taliban is a Pashtun nationalist movement that includes the whole ethnicity and is structured around Pashtunwali, let us start this section by stressing the importance of narrative and the immense power of fiction in the conflict and its possible damaging message.

Zirrar Ali's article "War through fiction" uses the example of Khaled Hosseini, who is an Afghan-American writer. Even though it passed almost 20 years from the publication of Kite Runner, his books are still bestsellers in the West. Now, a narrative from an "insider" that portrays the daily lives and struggle of locals in Afghanistan and is recognized in the West sounds like a success for offering some diversity into the War on Terror discussions, right?

Zirrar Ali, in his article "War through Fiction", raises the problem of Hosseini's narrative. He states that not only was the War on Terror narrative defined by the use of feminism as a reason for military intervention, but there was also a significant amount of "insiders" of the region who defended the Western military occupation. Zirrar argues that Hosseini published his first book, Kite

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<sup>67</sup> Rich, "'Saving' Muslim Women: Feminism, U.S Policy and the War on Terror."

Runner, at the most convenient timing- 2003 when the US occupation was already in full course.

Zirrar critiques Hosseini's portrayal of Afghan people, which makes them seen as one-dimensional violent/suffering entities caught in War. He notes that this depiction "amplified one reality in order to burry others."<sup>68</sup>

What really caught my eye in Zirrar's critique of the literary fiction production taking place in Afghanistan was the problematic portrayal of the Pashtun community. Immersing into Hosseini's books, the victims of the story are primarily Hazara or Tajik people. Pashtuns are always depicted as the conservative patriarchal hateful bullies. The issue at hand is that many western readers that have no geopolitical knowledge of Afghanistan will inherently connect the entire Pashtun community with followers of the Taliban, which only further stigmatizes the major population of Afghanistan.

Zirrar notes that Hosseini (who openly supported Bush) gives the West the exact tools needed for convincing the general population that the US must occupy Afghanistan in order to challenge the oppression of women and minorities and actively respond to the yearning for liberty.<sup>69</sup>

We cannot tackle women's rights under the Taliban unless we examine it through an intersectional lens. The conflict is not only women vs Taliban (or simply women vs patriarchal structures of society), Afghan people vs the West, but also internal conflict based on ethnicity, which is even more simplified in the narrative from the outside, where the Pashtuns are often perceived as the main/and only villains. Bilquees Daud, in her article "Project Taliban: An anti-Pashtun initiative?" challenges the so common link

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<sup>68</sup> Zirrar, "War through Fiction: Literature, Film and Invasion Apologia."

<sup>69</sup> Zirrar.

between Pashtun nationalism and religious fanaticism. She states that yes, the core of the Taliban's current leadership consists of Pashtuns. Nevertheless, this should not translate into an assumption that the Taliban represents Pashtun cultural, social and political ethos.<sup>70</sup>

As per the Pashtun governing principles, Daud describes the concept of Pashtunwali- a secular tribal code, which predates Islam and does not allow much authority to the Mullahs. The decisions are made under the institution of jirga- a council based on the egalitarian nature of the traditional Pashtun society that seeks to reach resolutions with a consensus and has no leader. When the Taliban came to power in 1994, it declared the jirga system as un-Islamic and executed village elders that sought to defy the ban of jirga practice.<sup>71</sup>

In his paper "The Taliban: Transformation from Pashtun nationalism to Religious nationalism", Rashid Ahmed traces the history of the Taliban propaganda, its promises, and following consequences. When the Taliban emerged, their strategy was indeed to use the principle of Pashtun nationalism for mobilization of the rural Pashtun society (target group since most of the Pashtuns were present in the rural areas of southern and eastern Afghanistan). Taliban used the "village identity" and various ethnic symbols to mobilize the ethnic sentiments. To that, the author questions to which degree the Taliban could actually "bring the village culture of Afghanistan back" since most of them formed their ideologies in Pakistan's refugee camps and madrasas in Southern Afghanistan. Rashid Ahmed further argues that the madrasa education altered the

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<sup>70</sup> Daud, "Project Taliban."

<sup>71</sup> Daud.

ethnic markers of the Pashtun students, changing their nationalist focus on the foundations of religion rather than ethnicity. In addition, the influence of Wahabism in the madrasas and the teachings of al-Qaeda based on theocratic Islamic autocracy further alienated the Taliban from anything resembling the Pashtun nationalist movement. Ahmed concludes by stating that the redefinition of belief under al-Qaeda divided the country on the basis of faith rather than ethnicity.<sup>72</sup> Kriti M. Shah continues on this topic stating that the Taliban does not reflect traditional Pashtun thinking and customs, nor does it seek to represent the interests of all the Pashtuns. She goes even further, establishing a theory, that the mistaken perception of the Taliban being a Pashtun movement might have originated in Pakistan for strategic reasons. She focuses primarily on those figures in a military settlement, such as the anti-US former Inter-services Intelligence chief Hamid Gul.

Kriti M. Shah also highlights that the Taliban, who were a product of Pakistan's madrasas, sought to replace the Pashtun traditional jirgas with shuras (religious councils). She notes that the highly conservative interpretations of Sharia during Shuras and their hierarchical principle directly contradict the basis of Pashtunwali.<sup>73</sup>

Even though the article was written in 2017, the author impressively predicted the course the events took in August 2021. Ironically, this cannot be said about many researchers from the US military. For example, Ryan Van Wie, in his 2020 paper on a possible peacekeeping mission in Afghanistan, stated, "it is improbable that 150,000 Taliban could decisively defeat the GOA's 300,000 soldiers and take over Afghanistan."<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> Ahmed, "The Taliban: Transformation from Pashtun Nationalism to Religious Nationalism."

<sup>73</sup> Shah, "The Pashtuns, the Taliban, and America's Longest War."

<sup>74</sup> Van Wie, "A Peacekeeping Mission in Afghanistan."

While the suffering of the ethnic and religious minorities- especially the Hazara people under the Taliban is undeniable, my goal in this section was to challenge the common misconception of the Taliban being a nationalistic Pashtun movement. While the focus of my thesis is on drafting policy promoting women's rights while the Taliban is still in power, I am convinced that in order to do so, it is also crucial to comprehend the realities behind the Taliban's emergence.

Shah states that Afghanistan was a geopolitical battlefield for foreign forces for far too long, and these forces lacked the understanding of the socio-cultural complexities. The Pashtuns have carried the consequences while a section was radicalized and militarized in the process. Pashtuns of Afghanistan were uprooted for more than two generations. First, those who fled during the Soviet occupation have no memories of the peaceful country. Followingly, they had no connection to the Pashtun practices of the elders and no connection to the tribes and their robust variety. As if the Soviet invasion and the US funding of the Mujahideen were not enough to disturb the Pashtun society, followingly, today's generation of Pashtuns that grew up under the US occupation are prone to regard foreigners as intruders and destroyers of their homeland.<sup>75</sup>

### **E. The Intersectionality of Afghan women's Struggle**

If the Taliban were to disappear tomorrow, Afghan women would still struggle. The Taliban might have worsened women's situation a thousand times, and yet we cannot ignore the struggles that existed prior and will exist even if the Taliban is defeated (and is there even an effective chance for that?). Usually,

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<sup>75</sup> Shah, "The Pashtuns, the Taliban, and America's Longest War."



academic papers quote statistics to highlight in which sectors women in a particular country suffer the most. However, while it is possible to obtain these statistics in Afghanistan during the research of particular communities or focusing on big cities, there is almost no contemporary data that would tackle the issue on a national level.

I was pleasantly surprised that the UN women identified this struggle for achieving gender statistics in Afghanistan honestly, rather than using the scarcely available ones from diverse years. The UN women notes: As of December 2020, only 38.6% of indicators needed to monitor the SDGs from a gender perspective in Afghanistan were available, with gaps in key areas, in particular: unpaid care and domestic work, key labour market indicators, such as the gender pay gap and information and communications technology skills. In addition, many areas – such as gender and poverty, physical and sexual harassment, women's access to assets (including land), and gender and the environment – lack comparable methodologies for regular monitoring. Closing these gender data gaps is essential for achieving gender-related SDG commitments in Afghanistan.<sup>76</sup> In the policy proposal for the potential role of the UN in Afghanistan, I argue that responsible data collection is fundamental for creating relevant policy and implementing monitoring. While the access to statistics on violations of women's rights in the private sphere will be incredibly challenging to achieve, assessing the issues in the public sphere such as employment rates (the latest statistic from the World bank established women's participation at 16% in 2020<sup>77</sup>), the gender pay gap in the diverse sector and women's access to healthcare are variables that we should start with.

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<sup>76</sup> "Country Fact Sheet | UN Women Data Hub."

<sup>77</sup> "Labor Force Participation Rate, Female (% of Female Population Ages 15+) (Modeled ILO Estimate) - Afghanistan | Data."

As per the demographics, Afghanistan's population is something around 40,510, 000 as of 2022. Around 10% of the population lives in Kabul. While this certainly does not mean that the policy should focus only on Kabul and big urban areas, the capital remains the first target given its strategic and symbolic meaning. As per ethnic division, 42% are Pashtun, 27% Tajik, 9% Hazara, 9% Uzbek, 4% Aimak, 3% Turkmen, 2% Baloch and 4% fall into an unspecified category. Muslims account for 99% of the population of Afghanistan, with between 80% and 89% practising Sunni Islam while 10-19% are Shia. Considering that most Afghan Shia Muslims are Hazaras, this carries implications when assessing the specific vulnerability of Hazara women under the Taliban. Further, while the sources differ on the literacy statistics, the world population review for 2022 notes that the literacy among the population of Afghanistan is only at 38.2% of the population over the age of 15 years, with males at 52% and females at 24%.<sup>78</sup>

To conclude, In the following chapters- and specifically in the one on a policy proposal specific to Afghanistan's public sphere I shall immerse deeper into the intersectionality of the women's struggle. For now, I simply wish to stress that factors such as ethnicity, economic class, level of education, absence of mahram and proximity to urban structures play a significant role in the negotiation of Afghan women's access to the public sphere.

## **F. Conclusion**

This chapter offered only a brief look into the topics of the War on Terror, dangers of white feminism, Afghan women's rights in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and

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<sup>78</sup> "Afghanistan Population 2022 (Demographics, Maps, Graphs)."

challenged the idea of the Taliban being a Pashtun nationalistic movement, I believe these topics are incredibly fundamental when it comes to drafting a policy on women's rights in a responsible manner. I want to particularly highlight that the US's actions in Afghanistan at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century should have been more widely discussed and challenged since it is direct proof that the US's enemy in the form of the Taliban as we know it was partially created by the U.S. Hence, in the War on Terror, the US is basically shooting itself in the foot.

Finally, I argue that assessing the history of Afghanistan with the geopolitics and the implications on women is essential to drafting policies that actually learned from the past mistakes and are relevant to the local context.

## CHAPTER V

### ISLAMIC FEMINISM AS A POLICY TOOL IN AFGHANISTAN'S POLICYMAKING

#### A. Introduction

In the literature review, I offered a summary of the major scholarships on Islamic feminism in general. This chapter seeks to question its possible implementation in today's Afghanistan under the Taliban's dominance. How do we move behind the damages caused by War on Terror? Given that feminism was used as an imperialist tool legitimizing military intervention in Afghanistan, how do we advocate for women's rights? On this matter, Moghadam states that the critique of Eurocentrism should not fall into a militant relativism, which she also describes as "protective denial" of oppressive relations, institutions and practices.<sup>79</sup>

While advocating for women's rights from within the Islamic juridical framework was practised for centuries, the very concept of Islamic feminism emerged in the last two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In this section, I want to move beyond the academic fights on vocabulary. Even though I perceive the movement similarly to Badran and do not regard the concept of feminism as inherently western, many activists are uncomfortable with the term for comprehensive reasons. Nevertheless, this chapter aims to discuss the possibilities of fighting for women's rights using tools and methodologies of Islamic jurisprudence and

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<sup>79</sup> Moghadam, "Revolution, the State, Islam, and Women: Gender Politics in Iran and Afghanistan."

hopefully moving beyond discussions on whether we should even call this methodology feminist or not.

Due to its desire for international legitimacy, the Taliban claims to give women their rights within Islamic jurisprudence. In the UN and international actors section, I discuss the monitoring mechanisms and practices to hold the Taliban accountable to its promises. Given the Taliban's improbability to effectively implement CEDAW recommendations or sign and ratify the Istanbul convention in the near future, religion becomes a potential tool for fighting for women's rights.

Not every Afghan woman wishes to base the fight for women's rights on the Islamic framework since the concept of Islamic feminism in policymaking presents essential issues- such as an eventual undermining of the forces aiming for secularization. However, female religious literacy is a mighty weapon against misogynistic practices under the Taliban's insurgency.

## **B. The Strategy of Fighting from within the Islamic Framework**

In the last decades, the strategies and methodologies of Islamic feminism have proven to be a potent force in challenging personal codes and changing the private sphere. Nonetheless, this section aims to use the framework of Islamic feminism to challenge the Taliban's imposed patriarchal dominance over the public sphere in general and employment in particular. Issues such as domestic violence, sexual violence, inheritance and divorce rights certainly need to be addressed as soon as possible. However, in the complete abyss of women's rights, the Taliban established after its insurgency in August 2021, regaining free and safe access to the public sphere and employment as a policy is a priority. Further, policies in the public sphere offer higher possibilities for implementing

monitoring to secure that the Taliban is sticking with its promises to the international society.

In order to assess the possibilities that are open to us when fighting for women's rights from within the Islamic jurisprudence, we have first to explore the history of women's rights in Islam and the methodologies. Everything starts with challenging what is known and what is depicted as a fact. Interestingly, mostly by the western powers that have no close engagement with Islam in the first place and the self-proclaimed scholars that often care too much about their personal interests and too little about the community's well-being. Further, it is essential to highlight that when Taliban religious authorities are talking about "community" or "inclusion", it usually portrays only the male part of the society and inclusion is tolerated only based on ethnic differences rather than the gender ones.

Therefore, is Islam inherently sustaining a patriarchal order within the society? While this very question could be answered in a graduate thesis on its own, I shall offer a brief take on the matter from the point of view of Islamic feminists. When observing Islam and Islamic practices all around the world in the 21st century, we need to critically distinguish between the cultural and the religious in the first place. Then, when we carefully divide the layers of a culture immersed into religion, we need to look back into the history. While many scholars did a fantastic job immersing themselves into Islamic history, I want to quote Asma Barlas' phenomenal book "Believing Women in Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretation of the Qur'an". She starts by questioning how the Quran and inherently God regard women, asking whether the Quran privileges men over women in their biological capacity, treats men as the self and women as the other, or binary opposites? She notes that much is at stake for Muslim women when we ask these

questions, given the increasing violence towards women in states such as Afghanistan. Before Barlas dives into the explanations on the gender equality implied in the Quran, she notes the tendency for highlighting Islam as a religion oppressing Muslims while disregarding ways in which Muslims are misreading<sup>80</sup> (or willingly manipulating) Islam. Further, Barlas remarks that if the history of western societies should teach us anything, be it that there is nothing inherently Islamic about misogyny, patriarchy and inequality. Nevertheless, these principles violating women's rights are ever-present in the discourses of Islamic states and clerics in the name of Islam.<sup>81</sup>

To understand Islam and Islamic jurisprudence outside of the patriarchal boundaries, we need to look beyond Sharia's centuries of misogynistic interpretations. As noted by Ziba Mir-Hosseini, it is fundamental to differentiate between Sharia and Fiqh, for one is considered God's word, and the other is a man-made interpretation prone to error. Mir-Hosseini notes that Sharia is literally "the way" representing the totality of God's will and Fiqh as a science of jurisprudence, literally meaning "Understanding", is the process of extracting the legal rulings from the sacred sources- Quran and the Sunna. Further, Mir-Hosseini notes that the two terms are often mistakenly equated in popular discourses and among academics, politicians, and legal specialists. This misinterpretation is often intentional. Certain Islamists seek to blur the lines between these two concepts, interchanging the human interpretation with what is perceived to be divine and infallible. Therefore, Fiqh, which is patriarchal in its present nature, is invoked as divine.<sup>82</sup> By interchanging these terms, women are discouraged from challenging the Fiqh, being told that they are challenging God by doing so.

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<sup>80</sup> Barlas, *Believing Women in Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur'an*.

<sup>81</sup> Barlas.

<sup>82</sup> Mir-Hosseini, "Muslim Women's Quest for Equality: Between Islamic Law and Feminism."

Amina Wadud, in her paper "Islam Beyond Patriarchy: Through Gender Inclusive Qur'anic Analysis", elaborates on the methodologies of deriving interpretations that are gender-egalitarian and respond to the present days' realities (al-waaqiyyah)- such as how women's place in society changed through centuries. Wadud stresses the intimate process between ethics, legal reform, and religious texts when deriving new legal forms. She notes the internal and external factors that put a constraint on the matter. While from the inside, women struggle against the patriarchal standards inside their own communities, there is also the international notion that Muslim communities cannot engage in global pluralism, universalism, democracy and human rights. Wadud states that all these issues can be addressed within the religious framework leading to challenging patriarchal practices while staying true to the religion.<sup>83</sup>

### **C. Women's Access to Public Space and Employment**

Shampa and Sanjoy Mazumdar, in their paper "Rethinking the Public and Private Space: Religion and Women in Muslim Society", examine women's role in the Islamic public space and the diverse levels of inclusion and seclusion. Importantly, the authors also note the cultural differences in perceiving and differentiating between which space is private and which one is public. The paper, drafting on the experiences from Iran and India, notes the persistent dichotomy in which the public space of men is related to power, status, control of information and decision making.<sup>84</sup> Previously, I stated that we must challenge the patriarchal foundation of Fiqh in general. Subsequently, when it comes

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<sup>83</sup> Wadud, "Islam beyond Patriarchy through Gender Inclusive Qur'anic Analysis."

<sup>84</sup> Mazumdar and Mazumdar, "RETHINKING PUBLIC AND PRIVATE SPACE: RELIGION AND WOMEN IN MUSLIM SOCIETY."



to the particular space of women in the public space and their access to employment, we should implement the same criticism. In this section, I want to start by highlighting the question of power, moving to the example of the Iranian revolution and the tendencies of new Islamic regimes to exclude women from the workforce despite their essentiality to the nation's economy. Finally, I will offer the historical background.

In her article "Why the Taliban's Repression of Women Might Be More Tactical than Ideological", Amanda Taub goes beyond the usual simplification of Islamist policies, stating that the Taliban's restriction of women's freedom is also a political choice. In order to comprehend this choice, we need to explore the Taliban's state-building efforts and Afghanistan's society. Currently, most women are still prevented from working and studying, which the Taliban claims are a prerequisite for temporary security measures. Taub quotes Dipali Mukhopadhyay, who explores the Taliban's struggle to move beyond insurgency into a state-building process. Lacking experience, funding and qualified staff, the Taliban is unable to provide complex government services. Taliban's compensation for this insufficiency is focusing on security control and the threat of force behind it. In that context, the Taliban's restriction of female mobility and exclusion from public space demonstrates their power.<sup>85</sup> The reason why the Taliban prevents women from accessing employment and the workforce is essential. Given the group's immense desire for international legitimacy and promise to give women their rights "within the framework of Islam", we must stress that eliminating women's public presence is based on a power struggle. This differentiation is fundamental in order to avoid international passivity due to cultural and religious relativism.

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<sup>85</sup> Taub, "Why the Taliban's Repression of Women May Be More Tactical Than Ideological."

First, it is essential to state that even in the most conservative Islamic societies and even among conservative ulama' there are solely any objections towards the professions that are considered "feminine enough" and revolve around caretaking. Therefore, there is usually little to no pushback when it comes to doctors, nurses, and teachers. Nevertheless, if we look into the seventh century and the Prophet's life, we discover working women outside of the "caretaking" sphere. Even though the example of the Prophet's first wife, Khadija, is quite overused in promoting female entrepreneurship, she indeed was a successful businesswoman and, at one point, also Prophet's employer.

Yusuf Sidani, in his brilliant essay "Women, Work and Islam in Arab Societies", also provides another example of a female entrepreneur challenging the current Islamist narrative on Muslim women's space in the private sphere. Umm Sharik was the Prophet's companion (Sahabiyya) who used to operate as a hotel manager. If Prophet himself married a woman active in the public sphere and had economically productive female companions, why does the Taliban see women stepping into the public sphere as impermissible? Sidani considers the conservative interpretations of scholars that discourage women from the public sphere an unconscious attempt to justify cultural practices.<sup>86</sup> While his article focuses on the practices and historical developments in Arab countries, exploring Islamic narratives on employment on the one hand and its reemergence after the Islamist boom is highly relevant to the case of Afghanistan.

Prior to discussing the diverse perspectives of the scholars on female employment, Sidani notes the impact Ulama' have on society intensified with the Islamic activism beginning in 1970. As per the example of traditional Ulama' perspective, Sidani highlights the case of Sheikh Abdel-Aziz BinBaz. While he regarded female presence in

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<sup>86</sup> Sidani, "Women, Work, and Islam in Arab Societies."

the public sphere as a deviation from the true female nature, he did not oppose women's involvement in nursing, healthcare and education, even though he stressed a strict gender separation in the work field.

In the review on the modernist Ulama' Sidani uses the example of Muhammad Al-Ghazali, Yusuf Al-Qaradawi, Abdel Haleem AbuShaqua and Hasan Turabi. In particular, Al-Ghazali critiqued the scholars who argued for preventing female mobility in public based on traditions rather than religions. He straightforwardly noted that such traditions put in place by people rather than God do nothing but cripple women's struggle for development. Concerning employment, Al-Ghazali was in favour of women's political and labour activities, noting that mixing of genders in the work environment is to be expected.

To conclude this section, Mernissi states that the liberation of women is primarily an economic issue.<sup>87</sup> While the term "liberation" is inherently problematic (liberation from whom and to what end), and I try to avoid the term together with its evil twin "empowerment", I agree entirely. As women, we cannot stand up for ourselves without having the economic means to do so. For this reason, I believe fighting for female access to dignified work in Afghanistan is essential. While female education is important, it is the employment that we should focus on; for what good comes out of education if the woman is segregated in her home? I believe that addressing employment and female access to the public space with strict monitoring of violations and shortcomings (such as the expected issue of wage gap) is essential for changes in the private sphere. For women everywhere, but especially in a conservative patriarchal society, obtaining divorce, custody, or justice for sexual and domestic violence is incredibly hard. While economic

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<sup>87</sup> Sidani.

means in no way substitute the very missing effective policies to address the issues women face in the very space where they should feel safe and secure, having financial means can offer at least a partial way-out.

#### **D. Applying the Framework to the Case of Afghanistan**

The following chapter will discuss the detailed analysis of Afghanistan's crushed economy. However, here I wish to stress how women's exclusion from employment further deepens the crisis. UNDP's report estimating Afghanistan's economic fall from December 2021 states that the Taliban's restriction of female labour could immediately cost the country \$1 billion, or 5% of GDP. While statistics vary, women represented at least 20% of the workforce prior to the insurgency, and at least a quarter of the 400 000 civil servants were women. Currently, all these women are banned from working until "there is a sharia-related procedure in place to secure their safety"- the Taliban did not elaborate on this vague procedure. Abdallah al Dardari, the head of UNDP, expressed himself, stating, "I want to say very clearly that there isn't a real full recovery of the Afghan economy without female participation". He further noted that the contribution of educated Afghan women to the country is higher than the one of men with the same degree of education.<sup>88</sup> Even though female employment cannot lift Afghanistan's economy on its own, it is a fundamental component.

#### **E. Limitations of the Religious Framework**

The first and most alarming issue with implementing the approach of Islamic Feminism in the case of Afghan women's access to employment and public space is its

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<sup>88</sup> Najafizada, "A Taliban Ban on Women in the Workforce Can Cost Economy \$1bn."

divisive nature. Although every woman in Afghanistan now lives under the Taliban's religious dictate, it does not mean that every Afghan woman is a Muslim or is supportive of a non-secular Islamic state. Therefore, is there a way how to implement policies using the frameworks of Islamic feminism without discrediting efforts for secularization? Can Islamic feminism and the Secular one peacefully coexist? And finally, is there even any chance for implementing secular approaches under the Taliban's government? In order to examine these questions, I am highlighting Badran's historicization of the emergence of Islamic feminism within its secular context and her optimistic take on its possible and beneficial intersection with secularism. Followingly, I discuss the critique from the Iranian secular leftists. Even though this critique sounds harsh, it is relevant for evaluating just how beneficial the framework can be and what are the possible damages.

Badran's paper "Between Religious and Secular Feminism/s." reflects on the two perceptions of feminism and considers their differences and intersections. Exploring the emergence of both variations of feminism, she notes that the Islamic one emerged in a postcolonial context characterized by the nations' dissatisfaction for lack of democracy and economic possibilities. When analyzing the roots of Islamic feminism, she notes that it was women's -both Secularists and religion-oriented, answer to the rise of Islamic movements and their need to counter with a progressive Islamic voice. Badran notes that the initiative to act was primarily due because women in different parts of the Middle East had participated for decades in employment in the public sphere. The call for them to return home in the name of Islam was disturbing. As per the historical element, while secular feminism emerged in a "religious" era, Islamic feminism emerged when the secular nations were in place.

Further, while secular feminism was a concept specific to national movements, the Islamic one embraced the central concept of the Qur'an. The two frameworks of feminism are usually seen as a binary, while Badran proposes an alternative point of view, discussing them as merging entities. Highlighting the shortcoming of Secular feminism; unlike Islamic feminism, the approach did not offer frameworks for changing personal codes. Therefore, when new tools and methodologies were needed, Islamic feminism provided them taking from secular feminists the Islamic modernist part and chose progressive Islam for its narrative.<sup>89</sup>

On the other hand, Valentine Moghadam's paper summarizes the perspectives of Iranian scholars that substantially oppose Badran's optimism concerning merging the secular with Islamic. These scholars maintain that the actions of Islamic feminists are compromised and insist that there is no chance for improvement of women's status as far as the Islamic Republic (or, in this case, Islamic Emirate) is in place. The author offers examples of Moghissi, Shahidian and Mojab. In particular, Moghissi notes that the movement strengthens the legitimacy of the Islamic republic and inevitably weakens the women's struggle in Iran. Finally, she concludes that Islamic feminism obscures women's true political, religious and ideological diversity, overshadowing the efforts of democrats, socialists and feminists towards secularization. Shahidian goes even deeper into the analysis, stating that Islamic feminism negatively impacts the women's movement and the left worldwide. In his eyes, the concept is inherently an oxymoron doomed to failure since there is no possibility to implement a fight from within in an effective manner.

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<sup>89</sup> Badran, "Between Secular and Islamic Feminism/s: Reflections on the Middle East and Beyond."

Instead, he reckons that the orthodox fundamentalist interpretations, institutions and laws are embedded too deeply to be challenged from within.<sup>90</sup>

In my perspective, discussing the critique and shortcomings of Islamic feminism is fundamental prior to its effective implementation in a policymaking proposal. However, in the contemporary situation with no realistic prospects for implementing secular policies in Afghanistan, I stress that despite all these very relevant problematics, arguing from within the Islamic framework is highly pragmatic and offers greater chances for successful policy- at least for the time being.

Men should not hold dominance over religion and its interpretations, especially if it concerns women's matters. Female take on Islamic jurisprudence can offer us more sensible and empathetic approaches. However, we have to be incredibly critical when it comes to assessing what is actually a feminist policy based on religion and what only strengthens the Taliban's dominance. Female religious literacy is essential. Although, that does not mean that every woman who is knowledgeable of the Qur'an is a feminist. Considering internalized misogyny, women can be the most prominent perpetrators of patriarchal systems and policies. Therefore, when developing a policy, we should be mindful that not every woman will unconditionally produce a framework that sustains women's rights and interests.

Finally, while the academic production on (and against) Islamic feminism is vibrant, this does not translate into a social movement. Establishing and promoting social movement is not a matter that can be fixed with yet another academic writing or a scholarly discussion. Translating the concept into a movement means implementing mindful advocacy campaigns. However, Islamic feminism should not be a tool accessible

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<sup>90</sup> Moghadam, "Islamic Feminism and Its Discontents."

only to the urban upper and middle class, which would be the case if we had focused only on the spread of information through social media. The advancement of technology was essential for the primary emergence and spread of Islamic feminism. Nevertheless, we need to move beyond that and ask how the concept can also benefit rural women and which tools and methodologies can be used to diffuse the information.

The inclusion of rural women brings me to my greatest concern and critique of existing scholarship of Islamic feminism. Afghan women need a framework that protects their rights under the Taliban's dominance, but does Islamic feminism actually protect all women? Under the religious dictate, some women are more vulnerable than others. Beyond the usual narrative of protecting ethnic and religious minorities, what about the LGBTQ community or sex workers (moving beyond the narrative that there are none in the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan)? Is Islamic feminism only for heterosexual women that fit into the "good Muslim" section, or can we elaborate on the previous scholarships and offer a framework that protects all women?

## **F. Conclusion**

While there is no perfect framework that could secure Afghan women's rights under the Taliban's government, this chapter evaluated the potential of Islamic feminism. Highlighting the concept's history, its strategies and methodologies and possible implications that could be specific to Afghanistan hopefully offer the base for policy draft. The section stressing the movement's shortcomings is essential- especially considering the inherent clash with secular activists. However, in the current situation, implementation of any policy that is based on western secular and neoliberal concepts is highly improbable. Therefore, I stress that even if the idea of arguing for gender equality



from religious grounds does not appeal to everyone, the support of secular feminists and the international community is essential to secure women's access to public space and dignified employment.

For too long men sought dominance using their interpretations of Islam to chain women. In the days of Islam's emergence the religion gave women unprecedented rights, so how is it, that nowadays women are told to stay segregated at home? How is it, that Taliban took a religion preaching peace and twisted it into a rope that is now choking thousands of women? Maybe Shahidian is right, maybe the roots of patriarchal greed in the institutions and practices run too deep for us to eradicate. However, this should not stop us from trying with all the strength we have, for any resistance is better than silent acceptance of injustice.

## CHAPTER VI

### POTENTIAL UN PEACEKEEPING PRESENCE IN AFGHANISTAN AFTER TALIBAN'S INSURGENCY

#### **A. Introduction**

Can peacekeeping formed by a patriarchal military structure sustain women's rights? And under which conditions can we implement a peacekeeping mission specifically designed for Afghanistan after the Taliban's insurgency? This chapter seeks to examine the variables of a potential peacekeeping mission in Afghanistan while specifically addressing sexual-based violence (SBV) and exploitation of local women on behalf of the peacekeepers.

While there is a substantial scholarship on women and feminism within the peacebuilding processes, there is an immense research gap pertaining to feminism and peacekeeping, even though the UNSCR 1325 is not limited to the concept of peacebuilding. I believe one of the reasons for this phenomenon is that assessing women's space in peacebuilding is easier since it fits within the stereotype of a feminine urge to create and nourish and does not directly challenge male hegemony over military and security. The section on gender and peacekeeping assesses previous scholarships to discover whether military and security operations are inherently anti-feminist. I engage with the patriarchal pieces of De Groot and Pelikan to highlight the problematic patriarchal take on stereotypical gender roles and male violence in the military on the one hand, and Diane Otto and Gina Horsfall's call for gender mainstreaming within the peacekeeping on the other hand. As per the specific problem of SBV in peacekeeping, I quote Heathcote, Otto, Jennings and Carey. Since the literature on gender and

peacekeeping is scarce and there has never been a peacekeeping mission in Afghanistan, I did not limit my research by time frame or geographical location since all previous experiences and failures of peacekeeping missions can be used to tailor a more sensible one in Afghanistan.

However, when it comes to discussing literature tackling specifically peacekeeping in Afghanistan without focusing on gender issues, except for Van Wie's article, I discuss only production from August 2021 till February 2022. Ryan C. Van, Gilchrist Mark and Charli Carpenter's military narrative might completely neglect women's rights; however, they offer essential frameworks for the preliminary organization, troop employment and funding.

## **B. Reviewing Previous Work on Gender and Peacekeeping**

Prior to highlighting previous literature on gender and peacekeeping, I want to highlight the UN's differentiation between peacekeeping and peacebuilding. The UN's diverse international peace and security mandates are often interlinked during conflict resolutions. The UNSCR 1325 that deals with gender inclusion in peace processes is usually discussed and researched within the concept of peacebuilding processes. As per the UN definition of peacebuilding, the process aims to prevent relapsing into conflict by strengthening national capacities and seeks to enhance the capacity of the State to carry out its functions in a legitimate manner effectively.<sup>91</sup> In order to build peace after conflict, it is necessary to have a solid foundation and effectively terminate the conflict at first. Considering that this did not occur in Afghanistan and the peacebuilding process would

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<sup>91</sup> "Terminology."

inherently mean strengthening the local government and, therefore, its legitimacy, the option is not viable for this specific case.

While peacebuilding would not respond to the current needs of Afghanistan, peacekeeping could. The UN definitions describe the function as supporting the implementation of ceasefire and peace agreements and may also intersect with the early peacebuilding efforts.<sup>92</sup> The international peacekeeping mission can offer a monitoring system to hold the Taliban accountable for not respecting even the most basic of women's rights. However, even after the UNSCR 1325, peacekeeping is not doing enough for women- not for the local ones nor for the female peacekeepers. While there is a significant prevalence of research on gender and peacebuilding, I am glad to see that researchers begin to address the matter also in the aspect of peacekeeping, where the realities are far more complex.

When finding Gerard J. De Groot's "A Few Good Women: Gender stereotypes, the military and peacekeeping", I expected the author to challenge gender stereotypes. However, the paper does exactly the opposite. De Groot explores the realities of women in the military in diverse countries and diverse historical periods. By playing on the gendering of emotions narrative, he states that female military personnel might be beneficial to peacekeeping missions given that the missions might need the physical qualities of soldiers on the one hand, but on the other hand, the qualities of a social worker are needed. The author continues on stressing that men are by nature more violent, while women are the empathetic and compassionate ones. Even though the article is from 2001, I believe we really need to move beyond these stereotypes. Women can be violent, ambitious and angry as much as men can be peaceful, kind and compassionate(assuming

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<sup>92</sup> "Terminology."

they liberate themselves from the constructs of toxic masculinity). As women, we are usually better at concealing our anger and violent outbursts. However, I argue that it is so not due to biological differences but due to social conditioning that sought to punish any female trespassing since early childhood. As women, we have constantly been pushed away from places of power and any rooms where crucial decisions were made since we were deemed "too emotional". So how is it then that male anger and violent outbursts are socially accepted, especially in the military context?

The author describes how diverse military programs sought to address male violence in the military without much success. He stated that while soldiers win wars, they "occasionally commit atrocities when aggression rages outside of control" he sees the cause in soldiers' frustration in the inability to use the violence in the war and, therefore, "the UN peacekeepers engage in systematic torture of the local population". The issue is that we are not dealing with an issue that the military is unaware of. De Groot notes that for most military commanders, the atrocities are a reasonable price for an effective fighting machine.<sup>93</sup> Further, the military narrative completely fails to hold the soldiers accountable by blaming the system and the lack of proper peacekeeping training. While proper military training and education on SBV for peacekeeping missions is undoubtedly needed, De Groot stating that disasters (probably a subtle euphemism for raping and abusing civilians) are understandable if the UN keeps throwing soldiers into unfamiliar peacekeeping situations is a narrative of infantilizing soldiers to avoid holding each individual accountable for a war crime- because that is what rape is.<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> DeGroot, "A Few Good Women: Gender Stereotypes, the Military and Peacekeeping."

<sup>94</sup> Jayaraman, "Rape as a War Crime."

I entirely disagree with De Groot's narrative full of stereotypes where women are essential to the military only due to the stereotypical feminine attributes and caretaking qualities. Further, I cannot stress how dangerous is his narrative on normalizing GBV on behalf of male soldiers. Nevertheless, I do agree with his stress on redefining the purpose of the military per se. In particular, it is fundamental to uproot the foundations of toxic masculinity and effectively address sexual violence towards civilians within peacekeeping missions.

Diane Otto and Gina Heathcote's "Rethinking Peacekeeping, Gender Equality and Collective Security" offers substantially more nuanced reflection on the intersection of gender issues and peacekeeping. The authors ask: How can the international community help to construct post-conflict societies respecting women if the very structure of the missions is not gender-balanced? The authors challenge the narrative offered by De Groot, noting their methodology aiming to move beyond the stereotypical narrative on gender roles in the military. Further, the authors highlight a shortcoming of the UNSCR 1325, highlighting that while addressing sexual violence is essential, it is not the only issue that we need to consider. (I disagree with the suggestion that sexual violence is over-emphasized and instead argue that other problems are not stressed up enough) As per effectively fighting sexual violence during peacekeeping missions, we need a deeper understanding of the intersections of women, peace and security while uprooting the old gender paradigms in peacekeeping and security. Another highly relevant shortcoming noted by the authors is the potential danger of institutionalization. Specifically, within the UN politics, the security resolution 1325 might be reduced to a technocratic tool, and the relevant personnel would not enhance the potential. Therefore we must secure the resolution is more than a bureaucratic piece of tokenistic feminism.

The re-emerging issue in the book is the discursive insistence on increasing female participation in peacekeeping missions. During my research, I came across a plethora of articles and papers that insisted on increasing female military participation without considering any other variables. However, in the same way, as I argue that not every woman knowledgeable of Islam will promote religious gender-sensitive policies, the same way female soldiers are not inherently feminist. Internalized misogyny is a real issue, especially in the military, where women will often try to alienate from anything seen as feminine to prove their belonging to the troops. Otto and Heathcote recognize this emphasizing that gender-diverse representation in peacekeeping on its own will not achieve feminist policies without effective gender mainstreaming.

Looking back into the chapter on War on Terror, the authors note how the UNSCR 1325 combined with chapter VII permitting the use of force is a double-edged sword for feminists. While chapter VII offers more diverse possibilities for implementing the resolution, on the one hand, it can also be a trigger for authorization of forceful interventions.<sup>95</sup> This resonates profoundly considering the US invasion of Afghanistan while hiding behind the feminist narrative. Therefore, peacekeeping in Afghanistan should not enable Chapter VII under any circumstances.

Examining the articles from the military background used in this chapter, we note the utter indifference towards women's rights in the "security is the primary goal" narrative. So whose security are we talking about when more than half of the nation suffers? The authors stress the need for feminist approaches that dismantle these very military reasonings based on patriarchal political and economic governance.<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> Heathcote and Otto, *Rethinking Peacekeeping, Gender Equality and Collective Security*.

<sup>96</sup> Heathcote and Otto.

### **C. Fighting the Normalization of Sexual Violence and Disregard for Local Voices within the UN Peacekeeping Mission**

Despite the growing academic discourse on implementing feminist approaches into the military, the context remains heavily patriarchal for now. Nevertheless, the UN peacekeeping presence is currently the only realistic way to secure effective monitoring of the Taliban's promise to respect women's rights- particularly access to education and employment. Even so, peacekeeping missions are primarily military missions shouldered by soldiers usually trained under the most patriarchal and nationalistic contexts. Therefore, will they protect vulnerable foreign women?

Despite many benefits peacekeeping could bring to Afghanistan, I find it fundamental to address also the downfalls of this possibility and its potential negative impacts on Afghan women. Highlighting the previous failures and violence of peacekeepers is not provided to argue against the mission in Afghanistan. Instead, by highlighting the cases of sexual violence of peacekeepers and discussing the tools to prevent such cases/ substantially increase accountability when they happen, I hope to offer an insight into potential peacekeeping forces that do not sacrifice women- employed nor the local ones in the process.

On this matter, I want to highlight Kathleen M. Jennings' "Conditional protection? Sex, Gender and Discourse in UN peacekeeping." Her paper is exceptional in its direct examination of peacekeepers as individuals rather than as a generic part of the UN. She primarily highlights the concept of protection being conditioned by the peacekeepers' perception of the locals. The author begins by stressing the UN's 2003 zero-tolerance policy (ZTP) towards sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA) by the peacekeepers, which explicitly prohibits peacekeepers from buying (or exchanging for food, services or



assistance) sex in the mission areas. This was followed by the 2005 Zeid report offering an anti-SEA strategy that laid the foundation for institutional changes. While the policies and reports are a base for an effective change, Jennings immerses deeper, exploring the peacekeepers' representation of locals in their discourse that directly affects their reasonings on consent and exploitation.

Jennings explores how the narrative on local women (specifically their bodies) portrays them as contradicting objects of lust, pity and fear while local men are seen as ignorant and not capable of caring for their women.<sup>97</sup> This narrative, often rooted in misogyny and orientalism, is dangerous due to its alienating creation of "the others", which justifies gender-based violence that should never exist in the first place. Interestingly, the author notes that the perspective was not limited to white European male peacekeepers but also defused among peacekeepers from the Global South and women.<sup>98</sup> This indicates that increasing gender or racial diversity of peacekeepers on its own is not an adequate response. The dangers of the prevailing discourse of locals "thinking differently" inherently position the foreign peacekeepers above their surroundings. When this narrative matches with the infamous HIV training that even further stigmatizes locals and the complete lack of severe punishments for trespassing the ZTP, the real disaster emerges. For example, Jennings examines the peacekeepers' efforts to justify sexual exploitation of local women as non-abusive since, according to them, local women fill the SEA report to take advantage of peacekeepers and not because they are "really suffering". While the male entitlement to abuse women and followingly call for empathy never ceases to amaze, Donna Bridges and Debbie Horsfall in "Increasing operational

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<sup>97</sup> Jennings, "Conditional Protection? Sex, Gender, and Discourse in UN Peacekeeping."

<sup>98</sup> Jennings.

effectiveness in the UN peacekeeping" highlight the realities under which peacekeepers inherently exploit sex workers in unequal power dynamics. In war-torn or unstable countries, a high amount of women is forced into prostitution and therefore, the peacekeepers inherently enable and support sexual slavery. The authors note that often commanders do not discourage this unacceptable and unprofessional behaviour but rather provide a lecture on "being careful" and distributing condoms to the peacekeepers. Further, the authors note that while the presence of female peacekeepers cannot prevent sexual violence, it might reduce the levels of sexual harassment and violence against local women significantly.<sup>99</sup> To conclude, sexual engagement with locals during peacekeeping missions is inherently abusive due to unequal power dynamics.

#### **D. Sexual Exploitation and Violence- Do Female Peacekeepers Matter?**

Should we care about female representation in Afghanistan's peacekeeping? While I already established that female military personnel per se should not be seen as a guarantee of feminist policies, nor are their representation indicator of a successful implementation of the UNSCR 1325, the former Secretary general's adviser on gender issues, Angela King, notes some of the positive effects of peacekeeping missions employing women. First, local women confide more in female peacekeepers. Second, female peacekeepers understand the implications of peace processes on women's life better than men. Third, the past missions with high female representations such as Namibia and South Africa have been successful. And fourth, if at least 30% of mission personnel are women, the local women are quicker to join the peace committees. King

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<sup>99</sup> Bridges and Horsfall, "Increasing Operational Effectiveness in UN Peacekeeping: Toward a Gender-Balanced Force."

notes that these committees are usually less hierarchical and more responsive to female concerns.

Expressing the necessity for gender mainstreaming is not new and was expressed already by the former Secretary-General Annan in 2002. On a negative note, it is essential to highlight that the Brahimi report does not even mention women. Further, Henry F. Carey notes that the UN is generally not bound by international treaties (relevant to this issue is, for example, CEDAW and the Istanbul Convention). The concept is that those international treaties apply to states, and international civil servants are exempt from the jurisdiction. This contradicts Annan's promise for gender mainstreaming and also creates issues when seeking accountability. The author notes that peacekeepers who were pledged guilty of sexual violence and other war crimes in Kosovo, Liberia, Somalia, Sierra Leone, Haiti and Bosnia were not persecuted in their countries on the pretence of helping preserve international peace. While the author agrees that persecuting violations of humanitarian law based on "military necessity" might be difficult, no military necessity excuses rape and abandoning babies resulting from consensual sex. However, what is increasingly outrageous than the lack of accountability of singular states is that the UN human rights bodies have not officially condemned most crimes committed by the peacekeepers.<sup>100</sup>

Bridges and Horsfall's main argument was that increasing women's presence in peacekeeping is beneficial for its effectiveness (noting that effectiveness is not necessarily feminist). Further, they state that a more gender-balanced presence is beneficial for "normalizing" the troops' presence regarding locals' perception of troops.

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<sup>100</sup> Carey, "Women and Peace and Security": The Politics of Implementing Gender Sensitivity Norms in Peacekeeping."

Also, it usually discourages a significant amount of male peacekeepers from violating local women<sup>101</sup> (noting the narrative on "the others" where not all women are respected equally). This brings us back into the gendered norms, whereas women are inherently regarded as peacemakers, and our violence is recognized solely if it sustains patriarchal goals and structures. As Mona Eltahawy notes in her recent essay *Feminist response to war*: "To allow women into armed forces and to assume combat roles is perceived as a form of equality for some. But if men themselves are not free of the ravages of patriarchy, why should I aim so low? If men are dehumanized in the name of fighting patriarchy's wars, it is beyond time for them to become, as Michael Eric Dyson says, "traitors to patriarchy," and not for women to sign up to become footsoldiers, lieutenants, and generals of patriarchy."<sup>102</sup> Despite my immense admiration for Eltahawy's writings and agreeing entirely with her challenge of the military's patriarchal and white supremacist structures, I insist that women not engaging with the military- and therefore with peacekeeping missions would- especially in Afghanistan do more damage than good.

#### **E. Reforms and Policies for Effective Prevention and Punishment of SBV**

Based on the previous assessment, even if women's representation in peacekeeping is not enough on its own, it is the starting point for an effective mission. Therefore when deciding which nations should be considered for peacekeeping mission in Afghanistan, we should consider how many female soldiers can be employed. I stress that settling under 35% should not be accepted.

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<sup>101</sup> Bridges and Horsfall, "Increasing Operational Effectiveness in UN Peacekeeping: Toward a Gender-Balanced Force."

<sup>102</sup> Eltahawy, "Essay."

Carey notes that norms represent only a first step- which is necessary but not sufficient to challenge impunity for sexual violence and promote responsiveness in war and the hard peacebuilding moments after. He notes that states promoted UNSCR 1325 to show solidarity with its principles without being required to take effective actions<sup>103</sup>. Therefore, the resolution needs to be reevaluated to oblige the countries for more than a symbolic response. While Carey reckons that states under Sharia law might be against gender mainstreaming in peacekeeping, I want to challenge this. The Taliban might not appreciate female peacekeepers roaming around Afghanistan while they try to segregate Afghan women at home by any means necessary, however with the strict rules on gender segregation, female peacekeepers are essential, especially within conservative Islamic societies. For example, male peacekeepers conducting physical security checks on local women go beyond being culturally insensitive to violating women's bodily autonomy. Further, there is none to directly engage with the local women on their diverse needs without female peacekeepers.

Beyond the implementation of regulations within the UN, which I stress must be in close cooperation with local NGOs and female groups that have the knowledge of local norms, customs and women's effective needs, Carey also notes the need for following recognitions: Recognition of sexual violence as jus cogens crimes (cannot be amnestied), equal gender rights- even in countries with traditional customary laws (here is where the narrative of Islamic feminism will prove handy), condemnation of forced or parental-sanctioned prostitution as a crime against humanity, mandatory trauma training and services to rehabilitate SBV survivors and most important- reparation to the survivors of

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<sup>103</sup> Carey, "‘Women and Peace and Security’: The Politics of Implementing Gender Sensitivity Norms in Peacekeeping."

SBV and assistance to document litigation- not only against individuals but also against organizations and states. Carey concludes that no matter how challenging pursuing these points are; they are too essential not to invest all available resources and efforts.<sup>104</sup> Further, monetary resources might not need to play an essential role. Burke comes with an innovative and simple solution of shaming states into taking responsibility for their peacekeepers' sexual violations. While shame might seem like a vague expression within geopolitics, it can be a mighty weapon when publicly disclosed by international and regional Human Rights bodies.<sup>105</sup>

#### **F. Challenging the Military Narrative on Security and Stability**

Moving beyond the generic risks peacekeeping presents to women, the following sections focus on the various scenarios under which the UN's peacekeeping mission could be implemented in Afghanistan. While research papers have been written throughout the decades on this topic and military articles and brief research papers are emerging calling for a robust international mission or even implementation of chapter VII of the UN's charter, I wish to offer a different narrative that challenges those who care only for geopolitics and completely neglect the civilians. Even though military articles on the diverse scenarios for employing UN's peacekeeping in Afghanistan, such as the one from Ryan C. Van, Gilchrist Mark and Charli Carpenter, present some crucial points focusing on budgeting and the particular operational prerequisites necessary for assembling and deploying the UN's peacekeeping operation, there are many issues they do not address as much as necessary, especially concerning the humanitarian and human rights monitoring aspects of the mission.

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<sup>104</sup> Carey.

<sup>105</sup> Heathcote and Otto, *Rethinking Peacekeeping, Gender Equality and Collective Security*.

Ryan C. Van states that peacekeeping should be used as a monitoring and verification mechanism rather than a transformative state-building mission that seeks to enforce the settlement and argues for a temporary short-term assignment, and stresses the necessity for establishing stability and monitoring that Afghanistan does not become a haven of terrorism.<sup>106</sup> Yet under the current government, the narrative on who is a terrorist and who is a "moderate Taliban" is getting more blurred and veiled in a political agenda day by day. Further, I want to counter the narrative that discusses only establishing stability without even providing any insight into what that stability would entail- or whether it applies only to restoring daily stability to men while women are expected to suffer the Taliban's misogynistic dictate.

Gilchrist argues that conflict termination is a crucial waypoint in a peace process and one in which the military can and should play an important role while describing conflict termination as a reduction in violence that creates room for constructive discourse toward an enduring political settlement.<sup>107</sup> Looking at the US's military presence in Afghanistan, what did they achieve in 20 years, and why should a peacekeeping mission that heavily relies on the military be more successful? While I believe that the military part of peacekeeping is important, it should not sacrifice the need for monitoring HR violations. Further, the US's military narrative on peacekeeping in Afghanistan often resembles efforts of fragile egos that got beaten on the battleground desperately trying to reach victories through political settlement, focusing on the personal, professional and geopolitical gains of their country rather than on mitigating the immense damages the US's withdrawal and the theft of \$7 billion frozen Afghan assets caused.

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<sup>106</sup> Van Wie, "Could Multinational Peacekeepers Prevent Worst-Case Outcomes in Afghanistan?"

<sup>107</sup> Gilchrist, "Blessed Are the Peacemakers."

Petr Pelikan, a Czech academic and a former member of the Czech military, during an interview analysis concerning the possible peacekeeping solutions in Afghanistan, said that rather than having 140 thousand casualties and immense economic expenses just so that "girls can study politics and gender at the university and have uncovered faces" is not worth military intervention.<sup>108</sup> While certainly, not all academics with a military background produce such absurd misogynistic simplifications of complex political issues as Pelikan, it summarizes the patriarchal dangers of the mainstream military narrative. This narrative does not care about the civilians- especially the ethnic and religious minorities or women; all it cares about is the previously mentioned abstract concept of "stability".

### **G. Problematic Implementation of the Brahimi's Robustness in the World of Taliban**

While the Taliban at the current stages refuses any international intrusion on the Afghan territory, Williams states that circumstances could arise where they thought it useful to consent to a small UN peacekeeping operation beyond the UN assistance mission already in the country.<sup>109</sup> If we assume that the UN will not employ a peacekeeping mission without a prior agreement/discussion with the Taliban government, is a small peacekeeping mission even effectively doing anything beyond establishing a symbolic presence? HPN, in its paper "The Brahimi report: Politicizing humanitarianism?" states that there is no excuse for deploying missions with weak and confusing mandates, inadequate numbers of troops and muddled thinking about aims and objectives.<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>108</sup> Pelikan, "Pelikán."

<sup>109</sup> Williams, "The Pitfalls of UN Peacekeeping in Afghanistan."

<sup>110</sup> HPN, "The Brahimi Report."



In her piece on how the Brahimi report improved the effectiveness of the UN peacekeeping missions, Lauren Durand noted that The Brahimi report established the humanitarian nature of PKOs by suggesting that peacebuilding, transitional administrations, reconstruction and development were equally as important as peacekeeping. Peacekeeping is no longer immediate relief but the establishment of long-term peace.<sup>111</sup> Therefore, is there any possibility for employing a peacekeeping mission in Afghanistan that would be within the framework of the Brahimi report on the one hand and get accepted by the Taliban on the other?

While Ryan C Van's paper estimation of the improbability that 150,000 Taliban could decisively defeat the GOA's 300,000 soldiers and take over Afghanistan are quite a painful reminder of the US's withdrawal plot twist, and even though I disagree with his approach for peacekeeping that does not consider issues outside of the military framework, he introduced three possible scenarios for an establishment of the UN's peacekeeping mission based on the diverse robustness of the mission with the pros and cons of each scenario. He argues that the most robust possibility with 25 000 peacekeepers and an estimated cost of 2 billion dollars per year (the US's military prior to its withdrawal cost 45-50 billion per year) provides the best monitoring and verification capability. Its wider geographic coverage will better enable peacekeepers to support disarmament and demobilization and credibly monitor a ceasefire and an intra-Afghan peace settlement's implementation. Further, it can promptly investigate alleged violations.

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<sup>111</sup> Durand, "How Did the Brahimi Report Improve the Effectiveness of UN Peacekeeping Operations?"

<sup>112</sup> Van Wie, "A Peacekeeping Mission in Afghanistan."

Howard, in her article, argues that since the Taliban desires international recognition and does need international aid, it might consent to the UN's mission without any western troops. She stresses the cruciality of the Taliban's consent since If UN observers are invited as guests, they stand a greater chance of acceptance and survival.<sup>113</sup> Also, in another article Howard wrote with Carpenter, they quote a report from the Human Security Lab stating that a mission, even with a 5,000 troop mission, could help.<sup>114</sup> As per Van's research, this would mean the third scenario in his research with an estimated cost of \$500 million, covering 17% of the Afghan population with low monitoring and verification capability. However, the positive aspect of a more modest mission is that since it would not be seen as a threat by the Taliban and would operate only in bases close to the major cities, there is a lower risk to the peacekeepers. As a compromise between a robust and a modest mission, I believe Van's proposal for a compromise with 12,000 troops would be suitable. Yet it poses a question, whether it would be worth it since the budget would increase to \$1 billion, and according to his estimates, the Afghanistan population coverage would increase only by 5,4%. Given that the US military was spending yearly between \$45-50 billion in Afghanistan, establishing a presence of 12,000, even if not covering a significantly vaster area, provides more international presence when it comes to insisting on the Taliban's accountability to their promises on abolishing violations of human's rights within the Islamic jurisprudence framework. In the following section, I wish to argue that given the Taliban's wish of withdrawing any western presence and apart from some parts of Pakistan, no country that could deploy troops has the same cultural comprehension of Islam, there is an immense need of

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<sup>113</sup> Howard, "Op-Ed."

<sup>114</sup> Carpenter and Howard, "How Not to Lose the Peace in Afghanistan."

employing local staff especially when it comes to drafting frameworks within which women's rights should be discussed within the Islamic jurisprudence. At this point, I want to highlight the relevance of Biermann's paper on the UN's bureaucracies and insist that in such a fragile context for negotiation such as contemporary Afghanistan, we have to strive to do much better when it comes to deciding who and why is called a "specialist" on Afghanistan at the UN and greater space should be given to the local staff, rather than to people who get to be called specialists not for comprehending the local context but rather for knowing how to tackle the frameworks of the UN's report structures.

Therefore, to conclude on the question of robustness, while I believe the perfect scenario would be Van's first framework with the estimated size of 25 000 peacekeepers, this scenario is improbable to happen since the Taliban would not agree to such an immense international presence (-even if non-western). Given that, I argue that 5 000 peacekeepers would be almost a mere symbolic presence, and the international community (with some states more responsible than others) have used Afghanistan as a geopolitical playground with a complete disregard for civilians for too long and should seek to employ a peacekeeping mission as robust as possible within what can be mediated between the Taliban and the UN.

#### **H. Seeking Taliban's Consent for the Mission- the Why and its Implications**

After arguing for a mission with the estimated troop of 12 000 peacekeepers (or as much more as the Taliban allows to the territory and as much as is offered by the states deploying the troops), I want to discuss whether there is any possibility for a UN's peacekeeping mission without the consent of the Taliban. Van, in his article for War on the Rocks and basically all other scholars that put into consideration this scenario argue

against it. He states that entering a country against the wishes of the de facto army would equal an invasion.<sup>115</sup> In the introduction, I have stressed not wishing to give any argument that would legitimize the Taliban's government in the eyes of the international society. However, is it even possible to hold the Taliban accountable for violating women's rights if there is no offer to counter it? And what exactly would it mean if the government was deemed legitimate? Federica Paddeu and Niko Pavlopoulos, in their incredibly detailed article on legitimacy and control, offer some of the examples of issues that must be settled if the government is deemed legitimate such as who may request military assistance in Afghanistan; who may represent Afghanistan at the UN and other international institutions; who may access Afghanistan's property abroad, including its embassies; and who may obtain access to International Monetary Fund resources in Afghanistan's name.(Unfortunately, Biden's current act gave us a response to this issue). Further, if the Taliban engage in violence against Afghan or foreign nationals, the responsibility of Afghanistan for any violation of international law may well turn on whether the Taliban is the government of the State and also issues such as who gets to speak for Afghanistan on social media and whether Taliban's content will be allowed on those media.<sup>116</sup> When questioning how is the 1. UN going to interact with the Taliban, and when reading the previously mentioned articles on the issues, all scholars deem the idea of the legitimization of the Taliban's government as inevitable. Is it really so? The authors of the just security article argue that Ghani and Saleh still have a constitutionally valid claim (even though it is basically impossible for them to act upon it). Given that the Taliban did effectively gain power over the majority of Afghanistan's territories and population, the

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<sup>115</sup> Van Wie, "Could Multinational Peacekeepers Prevent Worst-Case Outcomes in Afghanistan?"

<sup>116</sup> Pavlopoulos and Paddeu, "Between Legitimacy and Control."

question is which countries will decide to maintain international relations and in what manner- for example, by providing additional conditions prior. For example, the UK, during a General Security meeting on August 16, stated, " [i]f the Taliban continue to abuse basic human rights, they cannot expect to enjoy any legitimacy in the eyes of the Afghan people, or the international community" but can general condemnations such as these change anything? As per which countries currently have open embassies in Kabul and communicate with the Taliban, there's Russia and China. <sup>117</sup>The more one emerges into the question of legitimacy in Afghanistan and seeks to find a "perfect solution", the messier and increasingly frustrating the situation gets.

Kate Bateman remarks that the question of international recognition is one of the few remaining baits for negotiating with the Taliban. According to her, it is fundamental that as many countries as possible remain united to play this card effectively. She further states, "recognition of the Taliban government by Afghanistan's neighbours would confer a degree of legitimacy on the Taliban and provide them access to needed financial resources — and would significantly diminish US leverage and ability to press the Taliban on the most immediate objectives of access for humanitarian aid and freedom of movement for Afghan refugees, not to mention the broader priorities of an inclusive government, respect for human rights and counterterrorism assurances." <sup>118</sup>At this point, the question of legitimacy is a bargaining chip, and it is up to the UN especially to decide what exactly should be the price. While it is improbable to employ a peacekeeping mission with the US's presence, their role in peacekeeping is undeniable given that from the budget for peacekeeping mission between 2021 and 2022 from the \$6,38 billion,

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<sup>117</sup> Pavlopoulos and Paddeu.

<sup>118</sup> Bateman and Mir, "Taliban Seek Recognition, But Offer Few Concessions to International Concerns."

27,89% is funded by the US<sup>119</sup>. Van goes even further in discussing how to create international pressure on Taliban and notes, that top donor states, the five permanent members of the UN Security Council, Afghanistan's neighbors, and international governmental organizations like the World Bank and International Monetary Fund could withhold financial aid, humanitarian assistance, and diplomatic recognition, conditional on the Taliban consenting to a U.N.-led multinational PKO.<sup>120</sup>

As per the question on which countries should send the peacekeeping troops, the academic opinions vary. Lise Howard is in favour of employing troops that are primarily from China and Pakistan. She highlights the vast experience of Pakistan with the peacekeeping mission since it currently has 7000 peacekeepers active in 14 UN missions<sup>121</sup>. In my opinion, employing Pakistan's peacekeepers in Afghanistan goes against all geopolitical considerations and the ideas of impartiality. The peacekeeping missions are built on the principle of neutrality. Given Pakistan's current stance on the legitimization of the Taliban, I worry about conflict of the national interest that could impact the mission. Further, Aqil Shah notes the previous alliance between India and Ashraf Ghani's government. With the establishment of the Taliban's government, Pakistan has gained a geopolitical proxy against its nemesis. Even though the Taliban's trying to set free from Islamabad's influence to demonstrate its autonomy, Islamabad is still trying to protect its long-term investment into the Taliban. While many would deny this, Shah quotes Pakistan's interior minister Sheikh Rasheed Ahmad who stated, "Most of the top Taliban leaders were born and educated in Pakistan. Many of them are still here. We have done a lot for them."<sup>122</sup> If one country would get the quickest Taliban approval for a

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<sup>119</sup> UN peacekeeping, "How We Are Funded."

<sup>120</sup> Van Wie, "Could Multinational Peacekeepers Prevent Worst-Case Outcomes in Afghanistan?"

<sup>121</sup> Iqbal, "Pakistan Maintains Its Contribution to UN Peacekeeping."

<sup>122</sup> Shah, "Pakistan's 'Moderate Taliban' Strategy Won't Hold Up—For Anyone."

peacekeeping presence in Afghanistan, it would certainly be Pakistan. Nevertheless, it is certainly not the right step for securing accountability of the Taliban (if we are not talking about accountability to Islamabad).

Another country that Howard recommended was China, with its 8000 peacekeepers. Given the ease with which China welcomed the Taliban and expressed its willingness to "help build new Afghanistan", we should be wary of the conflict of interest when it comes to employing the troops in the mission. The same would go, in my opinion, for Russia. Therefore, what options do we have left if we are trying to exclude those with whom the Taliban explicitly refuses to cooperate but also those who are a little bit too enthusiastic about collaborating? Van also excluded the possibility of employing Indian peacekeepers because of their geopolitical interest and also dismissed employing the troops from the NATO members- South Korea, Japan, Nepal, Ukraine, Georgia, Australia, and New Zealand. Therefore, Brazil, Columbia, Senegal, Egypt, Indonesia, and Bangladesh remain viable options.<sup>123</sup> Whether these countries would be interested in participating in such a risky peacekeeping mission is to be seen.

The research paper "Aid, conflict and peacebuilding in Afghanistan" is incredibly relevant to the present case, even though the piece was written in 2002, which tells us just how much we need a clear, definite mandate for peacekeeping mission. First, it is fundamental for all the included to take the mission seriously and employ enough staff for the recommendations to be taken into practice. Another issue that was previously mentioned is the lack of deep regional expertise. The author argues that Careers in aid are often too shallow, involving frequent moves from one hot spot to the next. Donors should encourage, within their own organizations and their partners, the development of a cadre

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<sup>123</sup> Van Wie, "A Peacekeeping Mission in Afghanistan."

of regional specialists with deep experience and understanding of the South and Central Asian region. <sup>124</sup> I believe this to be especially true when it comes to military personnel.

Finally, even if the idea of issuing a peacekeeping mission within the framework of chapter 7 of the UN's charter in order to protect civilians seems quite reasonable in theory, the previous practical failings and abuses of the chapter by the 1. UN, to pursue its own geopolitical agenda, have taught us otherwise.

### **I. Securing Women's Rights during the Mission**

The previously quoted academics differ with their opinions on why is it fundamental to establish a peacekeeping mission. Be it monitoring of the inter-Afghan settlements or holding the Taliban accountable for their promises on women's rights. I believe a peacekeeping mission is fundamental mainly because of the need to secure that the Taliban is held accountable when it comes to its persisting violations of human rights- focusing especially on women. I agree with Aqil Shah's condemnation of the narrative of "moderate Taliban." There is nothing moderate about the group that conquered Kabul, and their agenda did not change over the last 20 years. What did change, however, is their realization that in order to secure their position, they have to engage in international discussions and promise at least the most basic of human's rights. What I find shocking (yet quite unsurprising) is the degree to which they are paying lip service, promising to respect women's rights and yet they do not even try to hide the cruelty women face in Afghanistan every day. The most painful symbol is the Ministry of Women's Affairs transformation to Ministry for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice- hence a comeback of the once so feared moral police. Despite the promises to the international

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<sup>124</sup> Atmar and Goodhand, "Aid, Conflict and Peacebuilding in Afghanistan."



society, women and girls still cannot access secondary education beyond grade six nor go back to their previous jobs (unless they used to clean women's public bathrooms).

I argue that the control and cruelty Taliban established over women cannot be explained within the ideological framework of even the most rigid interpretation of Islam. The phenomenon goes way deeper than calling it misogyny. The violations and cruelty of the Taliban towards women is a form of power, as previously mentioned by Amanda Taub, stating that restriction of women's most basic rights should be perceived as a political choice rather than an ideological one.<sup>125</sup>

I cannot stress enough how thin is the line to be walked when entering Afghanistan on the pretence of securing women's rights. There has been enough of the damage caused by the foreign troops that used the narrative of women being victims to pursue their own geopolitical goal. I argue for a peacekeeping mission that addresses violations of women's rights in the first place, rather than using it as a mere excuse for penetration to the territory. Finally, we must shift the narrative and ways in which we address women's rights under the Taliban in the first place. It is crucial to discuss women's potential to be the major actors in the public space. We must discuss the possibilities women can offer to the Afghan society rather than treating them as victims that need to be saved.

## **J. Analyzing Previous Scholarships and Moving to Effective Application in Afghanistan**

To summarize, I argue for an implementation of a peacekeeping mission in Afghanistan shouldered by the UN. Even though I wish the involvement and consent of the Taliban could be omitted, in order to hold them accountable and ensure more safety

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<sup>125</sup> Taub, "Why the Taliban's Repression of Women May Be More Tactical Than Ideological."

to the peacekeepers, their consent is crucial, even if it means compromising on the robustness of the mission (anything under 12 000 peacekeepers is only symbolic) and brings a lot of heavy feelings within the neutrality trap framework when dealing with authoritarian, repressive (and illegitimate) groups. The troops should be sent from non-western countries mentioned in the previous sections. As per the duration of the mission, I disagree entirely with Van Wie, who argued that it is sufficient to have a mission only for a brief period to ensure successful inter-Afghan talks. Since I argue that the mission's main focus should be holding the Taliban accountable to their promises of respecting women's rights, the mission should be long-term, emphasizing the non-military section. To conclude, there is no perfect scenario to conduct peacekeeping in Afghanistan. There will be casualties and messy, uncomfortable diplomatic cooperation with the Taliban. At the current stage, where the Taliban is likely to stay, it is necessary for the UN to secure as much order and commitment to human rights as possible. Further, at least 35% of the peacekeepers should be women for reasons previously described, and gender mainstreaming policies should be implemented. UN should engage local women in the design of this mission-the non-military part, as much as possible, which would be almost impossible without female UN staff.

Moving beyond its problematic past, I am convinced that peacekeeping can indeed serve feminist purposes and sustain women's rights. However, peacekeeping is primarily a military mission, unlike peacebuilding. Even though peacekeeping goals differ from war conquests, it is the very troops that conduct the mandate, and the military worldwide is not known for its feminist agendas. While the lack of intersectional feminism within peacekeeping can actually reinforce the existing local power structures, I do not believe feminists should simply pronounce military missions patriarchal and step aside. We must

challenge the shortcomings and demand change from within because the Taliban will not respect women's rights without the pressure and monitoring of peacekeeping forces.

## CHAPTER VII

### WOMEN'S ACCESS TO THE PUBLIC SPACE AND EMPLOYMENT UNDER THE TALIBAN. ON NEGOTIATING THE PUBLIC SPHERE AND RELEVANT POLICIES

#### **A. Introduction**

This chapter deals with the diverse meanings and power dynamics of Afghanistan's public space, noting its gendered division and the patriarchal mechanisms-not specific only to the Taliban to exclude/ violate women who dare to challenge the current situation. During the examination of specific scenarios such as access to healthcare, rural areas or employment, I want to stress that the Taliban's effort to eradicate female public presence has nothing to do with Islam or protecting female honour and is simply a mechanism upholding misogynistic terrorism.

The public space is not essential only for women wishing to have a career since safe access to healthcare/groceries should be non-negotiable for everyone. However, during my writings, I am trying to stress that the situation affects women differently, and those who have no mahram suffer disproportionately.

As per the literature review, the academic resources are significantly limited. I have decided to examine research pertaining to the diverse variables of Afghanistan's public sphere with no time framework and, followingly, analogically evaluate the relevance for the contemporary situation. My biggest inspirations were Moghadam and Rostami. I have found that the literary production revolving around the early post-2001 period was the most beneficial one. The detailed examination of past Taliban's atrocities on women and the female coping mechanisms offer valuable lessons that can be applied for the not-so-different Taliban dominance nowadays.

Finally, it is impossible to tackle every single variable. However, I hope that this chapter can offer some initiatives on where to start. Afghan women have been internationally praised for their resilience, and while that is an excellent quality, I argue that international actors must actually offer effective support to these women rather than offering an empty celebration of female martyrdom.

### **B. Challenging the Patriarchal Dominance over the Public Sphere**

The concept of public space is historically connected with the notion of power, and power is inherently linked to patriarchal structures within conservative societies. In her article "Patriarchy, the Taleban and politics of public space in Afghanistan", Moghadam analyzes the historical changes of public space in Afghanistan and the diverse forms and reasons for female exclusion. Prior to discussing her findings, while Moghadam's scholarship on Islamic feminism has been an immense inspiration for years, I believe her description of the Taliban as an "Unconventional army of Pashtun men" and her focus on (primarily Pashtun) tribalism is problematic. As stated in the section on Challenging the mainstream narratives, Pashtun men do not inherently equal Taliban. Further, enough academic production and political discourses already stigmatize Pashtuns and promote interethnic conflicts.

Nevertheless, Moghadam offers brilliant historicization, noting that the male public sphere of prerogatives and privileges was created as a contradistinction to the female private one. Her work is essential especially because she tackles the concepts of cultural relativism and followingly refuses them. On the other hand, Ross-Sheriff, in her thorough paper "Afghan women in exile and repatriation" in the section on western workers and other human services professionals, stresses that while these workers might

notice the patriarchal structure of the relationships, it ought not to be judged. According to her, patriarchy offers safety in the context of displaced Afghans, and the social workers should develop cultural sensitivity rather than seek to challenge the power dynamics.<sup>126</sup> While Ross-Sheriff is right about the need to seek empowerment from within the culture rather than outside, and patriarchal structure can indeed offer a degree of protection for certain women, what about the others? While the war on terror narrative imposing imperialism on the pretence of "liberating" women is damaging, so is cultural relativism. Mona Eltahawy, in her book *Headscarves and Hymens*, wrote, "When Westerners remain silent out of 'respect' for foreign cultures, they show support only for the most conservative elements of those cultures. Cultural relativism is as much my enemy as the oppression I fight within my culture and faith."<sup>127</sup> Moghadam elaborates on these sentiments stating that for her, gender-segregated worlds continue to be a severe limitation, expression of unequal power, an indication of exclusion and an exercise of male dominance over women. She also highlights that in patriarchal societies such as Afghanistan, men do not limit only their female relatives' access to the public sphere but also the very access of women as a social group.<sup>128</sup>

Therefore, while some women might find comfort and security in their private sphere and do not desire to exercise their mobility in the public one or seek education and employment, this certainly does not mean that as human rights activists and feminists, we should dismiss the case while murmuring "cultural relativism" and look the other direction. I argue that women's access to the public sphere is essential and should be considered a basic human right. When conducting research on the existing literary

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<sup>126</sup> Ross-Sheriff, "Afghan Women in Exile and Repatriation: Passive Victims or Social Actors?"

<sup>127</sup> Eltahawy, *Headscarves and Hymens*.

<sup>128</sup> Moghadam, "Patriarchy, the Taliban, and Politics of Public Space in Afghanistan."

production pertaining to Afghan women's access to the public sphere, most articles tackled the cases of higher education and professional women in Kabul. While certainly important, I want to highlight that access to the public sphere is not essential only for these women, and if there is to be a policy proposal, it should also focus on the case of rural women, women from the lower and middle class and most importantly- the most vulnerable women under the Taliban- Zanan bi sarparast- meaning women without a male protector. Nevertheless, the pressing need for increasing intersectionality in policymaking could create a thesis on its own and is not the primary focus of this one.

The access to the public sphere differs for diverse Afghan women based on variables such as the availability of Mahram and region. It is curious to note the case of foreign (and especially western) women. While currently under the Taliban, the presence of foreigners working for NGOs significantly diminished, it is important to highlight this foreign privilege in relation to my argument on the importance of female presence in peacekeeping. Thorpe and Chawansky, in their piece "Gender, embodiment and reflexivity in everyday spaces in Afghanistan," tackle the issue while evaluating the power positioning of foreign women in Afghanistan's development aid. The authors examine the lived experience of Western women in Afghanistan to analyze the role of the female body and vulnerability. However, the western and Afghan female bodies are regarded and treated differently. The article tackles the perception of foreign women towards veiling practices and how these women seek to navigate cultural body codes with some degree of cultural sensitivity for society's respect and for minimalizing the personal safety risk.<sup>129</sup> While I regard the constant focus on veiling rather than addressing

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<sup>129</sup> Thorpe and Chawansky, "Gender, Embodiment and Reflexivity in Everyday Spaces of Development in Afghanistan."

effective women's rights violations as unfortunate, it still remains relevant when tackling Afghanistan's public space- especially so after the Taliban's insurgency. Lila Abu-Lughod and many others noted that the burqa could be seen as a portable private sphere that allows for a degree of safety and anonymity.<sup>130</sup> However, what does it tell us about women's access to the public space if the burqa is mandated? Under the Taliban, the "portable seclusion" is not a facultative tool for extending the private sphere but rather a power move to symbolic elimination of women.

I argue that the Taliban's narrative on female bodies has nothing to do with Islam or modesty and everything to do with a misogynistic control of the public sphere. Even though Moghadam's paper is from 2002, her description of the ways in which men- and not only Taliban maintain patriarchal dominance over the public sphere and why is spot-on. She notes that by maintaining the honour-shame complex, the patriarchal dominance over public space excludes women from the competition over public goods. Further, fundamentalists seek to redefine the boundaries between public and private to reinforce their power over female sexuality and to stress male ownership over the means of production. Moghadam also notes the narrative I mentioned from Ross-Sheriff's paper on certain women who find status and stability in the private sphere and do not want to negotiate their right to participate in the public.<sup>131</sup> The reason why I stress this issue is that in order to challenge the current state, it is essential to comprehend all the variables. Negotiating female access to the public spheres means that women are viewed as active members and contributors to society. However, gaining freedom is inherently linked to gaining more responsibility, which increases the pressure that not all women are willing

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<sup>130</sup> Abu-Lughod, "Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving?"

<sup>131</sup> Moghadam, "Patriarchy, the Taleban, and Politics of Public Space in Afghanistan."



to undertake. Apart from the pressure linked to active participation in the public space, Moghadam notes the patriarchal mechanisms that discourage women from being more involved. However, these mechanisms were in place before the Taliban's insurgency and are benign compared to the outrageous violence women face in the public sphere now. Nevertheless, it is essential to be aware of these mechanisms controlling public space and challenge them- some of them are household rules and constraints on female mobility, compulsory veiling, restricting female mobility (not only as individuals but as a social group), male monopoly over the coffee and tea shops and sexual harassment/violence. Moghadam states that discussing and challenging these divisions is nowhere as relevant as in Afghanistan, where women's access continues to be politicized, contested and denied<sup>132</sup>

### **C. Women's Safe Access to Healthcare**

While in the chapter on creating Narratives on Afghanistan, I shared a critique of Hosseini's portrayal of suffering that feels somewhat one-dimensional and sustains the war on terror narrative, as the Taliban is again imposing severe restrictions on female access to healthcare, the novel *Thousand Splendid Suns* comes to mind. In Chapter 39, the character Laila who was expecting to deliver a baby at home needs to undergo a C section. Hosseini describes the state of the only hospital for women in Kabul, the overcrowding and the lack of any medical supplies. The chapter portrays hours of waiting and Laila's C-section that is done without anaesthetic.<sup>133</sup> Even though this is only literary fiction tackling an event prior to 2001, it has never been more relevant than now. While

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<sup>132</sup> Moghadam.

<sup>133</sup> Hosseini, *A Thousand Splendid Suns*.

Afghanistan's general state of healthcare is deteriorating, considering the lack of foreign support, we can expect the quality to worsen further. With the Taliban's strict restriction on women's mobility without a mahram, the situation is disproportionately heavier on women. When drafting a policy that aims to support women's access to the public sphere, healthcare must be a major focus.

I propose examining the situation during the last Taliban's dominance to comprehend the severity of the issue if no steps are taken. For example, in 1996, all female healthcare workers were prohibited from entering the hospitals where they were employed, which left the 22 Kabul hospitals critically lacking in staff. Further, male doctors could not effectively diagnose or treat women since they could not conduct physical examinations effectively. There was only one medical center specifically for women in all Kabul that contained only female medical staff. Moreno described in her article that the medical center had only 35 beds, no oxygen, lack of surgical and diagnostic equipment, leave alone access to electricity and drinkable water. The author further notes that maternal mortality went up to 1450 per 100 000 live births, and only 6% of women had trained medical personnel during delivery. Further, the cases of mental health issues such as depression, anxiety, and PTSD grew in these years.<sup>134</sup> Since Afghan women are the primary caretakers for their children in most cases, the healthcare situation and restriction of female mobility directly impacted child health as well.

The HR watch report pertaining to healthcare in Afghanistan maps the developments in the last 20 years, noting the country's dependence on international donors. Given the increasing decline in funding, women's access to quality healthcare is limited. The report notes the critical achievements in the last years, such as providing

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<sup>134</sup> Bornstein Moreno, "Women's Healthcare In Danger Under Taliban Rule."

prenatal care, use of modern contraception, and attended births. Unfortunately, at this moment, women struggle to access even the most essential info on health and family planning. There is a lack of modern contraception, prenatal and postnatal care is basically unavailable, cancer and fertility treatments are almost non-existent, leave alone pap smears or mammograms. Currently, Afghanistan has 4,6 doctors, nurses and midwives per 10,000 people, which is below the critical shortage of 23 healthcare providers as established by the WHO. Further, even if women do manage to access medical aid physically, there is a following barrier of costs such as transportation to the facility (10% of the population cannot reach health facility within 2 hours) or price for the medicine and health supplies.

Given the scarcity of resources pertaining to healthcare in Afghanistan, this particular report does a fantastic job in tackling all the significant issues and actually offering highly relevant policy and initiative proposals. Since the report was published prior to the insurgency, it offers diverse proposals for the Taliban and the Government. Sadly, the HRW call for the Government to ensure female access to sexual education and family planning is hardly heard by the Taliban, leave alone the proposal for abolishing the requirement of husbands' consent for women's use of contraception.

While the access to financial resources would flow from abroad, which is linked to the dilemma of the inherent strengthening of the Taliban government, there are still steps and initiatives that the Taliban could undertake (especially under the monitoring pressure of the previously mentioned peacekeeping mission). First, as the HRW report states Taliban should support the provision of health services and reform of the health sector while respecting everyone- and women especially- to have full access to all the resources. Even if provided by a male doctor and even if the woman has no mahram.

Second, facilitate education for women and girls to ensure literacy pertaining to general health and family planning while also supporting the training of future female healthcare workers.<sup>135</sup>

Further, the Government- in this case Taliban should permit comprehensive sexual education and full access to contraception accessible also to those who did not attend formal education. Now, while I am aware that this point is a very long shot, these topics can be addressed in a highly respectful manner within the Islamic framework. Of course, the modesty aspect is not really the Taliban's concern since the issue at hand is that women who are not educated concerning sexuality and consent are more vulnerable to SBV. I argue that addressing sexual education is especially crucial post-Taliban insurgency, where female bodies are seen as a politicized and hyper-sexualized commodity as a form of resistance.

Another key factor noted by HRW is increasing monitoring and strengthening accountability. While the article focuses on reducing corruption and reporting complaints, I believe that in the current alarming situation, the key is to ensure that women do obtain access to proper healthcare disregarding whether they do or do not have a mahram and also allowing them access- with an actual physical examination from male doctors. Finally, the HRW proposes tracking the provision of health services by the provinces and districts, including information such as the number of opening/closing medical centres, the gender division of the staff and patients and services provided.

The HRW also calls to international donors such as the UN, US, UK and Canada. Concerning the implications of the Taliban's dominance for the donors' support, I did tackle the issue of legitimacy in the previous chapters. While it is easy to condemn those

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<sup>135</sup> "I Would Like Four Kids — If We Stay Alive."

offering funding and support, even while Afghanistan is effectively under the Taliban's dominance, is it ethical to neglect women (about whom the Taliban does not really care in the first place) the access to basic health services? The HRW states that donors should not hide behind security and political developments to neglect women's healthcare access when needed now more than ever. In order to ensure that women can effectively access healthcare without Taliban's violations, a monitoring system examining the patient outreach and quality of services should be in place. Further, the HRW proposes preventive and specialist health services development that should be discussed with Afghan health specialists- since they know from the inside what is effectively needed and can suggest funding priorities.<sup>136</sup>

#### **D. Afghan Women's Agency- Examining their Resistance in the 1996-2001 Period**

The pleasant and frankly unexpected discourse connected to the literature review in this chapter is that almost all the authors effectively challenged the war on terror narrative and did highlight Afghan women as agents rather than passive victims. Further, I was pleased about the general acknowledgement of how war affects women differently- and more profoundly. While these are basic points, they are essential for academic work. Therefore, recognizing gendered struggle and agency is essential when arguing for women's access to employment and free movement.

First, Rostami-Povey's "Women in Afghanistan: Passive victims of the borga or active social participants?" tackles the daily realities of women under the Taliban and the initiatives of changing their homes into underground schools. In this case, the narrative

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<sup>136</sup> "I Would Like Four Kids — If We Stay Alive."

that challenges the war on terror discourse focuses on women organizing around gender-survival strategies and gender-specific concerns. Rostami-Povey notes the strength of networking rather than success in individualistic efforts. The author's mapping of the women's agency under the Taliban is not fundamental only because it challenges the mainstream western narrative. Rather, it offers an essential base for policymaking in the current situation. I argue that looking into these women's survival strategies can help us draft strategies for fighting for women's rights in Afghanistan today. The role of international actors (academics included) is to create such pressure on the Taliban that these initiatives are no longer conducted underground. Tackling the issue of women's rights under the Taliban in general, she notes that those women who firmly comply with the rules may preserve some rights- which, however, does nothing for the women who are not willing to comply.

As previously mentioned, Rostami-Povey notes that not all women are under the same danger when it comes to the Taliban. The groups at risk the most are zanan bi sarparast (literally meaning women without protector), sex workers and beggars (the last two groups are expected to grow in numbers given the alarming economic decline). She also states that addressing the violations of women's rights should not involve only activity in individual households but also individual communities, religious organizations, health and educational organizations, professionals and law enforcers.<sup>137</sup> However, this is hard to do in the current situation because to whom are we ensuring accountability if the country is run by the Taliban?

As per the precise coping strategies, she highlights the diversity based on economic class and access to education. Nevertheless, professional women's survival

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<sup>137</sup> Rostami-Povey, "Women in Afghanistan: Passive Victims of the Borgia or Active Social Participants?"

strategies also included forming networks also sustaining the poorer women. While some wealthy Afghan women chose to stay in Afghanistan, creating underground opposition, the poor women did not usually have any other choice. Many of them sustained themselves with secret teaching lessons in their homes.<sup>138</sup>

Moghadam notes that the resistance emerged in the circle of expatriate Afghan scholars and activists. She notes the Afghan Women's Council (AWC), the Women's Association for Peace and Human Rights in Afghanistan (WAPHA), the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan. Also, these organizations were cooperating with feminists in diverse countries in order to raise international awareness. Importantly, she notes the non-western monitoring that called for the Taliban's accountability, such as the international solidarity network Women Living under Muslim Laws.<sup>139</sup>

The research on Afghan women's coping strategies and mechanisms is not limited to Afghanistan, and except previously mentioned Ross-Sheriff's piece, I want to highlight the brilliant "Gender, Agency and Identity" that tackles not only Afghan women in Pakistan's and Iran's diaspora but also the ones in Afghanistan during the US invasion. This piece is also by Rostami-Povey. She depicts the similarities of events women faced during the Taliban and during the US invasion, such as further female alienation and repeated need for identity renegotiation. Comparing the West with Afghanistan, she also notes how the West- in this case, the US fails to comprehend the Afghan fluidities concerning gender. She notes that in Afghanistan, it is a complex concept understood in terms of social relations, Islam, domination, subordination and masculinity. However, unlike Moghadam, Rostami-Povey does not list ethnicity as a challenge and stresses that

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<sup>138</sup> Rostami-Povey.

<sup>139</sup> Moghadam, "Patriarchy, the Taleban, and Politics of Public Space in Afghanistan."

issues arose from ethnicized politics influenced by local politicians and foreign invaders. She also highlights the need for constant negotiation of female identity. First, under the Taliban, then negotiating the existence in diaspora, then the invading western forces.<sup>140</sup> Now, Afghan women are requested once more to shatter their former identity in the name of patriarchal geopolitics.

### **E. Advocating for Employment and Education**

Women's access to employment is essential. Nevertheless, international actors often push it aside, preferring to tackle only girls' access to education. Undoubtedly educating girls is essential as it promotes a sense of independence from an early age and can boost the next generation's development. However, the ugly sceptical question is, does it even matter if girls under the Taliban are educated? What is the point of women struggling against a plethora of factors to obtain that diploma or university degree if they cannot benefit from them in the end?

I argue that the international actors must focus on employment at least as much as on education. While economic means alone cannot challenge the patriarchal dominance over the private sphere, it is an essential step for women's economic independence. Further, ensuring women's access to employment and effective monitoring should not be limited to the urban middle and upper class.

As per the current date, no research has addressed the specific case of female employment in Afghanistan after the Taliban's 2021 insurgency. Therefore, I am looking into academic research and policy proposals from very diverse periods and backgrounds

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<sup>140</sup> Rostami-Povey, "Gender, Agency and Identity, the Case of Afghan Women in Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iran."



to tackle the matter effectively. There is an immense research gap in examining employed Afghan women's struggles pertaining to unpaid house labour, maternity leave, and work-life balance.

#### **F. The Scarce Prospects of Highly Educated Women and Inadequate Policies in the Urban Settings**

Payne and Burrige's "Thousands of Mixed hopes and fears: Women Graduates' access to employment in Afghanistan" tackles the challenges freshly graduated women face in Afghanistan's society. While the research was published in 2021, the interviews were conducted prior to the Taliban's insurgency and therefore highlight just how big of a challenge it was for a woman to get employed, even without Taliban's war on women. The interviewed women shared their concerns on nepotism, corruption, limited positions available to women, gender wage gap, gendering suitability of employment and the connected family pressure and the crushing effect of sexism and sexual harassment/assault in the employment. The research stresses that Afghanistan's secondary and tertiary education systems do not prepare students for employment. Some of the interviewed women noted that internships and professional work experience opportunities would be beneficial during their studies since they would help to establish a professional network applicable after graduation.

While most families are supportive of women's higher education, they often pose constraints on which jobs should women accept (as if it was not already hard enough), stressing that the job should not be in the private sector or should be gender-segregated. Another constraint listed preventing women from getting a job is security, where women fear primarily rape and sexual harassment, which, as Moghadam mentioned, are some ways in which men maintain patriarchal control over the public space. This control is also

present in the offices where male supervisors demand sexual favours in exchange for employment or promotion. Unfortunately, there is usually no relevant monitoring and reporting system for sexual harassment since women often feel uncomfortable disclosing these violations.

One of the questions in the interview tackles "affirmative actions", meaning gender quotas. While some women were directly in favour of that given the power dynamic disparity they faced for decades, some women considered it unfair since the position should be given to the most suitable person, disregarding their gender.<sup>141</sup> I shall address why I do not think this is entirely realistic in the policy recommendations.

'Education is as important for me as water is to sustaining life' also tackles the perspective and reasons of Afghan women pursuing higher education. All the women in the interviews listed deeper motivations for pursuing education than simply personal gain, wishing to serve their country and communities. Other motivations listed were the desire for independence, recompensing their families and improving employment prospects. The interviews describe women's common fear of the worsening security issues and the terror of returning Taliban.<sup>142</sup> The research was published in 2016. It is heartbreaking how women constantly demonstrate awareness of how the geopolitics are shifting against them, yet there is none to prioritize women's rights.

When looking for specific policy proposals in Afghanistan's urban setting, "Factors Impacting Work-Life Balance of Female Employees in Private Higher Education Institutions in Afghanistan" emerged. Even though the research took a significant sample of 219 employees, it does not offer significant findings and, in some

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<sup>141</sup> Payne, Burrige, and Rahmani, "Thousands of Mixed Hopes and Fears': Women Graduates' Access to Employment in Afghanistan."

<sup>142</sup> Burrige, Maree Payne, and Rahmani, "Education Is as Important for Me as Water Is to Sustaining Life': Perspectives on the Higher Education of Women in Afghanistan."

aspects, even stigmatizes women further. In my opinion, the research does not do justice to the complex struggles of women in Afghanistan, calling out their "ineffective management of life priorities". In discussion, the author argues that a solution for supporting women could be reducing working hours. On that, I beg to differ. In a patriarchal society, where women already earn way less than men, the solution is not cutting off their working hours or directly listing jobs for women as part-time and therefore cutting their salary even further. Instead, I propose flexible hours that also acknowledge women's life in private. However, I agree with the author's proposal to increase paid leave<sup>143</sup>, though I would specify the need for maternity leave.

"Job satisfaction of women employees of the public sector of Afghanistan" from 2021 focuses primarily on the Ministry of finance, noting that it is one of the five public agencies with the most gender-diversified workforce. That being said, the Ministry of Finance is still created by men from 92%. (Precisely 6941 men and 606 women) As per the biggest challenges, the interviewed women tackled low salary and delay in salary payment, unsuitable workplace and inappropriate behaviour, lack of attention and support, lack of transportation, gender discrimination, and lack of promotion. In the findings, the authors concluded that the issues of salary increment, job promotions, and advocacy for female employees' rights should be listed in future policymaking while also addressing sexual harassment (here sugar-coated as "inappropriate behaviour") and safe transportation.

The authors' recommendations are: Launching workshops for male employees on proper gender relations in the workplace, promoting employees disregarding their gender,

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<sup>143</sup> Saadat Hashimi, "Factors Impacting Work-Life Balance of Female Employees in Private Higher Education Institutions in Afghanistan: An Exploration."

standardizing salary scale, and ensuring a safe working environment without gender biases. In conclusion, the authors hope that the research would snowball effect other ministries and public sector policies regarding women. The last paragraph mentions the Taliban's insurgency (which I suppose happened at the later stage of writing the paper). It highlights that Afghan women have shown and will continue to show impressive resilience despite all the hardships.

### **G. Conclusion and Policy Suggestions**

This chapter analyzed the gendered public space in Afghanistan with its diverse variables in order to assess which steps should be taken to secure Afghan women's safe access to the diverse domains in the public sphere. As evident from the previous two chapters, I argue that despite the various issues of UN peacekeeping, it offers a potent tool for securing monitoring and accountability when it comes to Afghan women's rights. On the other hand, the section on Islamic feminism aimed to challenge the notion that arguing for women's rights must be in disagreement with Islamic values. UN monitoring and international pressure are needed to counter the Taliban's misogynistic policies. However, this monitoring should always primarily listen and address the local needs instead of assuming. Rostami stated that to ignore women and their organizations during Afghanistan's reconstruction would deny women in Afghanistan the right to rebuild and solidify their new reality. Further, she stresses that policy-makers must not neglect the social and economic issues while the West is constantly preoccupied only with the military and political ones.<sup>144</sup> The UN peacekeeping should in no way resemble the former Provisional Reconstruction Teams described as a mixture of military and civilian

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<sup>144</sup> Rostami-Povey, "Women in Afghanistan: Passive Victims of the Borgia or Active Social Participants?"

aid workers "killing people in the morning and distributing food in the evening." Rostami argues that the efforts of the international community based on western notions of liberalization, governance and gender mainstreaming have previously failed to bring effective state-building, peace and security. She dives deeper, noting that for most Afghans, women's rights were never only about challenging male dominance but also about challenging the imperialist one.<sup>145</sup> To conclude on the need for international interference, we must be vigilant on its relevance to the local context and actively challenge any orientalist and patronizing saviour narratives. Further, while the international actors need to engage with the Taliban, they must demand accountability and finally stop being satisfied with the HR lip service without any effective actions.

Securing women's rights under the Taliban is an incredibly challenging task, given that the Taliban has no interest in doing so. However, it is not impossible. The first step in destroying their misogynistic dominance lies in collecting reliable statistics (with emphasis on the rural areas) on diverse variables such as healthcare access, mobility, employment, number of women without a mahram and further- this should be conducted by the potential UN peacekeeping or the UNAMA). Second, no policy will function appropriately if adequate monitoring that produces monthly reports is not in place. Third, the first push of the international actors should be on reopening the Ministry of Women's Affairs, since that is the local centre where all the discussions should take place. Also, since the Taliban replaced the very Ministry with the Ministry of virtue that aims to use violence on women simply for existing, the reopening is crucial also symbolically. Fourth, while girls' and women's education is necessary, international pressure should be

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<sup>145</sup> Rostami-Povey, "Gender, Agency and Identity, the Case of Afghan Women in Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iran."

at least the same when advocating for women's employment. What is the point of educated women if they cannot even apply for a job position?

Working conditions of Afghan women- in the private and public sector, urban or rural, educated or illiterate were problematic even prior to the Taliban. Therefore, when arguing for female employment, it is essential to state that it must be dignified and safe. In order to do that, women must first feel safe actually to travel on their own to the workplace. Further, there is this notion that men are the primary providers for the family, and therefore it is acceptable for them to obtain a higher salary or get precedence during a job interview. However, I argue on the contrary. Not only it is essential to assess that women obtain an equal salary, given that men had the precedence for decades, it is also crucial to establish gender quotas and conditions that allow women to effectively function in the private sphere as well- ensuring flexible working hours, and maternity leave. Given that the Taliban are priding themselves with establishing measures to "protect female honour", rather than segregating women at home, it would be beneficial to provide measures against sexual harassment in the workplaces and ensure a safe (female-only) HR environment for reporting the violations. Finally, in the case of university-educated women, considering the corruption and clientelism in Afghanistan and the scarce opportunities for women to cultivate these networks, they should get precedence in eventual university internships.

Finally, ensuring female access to the full spectre of the public sphere will be challenging, and there are a plethora of variables. Some are more likely than others to be accepted by the Taliban. Nevertheless, I argue that we should not settle for feminist breadcrumbs just because the current situation is horrid.

## CHAPTER VIII

### CONCLUSION

#### **A. Introduction**

This chapter concludes my thesis with a summary of the key research concepts and the relevant policy recommendations divided into the ones on Islamic feminism, UN peacekeeping employment and women's access to the public sphere. Further, I discuss the potential of future research by highlighting the persisting research gaps and express my hopes for the recommendations' practical application in policymaking.

#### **B. Overall Findings**

The primary research aim for this thesis was to offer policy recommendations pertaining to Afghan women's safe access to the public space while specifically focusing on access to dignified employment after the Taliban's insurgency. In the course of my thesis, I argued that in order to actually propose policy recommendations that are relevant, realistic and effectively improve Afghan women's rights, we must look at the broader picture. The task was to emphasize local actors, academics, and frameworks to challenge the western approaches to gender-inclusive policymaking that are often not relevant or respectful to other cultures and their various tools for feminist activism. On the other hand, I also highlighted the need to engage with the UN and international actors for ensuring practical issues such as funding, statistics collection and monitoring. Finally, I argued that while the involvement of international actors is highly problematic, looking specifically at the US's past failures, in the current situation of Taliban dominance, no significant changes pertaining to gender-inclusive policies are expected to take place without it.

The following section will discuss the policy recommendations merging local and international initiatives. Afghan women's rights should not be used as tokenistic leverage for yet another invasion, and there is a crucial need for vigilance when it comes not only to requesting the Taliban's accountability but also effective work of the UN and international actors instead of empty promises.

## **C. Summarizing the Policy Recommendations pertaining to Islamic Feminism**

### ***1. Islamic Feminism as a Feminist Policy Tool***

The Taliban promised women their rights within the framework of Islamic jurisprudence. Therefore, "holding accountability" in this context does not mean referencing the CEDAW or Istanbul Convention. (Even though pushing the Taliban to ratify these in the future would be undoubtedly beneficial) Further, future research pertaining to the bridging and dividing points between international human rights conventions and diverse approaches of Islamic feminism would be highly beneficial for exploring further the co-existence of the secular discourse with the specific religious one. Arguing for women's rights from within the Islamic framework is a game-changer when it comes to "governments" that will certainly not accept any arguments on a secular basis. Further, Islamic feminism- or simply women's struggle for their rights within the Islamic framework, given that feminism carries a negative connotation with western principles for some, also challenges the western concept that there is only one correct way of fighting for women's rights. It is not only a stance against the patriarchy but also against the imperialism that seeks to liberate women from their faith, which was never oppressive in the first place.



However, prior to the recommendations, I want to highlight certain limitations that need to be addressed within this section. First, I want to address the scholars who call the struggles of Islamic feminism opportunistic and based on pragmatic needs rather than faith. What I have to say to this can be summarized as "Yes, and so what?". Not all Afghan women are religious nor opposed to secularism. However, arguing from within the Islamic framework is the only realistic option in the current situation. None is asking the Taliban whether they are genuinely religious or are simply abusing and twisting their religion to achieve cruel, absolute dominance over women. Therefore it is quite curious that the moment women want to argue for their rights from within the Islamic framework, it is discredited as pure pragmatism. Therefore, when policy drafting, the focus must simply be on the recommendations from the religious point of view, instead of looking at the individuals behind them, seeking to discredit them for not being "religious enough"- for any woman with an agency and desire to effectively occupy the public sphere is not religious enough in the Taliban's eyes.

Further, not every woman knowledgeable of Islam and public policy is inherently feminist/ in support of women's rights. We must be aware of distinguishing between the effective representation of women's interests on the one hand, and female tokenization in the representation, while it sustains the Taliban on the other hand. Therefore, while feminist religious literacy- rather than mere memorization of the Quran, is essential for women's comprehension of their rights, it is essential to be highly critical nevertheless.

Arguing on religious grounds should also not mean that only the women considered "good Muslims" in the eyes of the Taliban will obtain their rights. While this will inherently bring controversies, the framework left the most vulnerable women behind for too long. Islam is not a religion relevant only to a few "perfect" ones and needs to

protect also women who are queer, trans, the sole providers and sex workers. Male hegemony over religion sees everything about women as sinful, while men's sins get brushed away when the rights should extend to the Islamic society as a whole.

## ***2. Islamic Feminism- Recommendations on Advocacy and Policy Frameworks***

In order to draft policies that are built on Islamic feminism, the international actors must secure Afghan women safe meeting space for discussions and mobilization on the one hand, and followingly progressive Islam-knowledgable Afghan women should focus on increasing female religious literacy in the population. On that note, I propose establishing workshops where female scholars discuss the rights Islam gives to women in the public sphere and in the private one. Noting the Taliban's incredible aggression towards anyone who openly opposes their principles and teachings, it is essential that the UN peacekeeping secures monitoring and protection of the activists prior to any of these meetings.

I argue that establishing such workshops is essential because many women experience shaming for being bad Muslims or westernized infidels when asking for their rights which can often lead to their resignation from advocacy. On this note, it is essential to raise public awareness, especially on the difference between Fiqh and Sharia. While God's will is infallible in Islam, the centuries of singular male interpretations seeking patriarchal dominance are certainly open to challenge. Islam gave women unprecedented rights centuries ago; being educated on them is essential. Challenging the Taliban's oppression, rules and dress codes does not mean challenging Islam or being a bad Muslim.

When it comes to policy drafting, I want to stress that the policymaker could be a woman and still sustain the Taliban's order. Therefore, it is essential to dig deeper beyond

the visual gender representation and ensure the policymakers are actually promoting women's interests, not strengthening the Taliban ones.

Concerning Islamic jurisprudence, the issues on women should be primarily interpreted by women who usually happened to be significantly more comprehensive of female realities and needs. Further, Islamic feminism was always present in academic discourses but not in public movements; therefore, nourishing these meetings as a catapult for a movement that openly challenges the Taliban's dominance over religious interpretations would be amazing. Even though I mostly argue for activism and inclusion of local women in the process, given the current dangers, it would be fantastic if the Afghan women in diaspora used their voices to share knowledge on women's rights in Islam on social media platforms in Dari and Pashto (noting that it is only a stepping stone, but not a perfect solution given that many Afghan women do not have access to the internet/ are illiterate)

The specific policies noted in the section on the public space and women's role in society should use Islamic historical sources to oppose the gendering of the professions. If the prophet's wife Khadija could have been his employer and a successful entrepreneur, and if Aisha could have led a battle on top of a camel, how can the Taliban dare to say that all women are fit for cleaning female bathrooms? The myth of women being only unpaid (or miserably paid) caregivers needs to be abolished, especially considering that the public sphere used to employ around 400 000 women prior to the insurgency.

#### **D. Summarizing Policy Recommendations pertaining to the UN Peacekeeping Mission**

Arguing for a UN peacekeeping mission comes with heavy implications. While peacekeeping has diverse functions and also contains civilian positions, its primary focus

is on the military aspect. Not only does Afghanistan have extensive unpleasant experiences pertaining to foreigners penetrating the country on a pretence of protecting the civilians and women in particular. Also, the military context, in general, is based on the concept of maintaining patriarchal structures. Can soldiers educated in the most patriarchal and nationalistic manner, often so out of their personal choice, effectively protect foreign women? In the chapter on peacekeeping, I tackled the generic experiences- and specifically failures of the peacekeeping missions, and the literature on UNHCR 1325 in relation to peacekeeping (which is quite rare since most productions deal only with peacebuilding) and the problematic power dynamic when it comes to the interaction between the locals and peacekeepers focusing especially on sexual-based violence and exploitation of the local women. Further, I examined the articles focusing on the specific case of Afghanistan, evaluating the logistics such as which states should be employed in the troops, what amount of troops the Taliban would allow, how long the mandate should be and which areas should be primarily monitored.

### ***1. Policy Recommendations for the Technical Aspects of the Mission***

First, the UN peacekeeping mission must not neglect humanitarian issues, human (specifically women's) rights and socio-economic issues in the name of international geopolitics and security.

Second, the peacekeeping mandate must be unequivocal. For example, noting that the mission's goal is to "ensure security and stability" does not suffice. It is essential to include what stability represents within the mandate to ensure that the mission effectively challenges women's lack of access to the public sphere. As previously noted by HPN, there is no excuse for deploying missions with weak and confusing mandates, inadequate

numbers of troops and muddled thinking about aims and objectives.<sup>146</sup> As per the timeframe recommendation, I argue against any short-term mission and seeming quick fixes. While Afghanistan needs immediate financial and humanitarian aid, the establishment of a long-term mission aiming to provide dignified living conditions to all civilians should be in place.

Taliban's consent for the mission is essential in order to ensure cooperation, peacekeepers' safety and effective work. However, the mandate must establish strict boundaries and highlight that offering humanitarian aid and a degree of cooperation does not equal the Taliban being legitimized in the eyes of the international society. Further, it is essential to employ as many peacekeepers as the Taliban permits on Afghanistan's territory. A mission of 5000 would be merely symbolic. Therefore, I argue that the UN's negotiation with the Taliban should not go under 12000 peacekeepers, with at least 35% (4200) of women's participation.

When it comes to choosing the countries that employ peacekeeping troops, the Taliban would certainly give permission to Pakistan prior to any other countries. Given Pakistan's lack of impartiality and blatant support of the Taliban, I fundamentally argue against employing Pakistan. For similar reasons, I also argue against China and Russia and India, noting that NATO members are unlikely to participate. Therefore possible members could be Brazil, Columbia, Senegal, Egypt, Indonesia, and Bangladesh- noting also that the Taliban explicitly highlighted they do not want any western presence.

Finally, when employing a peacekeeping mission to Afghanistan, the preparation and establishment of precise goals are fundamental. If the mission is conducted

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<sup>146</sup> HPN, "The Brahimi Report."

improperly, it will only increase the current local gender dynamics rather than challenge them.

## ***2. Recommendations pertaining to Women's Rights within the Peacekeeping Context***

Suppose the UN peacekeeping is to hold the Taliban accountable for their violations of women's rights. In that case, it is essential to establish an effective and responsible data collection in order to create statistics that primarily focus on women's issues. Given that the UNAMA's mandate has been very recently extended despite the Taliban's governance, the data collection can be conducted by them even prior to the peacekeeping mission (focusing on issues such as access to healthcare, employment, wage gap, literacy rates per region, number of women without mahram...). No effective policy and monitoring can take place without precise demographic information on the policy target. The expected challenges are, first, problematic access for security reasons to certain rural areas. Second, data collection on women's issues in the private sphere is generally hard to obtain and needs to be collected by female staff.

The previous UN peacekeeping missions and their violations of local women should pose a warning on internal UN structures' inadequacies. When peacekeepers violate locals during Afghanistan's mission, each individual must be effectively held accountable and punished instead of blaming the system for the lack of peacekeeping training. Rape is a war crime and needs to be treated as such in practice by the UN, even if the rapers are part of the peacekeeping troops. Effectively recognizing sexual violence as *jus cogens* crime also means that the crime cannot be amnestied.

Apart from strengthening the Zero tolerance policy against sexual violence, detailed workshops on Afghanistan's cultural norms (explained by Afghans, not UN's

western "specialist" knowledgeable only of the compound life) and how to respect them during the mission should be provided prior to the arrival to Afghanistan. Issues such as male peacekeepers insisting on physical security checks of local Afghan women are disrespectful towards the women and provide the Taliban with reasons for limiting women's mobility even further on the pretence of honour protection and, therefore must be avoided.

The ZTP workshop should also highlight that given the power dynamics between locals and peacekeepers, sexual engagement (especially when exchanged for a service or money) is not only unprofessional but inherently abusive. Prostitution in the local context is often involuntary. Therefore, the peacekeepers support sexual slavery. The UN also needs to hold accountable the military commanders, who, at the end of the ZTP presentation, distribute condoms to peacekeepers and silently sustain these problematic behaviours as discussed in the relevant chapter.

While the abuses of civilians should absolutely not happen, if they do, the UN should offer mandatory trauma training and services to rehabilitate SBV survivors and, most important- reparation to the survivors of SBV and assistance to document litigation- not only against individuals but also against organizations and state. Further, the UN Human Rights bodies need to actually acknowledge and condemn these violations, which in most of the past cases did not happen.

Some scholars I cited in the relevant chapter argued that the male peacekeepers "behave better" (a subtle way of saying "do not go around raping vulnerable people") when female peacekeepers are present. At the same time, female peacekeepers should not play moral supervisors to their male colleagues, as if they do not have any other function besides that. More generally, female peacekeepers are not an answer to challenging the

patriarchal structure of the military. However, I still argue that female peacekeepers are essential to Afghanistan's peacekeeping and should create at least 35% of the personnel. First, female peacekeepers understand better the gendered aspects and experiences of violence and often inspire local women to participate in the later peacebuilding processes actively.

Second, female peacekeepers are essential when it comes to conducting physical security searches of women, conducting statistics research on gendered issues directly with the women, and contributing to the "normalization" of the mission. Meaning that if the mission is gender-balanced, it eases the tensions with which the troops are usually perceived by the locals.

Even though the military structures are patriarchal, which directly relates to UN peacekeeping, I argue that women not engaging with the structures is not a long-term solution. I stress the solution is to actually engage and actively challenge the structures to ensure accountability. There is also a need of reforming the UNHCR 1325 in a way that the singular states are required effective actions rather than symbolic ones. Finally, I want to challenge the UN's take on gender mainstreaming, which often happens to be problematic, considering that the UN is not abiding by any international treaties such as CEDAW or Istanbul Convention.

### **E. Beyond Peacekeeping and Islamic Feminism- Focusing on Gendered Afghanistan's Public Sphere**

Access to the public sphere is not essential only for highly educated urban upper-class women. In reality, the current limitations of female mobility without a male guardian have an incredibly negative impact on all women (though some suffer disproportionately more, such as those without a male guardian). In addition, women's



safe access to healthcare, hard-earned employment, and basic tasks such as groceries should be absolutely non-negotiable. Public space is inherently connected with power and resources. To negate women any participation has more to do with the Taliban's desire to negate women any form of personal freedom and independence rather than caring for female honour. Further, given the current decadence of Afghanistan's economy, it is time for the Taliban to realize that by preventing women from working, they are actually hurting themselves too.

The female experience of public space will differ based on issues such as the amount of coverage- women in burqa and rusari will face different degrees of push-back from the Taliban, ethnicity, availability of mahram and province. The goal of these policies is to finally ensure that all women disregarding their differences, will have equal possibilities of mobility in the public sphere.

### ***1. Access to the Public Sphere***

First, I offer a recommendation specific to any foreign donors. Many donors are currently withdrawing their economic support to Afghanistan out of concern about effective economic support to the Taliban. I argue that the international society should not punish civilians for crimes that they did not commit. Therefore, rather than not donating, the donors should be more intentional about to whom they are donating- and should therefore donate to cases specific to Afghan women whom the Taliban does not even consider equal citizens.

Pertaining to healthcare, it is necessary that the UN peacekeeping monitors women's safe and dignified access to the hospitals and medical centres unconditioned on the lack of a male guardian's presence or the necessity to be examined by a male doctor when a female one is not available. If the Taliban wants to govern Afghanistan, the group

must secure dignified and safe access to healthcare for all its citizens while considering the specific needs of female patients- especially so pertaining to safe deliveries. As per the funding and monitoring, the renewed UNAMA that already engages in a dialogue with the Taliban can be of help.

As per the issue of female employment, the advocacy needs always to specify that the conditions must be safe and dignified. The specific needs of women in the workplace go beyond the gender pay gap and sexual harassment issues, especially so in a conservative society, where unpaid domestic labour and childcare are usually shouldered only by women. Therefore, women need the possibility of flexible working hours (which does not mean offering women part-time jobs since that would only decrease their salary), paid maternity leave and prospects for promotion.

Taliban needs to seriously reconsider its misogynistic dominance over the public sphere since it drastically damages the already bleeding national economy. The first step on their behalf should be reopening the Ministry of Women's Affairs. Its transformation in August to the ministry of virtue was basically a declaration of war on women. However, the Taliban need to recognize that they actually need women to secure society's reestablishment.

#### **F. Study's contribution to the theory and practice, its limitations and future recommendations**

My research elaborated on the existing scholarships and researchers with the aim to provide policy recommendations relevant to the current situation in Afghanistan. As per the academic contribution, my paper aims to challenge international passivity. I argue that while the circumstances are far from ideal, it is unethical at least to turn away from Afghanistan's situation. While Afghans are- rightfully so- wary of international presence

in their country, I hope that more scholars will consider the deeper examination of local and international actors closely cooperating. My research aimed to highlight that while international actors such as the UN possess the technical and financial tools, it is necessary to effectively listen to and cooperate with the locals since they know better which solutions are realistic and relevant to the current context. I hope to see more research in academia that moves beyond anthropological discussions and focuses primarily on policy and international relations. Further, there is an incredible lack of reliable quantitative data pertaining practically to all aspects of women's daily realities, which leaves immense options for future researchers. For example, I believe research on the wage gap and which variables affect it the most would be incredibly helpful. Also, the potential of Islamic feminism within policymaking and political discussions is entirely unexplored and is more likely to be used in practice if broader frameworks exist in academia.

When I was conducting my research, I did so hoping to provide pragmatic recommendations for the current situation. I am aware of the vast limitations and challenges the diverse actors- such as Afghan activists but also the UN staff will face under the Taliban. However, these limitations should not mean that we all give up on advocacy. While my recommendations can certainly be elaborated on in greater detail, I hope the UN and other international actors will consider a more responsible and proactive approach toward the violations Afghan women face.

## **G. Conclusion**

The Taliban must realize that it is one thing to conduct an insurgency successfully, but it is an entirely different thing to maintain governance. Afghanistan is bleeding while

the Taliban creates only harsher conditions for women, and the international society does not effectively act. My recommendations sought to offer pragmatic steps for the Afghan women, the Taliban and the UN on possible actions and goals for the near future. The ground covered explicitly focused on the possibility of a UN peacekeeping mission, the role of Islamic feminism in Afghanistan's advocacy and policymaking and the necessary reforms for allowing women safe and dignified access to the diverse parts of the public sphere. The road ahead is incredibly difficult and changes almost daily, which requires constant reassessments and modifications. Nevertheless, I argue that Afghan women have been a token in geopolitical games for far too long, and the time has come for the international society to recognize its previous wrongdoings and stand up for Afghan women. Not with empty condemnations and fetishization of Afghan women's suffering on social media, but with effective policymaking.

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