Afghan women have been the symbolic target of competing discourses and political strategies. The US-led bombing of Afghanistan used the rhetoric of women’s emancipation as a major reason for the attack without pursuing real ‘liberation’. The misogynist Taliban discourse, as it was promulgated in the Pakistan-based refugee camps and heavily funded by the western world, marked a severe deterioration in Afghan women’s rights. After the US-led military intervention of 2001, the Karzai government’s unfounded claims vis-à-vis women’s betterment have not been realized. Afghan women, a clear majority of the Afghan population, are not at the centre of the government’s concerns or those of the international community. Engaging these problematics, this article claims that conventional politics, informed by statist and masculinist ideologies and practices, are incapable of ensuring Afghan women’s emancipation.

Key Words ◊ Afghanistan ◊ masculinity ◊ Taliban ◊ United States ◊ violence ◊ women

In this article I analyse western as well as ‘fundamentalist’ discourses on Afghan women over the last decade to highlight both misogyny and racism. I question the extent to which these discourses have impacted women’s lives in Afghanistan, and in turn, whether Afghan women can shape the possibilities of their own emancipation. I argue that ultimately such misogynist and racist frameworks stem from very similar forms of conventional power politics, where women’s control rather than their emancipation is the objective. By misogyny, I mean a set of ideas embedded in cultural and political institutions that denigrate women’s selfhood and citizenship.

Specifically, I wish to make three points. First, that the violence and bombing in Afghanistan cannot be justified in the name of the so-called
liberation of Afghan women. This rationale for violence is highly reminiscent of colonial discourses on women. Second, and connected to the first point, the liberation of Afghan women cannot be considered to be about the removal of the Taliban, but should be understood in the larger context of international, statist and masculinist politics, as Afghan women have not made substantive gains from the violence that was perpetrated and justified in their name. Third, I raise the question: can violence be a recommended instrument for ensuring women’s rights? National liberation struggles around the world, whether they are waged by nationalists or assisted by outsiders, are critiqued by feminists for their use of women as a resource that is mobilized against a colonizer. As soon as the ‘liberation’ is achieved, women are subjected to stronger patriarchal control as Jayawardena (1986), and Moghadam (1994) demonstrate. Can one say that the case of Afghan women is somewhat similar, if more disappointing, as Afghan women did not even experience the shared moment of triumph? In fact, their oppression intensified with the US-led bombing of Afghanistan as the constant threat of death and the destruction of their neighbourhoods and communities eliminated any possibility of a sense of security.\(^1\) That the bombing has had profound psychological effects on women is evident—what is less evident is whether women have made any substantive gains under the new dispensation.

This article presents an overview of my thinking/writing about Afghan women over the last 10 years. The objective is to bring out the generational complexity of Afghan women’s issues. While touching upon Afghan women’s agency and struggles, I am in agreement with critical contemporary perspectives on women in contexts of conflict that we need to go beyond looking at women as mere victims, as Manchanda (2001) writes. My primary focus is thus upon the discursive implications of policy. This article contributes to the growing literature on women in conflict in general, and the scholarship on Afghan women in particular. It synthesizes a history of Afghan women that transcends the stereotypical story of the plight of Afghan women under the Taliban, taking into account the destruction caused by the US bombing of Afghanistan and the racism inherent in post-war reconstruction and development (see Kapadia, 2002). I trace the political economy of the conflict as it impacts Afghan women’s lives, using a feminist reading of women’s place in the discursive underpinnings of the various stages of the conflict to raise questions about spaces of agency. Instead of focusing on the few Afghan organizations that have received recognition from the western media or the international donor community, the voices that I incorporate in this article are of poor Afghan refugee women who were devastated by succeeding stages of the violence.
The Afghan Conflict: A Context

Afghanistan, a landlocked country variously included in south, west and central Asia, historically acted as a buffer between the Russian and the British Indian Empires. Ethnically and linguistically diverse, Pushtuns are in the majority with Pushto and Dari as the two primary languages.

The recent Afghan conflict can be organized into six distinct phases. During the first phase, factionalism within the People’s Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) took place between 1978 and 1979. In April 1978, the Soviet-supported PDPA ousted President Daud (1973–8), who had declared Afghanistan a republic and was suspected of leaning towards the United States. Daud’s reform programme, especially his attempt to reinforce a liberal agenda for women’s rights, was criticized by the conservative segments for being too western and by the leftists for being inadequate. The PDPA ushered in its own reform programme, characterized by land reforms and changes in marriage laws, as well as women’s political activism through pro-government demonstrations and extensive literacy-cum-political meetings (communist style), the opening of day-care centres for children, and the attempt to induct more women into public sector employment (for more details see Dupree, 1990). If the conservative landed gentry and mullahs found Daud’s reforms objectionable, they considered the PDPA reforms anathema to their worldview and began to organize resistance across the countryside. Composed of two factions, Khalq (people) and Parcham (flag), the PDPA itself fell victim to factional in-fighting resulting in a series of coups that culminated in a Soviet military intervention in December 1979. This phase may be seen as constituting the backdrop of the protracted civil war that continues to date (also see Moghadam, 1999: 172–204).

The second phase, inaugurated by the 1979 Soviet military intervention, took place with the imposition of a Soviet-backed government. Within the cold war context, academicians and policy makers advanced several theories to explain Soviet military intervention in Afghanistan, ranging from the historic interest of the Tsarist Empire in reaching warm water ports to the contemporary Soviet government’s attempt to enlarge its area of influence in order to challenge the US-led containment policy. The ‘resistance’ groups, popularly called Mujahideen (holy warriors/freedom fighters), funded heavily by US, British, Chinese, Saudi and Egyptian money, under the guise of jihad (holy war) during the Reagan years, eventually pushed the Soviet troops back (1988), and in 1992 replaced the central government. During this phase, the resistance was trained in the refugee camps of Pakistan where over three million Afghans had sought refuge since 1980. Aid was channelled through the Pakistani military government of Zia ul Haq. Superpower rivalries dominated this phase of the conflict. Meanwhile, the pro-communist Najeebulah government in
Afghanistan continued to implement reform programmes and induct women into government and public institutions. This had become imperative as many men who could have been employed were deployed in the war.

In the third phase, the fractured Mujahideen-led government functioned between 1992 and 1996. The Mujahideen factions who took over Kabul were predominantly Sunni and Pushtun. Not only was there infighting between the Shias and Sunnis, there was contestation over which Sunni faction would control Kabul. As a result, the Shia-dominated non-Pushtun Northern Alliance, supported by Iran, split, resulting in heavy gun battles among the Mujahideen commanders. Government apparatus all but collapsed during this time. Regional powers and configurations dominated this phase of the conflict, as did the Shia/Sunni divide. The end of the cold war had rendered Afghanistan redundant for many western countries.

During the fourth phase, the Taliban government came to power in 1996. Predominantly Pushtun and Sunni, promising peace and security to a war-ravaged people, the Taliban emerged as a dramatic force, establishing control over 90 percent of Afghanistan. This phase also marked the ascendance of the ethnic dimensions of the conflict. Most Afghans, weary of the protracted war, were ambivalent, disappointed that the defeat of the Soviet Union had not brought the much-awaited peace. Anti-women policies, begun by the Mujahideen, coalesced under Taliban rule. The Northern Alliance, officially called the United Front, and backed by Iran, Russia, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and India, controlled 10 percent of Afghanistan. Only Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates extended recognition to the Taliban government. The Taliban had received their training in the same refugee camps and madrassahs (religious schools) of Pakistan that were established for the Mujahideen. The Taliban’s ultra conservative worldview affected both men and women; men were not allowed to shave their beards while women were denied employment, education and freedom of movement. However, most of the world ignored Taliban edicts until September 2001.

The War on Terror and US bombing of Afghanistan between October 2001 and March 2002 following the attacks on the United States on 11 September 2001, coupled with Russia’s concerns about the spread of Islamic movements in central Asia, paved the way for the eventual bombing of Afghanistan. The bombing was dramatic and intense in that the most advanced war technology was used against one of the poorest nations of the world. This fifth phase marked the birth of a new era in international politics—the ascendance of the unbridled power of American Empire.

Finally, the Afghan Transitional Authority came to power in December 2001, ushered in by the Bonn Agreement, signed on 5 December 2001.
Later, after President Karzai was elected, it was called the Afghan Transitional Administration (ATA). The Karzai government is a puppet government whose writ barely extends beyond Kabul, where the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) of the US allies ensures the government’s rule. The ATA does not have effective command of much of the countryside, which is ruled by tribal warlords, and where remnants of the Taliban continue to resist and fight ATA forces. Under the ATA, women’s equal rights are assured by the 2004 constitution, which translates into formal economic and political rights. At least two posts in the cabinet are reserved for women, girls’ schools have reopened, and there is some relaxation in government attitudes towards women’s appearance in public: on television, at festivals and in concerts. Aside from these cosmetic changes, however, Afghan women do not appear to have made substantive progress with regard to oppressive customs, violence and their position in Afghan society.

How did women fare through the different phases and contours of the conflict? The Afghan conflict has resulted in approximately 1.5 million dead, and many more disabled and repeatedly displaced with loss of livelihood and tremendous psychological suffering. Afghan women have endured war-inflicted traumas, but have received little or no space within which to shape the contours of a meaningful peace for themselves.

_Afghan Women and Political Discourse_

What was the position of Afghan women before the current crisis began almost 25 years ago? Afghan women attained the right to vote after the promulgation of the 1964 constitution. Over 100 years ago, Afghanistan’s monarch, Amir Abdur Rehman Khan, passed decrees aiming to ensure that women received the rights granted to them in Islam. These included decrees against child marriage and forced marriage, and supported women’s, especially a widow’s, right to inheritance and second marriage, a woman’s right to divorce and the right to claim her Mehr (dower). However, according to Dupree (1994: 22), Amir Abdur Rehman Khan ‘denied women full freedom of expression and mobility by decreeing that men were entitled to full control over women because “the honour of the people of Afghanistan consists in the honour of their women”’. Granting women rights and simultaneously circumscribing these rights is a pattern that repeats itself throughout 20th-century Afghanistan, and is ascribed by many to the tensions between modernists and traditionalists. For instance, following the decree on citizens’ (western) dress code issued by King Amanullah in 1928, Queen Surraya, who wore western dress and removed the veil to come out in public, symbolized the modernization of Afghan women. Although the issue of purdah (segregation) for many urban elite Afghan women
appeared to have been settled, a rebellion against Queen Surraya's husband, King Amanullah, was incited by conservative elements in 1928–9. In an interesting side note, we find that the infamous Lawrence of Arabia was instrumental in fomenting this rebellion by inciting tribal elders with stories of the King Amanullah disrobing Afghan women, and therefore, their honour (see Pukhtun, 1929: 15). Thus, imperial powers (especially the men who ruled) were not averse to using the symbolic importance of women to women's disadvantage if it served their purpose. This is in contradiction to the dominant colonial discourse that justified colonization in the name of liberating women.

Over the course of several decades, the clergy used various episodes to register its protest over the unveiling of Afghan women, including the decision in 1959 to make purdah optional, and increasing confrontations between traditional practices and modernization from the 1970s onwards.

The Afghan constitutions of 1923, 1964, 1977, 1987, 1990 and 2004 have granted women equal rights with men. However, each constitution has insisted on voluntary processes of change and always attached a clause stating that no injunction should be contrary to Islamic values. The pro-communist stance of the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan (DRA) was slightly different in that it introduced reform and stated, 'the entire people of Afghanistan, women and men, without discrimination have equal rights and obligations before the law' and issued a decree stating its aim to remove the 'unjust patriarchal feudalistic relations between husband and wife' (Dupree, 1994: 24). Such decrees had limited impact across the country, largely because social relations structuring families did not undergo significant change. Despite this, according to Stephens (2001), Afghan women held 70 percent of teachers' jobs, 50 percent of government jobs, and 40 percent of medical posts up to the early 1990s. Even though this phenomenon was restricted to the urban elite and educated classes, it was possible not only because the DRA encouraged women to access employment in the public and private sectors, but also because many Afghan men had taken up arms, and women stepped into positions that otherwise men might have held.

However, for 85 percent of Afghans, who continued to live in rural areas, many of the changes implemented in urban centres continued to be perceived as threatening to Afghan customs and identity. The conservatives associated most reform programmes with sexual anarchy, while many believed that the DRA's rhetoric, decrees and actions would ultimately 'destroy both family and honour' (Dupree, 1990: 124). Therefore, when the US–Pakistan–Saudi-supported Mujahideen-led government took over in April 1992, they reversed many of the policies of the previous regime with regard to women, as this was a central point of contention between their worldview and that of the DRA. Unsurprisingly, the Taliban government completely reversed any gains women might have achieved. The
Mujahideen government had no national policy on women’s rights—indeed, it was itself hardly a viable government as the infighting among the different factions of the Mujahideen for control led to chaos and a complete breakdown of order. Many who had supported the Mujahideen were deeply disappointed with widespread human rights abuses as well as the violence perpetrated, and chose to go back as refugees to neighbouring countries (Khattak, 2002). According to Niland (2004: 65):

> Widespread disgust with factional infighting and human rights violations, in particular the abuse of women was a significant factor in the Taliban rise to power and the extent to which they were tolerated, if not welcomed, in their early years as they rid much of the country of the lawlessness and predatory activities associated with Mujahideen rule.

**Discursive Continuities and Discontinuities under Taliban Rule**

The Taliban initially achieved overnight popularity because they promised to bring peace and security to a country torn by war. However, their decrees about the status and rights of women won them no favour with anyone—not even the Pakistani conservative Jamat-e-Islami, whose chief, Qazi Hussain Ahmed, criticized the Taliban’s policy of denying women the right to education and employment (personal interview, 1999). The Taliban’s inspiration, attitude and policies towards women came from the 343 camps that had been established across the North West Frontier Province and Balochistan province of Pakistan with the support of various western countries and where the training and indoctrination of Afghan refugee men were done at the behest of the different secret agencies (Donini, 2004: 121–3), the most important being the CIA and its smaller partner, the Pakistani ISI. Elsewhere I have documented (Khattak, 2003) the details of how the camps were set up and how refugee registration, consisting of entitlement to food, shelter and services such as health and education, could take place only after a declaration of allegiance to one of the seven political parties crafted by the ISI. The declaration of allegiance required men to go back and fight in Afghanistan after receiving training in a border camp. These political parties channelled weapons, fighters and funds to warlords in Afghanistan.

Extremely strict codes and edicts were imposed in the camps to make the jihad a success. These codes varied slightly in their harshness, reflecting the range in the stances on women of the seven political Islamic parties that controlled the camps. In fact, as I have shown, the success of the jihad was also critically dependent upon the oppression of women in the camps, carried out through the frequent circulation of different fatwas (religious edicts) and increasingly conservative interpretations of Afghan culture and traditions (Khattak, 1998, 2003). Such stances received quiet sanction from international funding agencies that followed a policy of non-interference in
Afghan women’s issues. The extreme checks on women’s mobility and literacy gave Afghan men the psychological assurance that their women would not be interacting with other men in their absence.

In addition, there were stringent interpretations of widely held turn-of-the-century conservative views about the limits of women’s freedom, which were therefore utilized as a way of consolidating a sense of rootedness in tradition and a particular kind of Afghan identity. Given this background, when the Taliban took over, it was no surprise that they implemented the same extremist beliefs (that had partial roots in local culture) they had imbibed in the religious madrassahs in Pakistan. According to Azarbaijani-Moghaddam (2004: 100),

... a patchwork of Taliban attitudes to women’s programs, along with an equally inconsistent and uncoordinated range of gender policies from international agencies led to unpredictable patterns of clamp downs or frenzied bursts of activity with women and girls in some areas, while in others, projects progressed relatively undisturbed ...

The discontinuities and ruptures within the Taliban discourse on women are important, as they point to the agency of Afghan women as well as the negotiation advantages of some aid agencies. As examples, we can take the issue of medical practice by women doctors, some of who were able to effectively negotiate with the more moderate mullahs to continue their work in hospitals. The best known example is that of Dr Suhaila Sidiq, a surgeon, who continued to work in a military hospital, and attended to male as well as female patients besides organizing medical courses for women throughout Taliban rule (Hours, 2001). The WFP (World Food Program) persuaded the Taliban to allow Afghan women to run tandoors (bakeries) from where Afghans could buy subsidized bread. Similarly, thousands of schools for girls functioned in people’s homes while the Taliban looked the other way. During the latter part of their rule, the Taliban formally agreed to open schools for girls in Kabul and Kandahar, Mulla Omar’s native city. RAWA (Revolutionary Association of Afghan Women) supporters also ran clandestine schools in Afghanistan and were able to internationalize human rights abuses in Afghanistan by using their veils to hide cameras and books (Wake, 2002: 44–5). Afghan women, perceived as oppressed by the imposition of the veil, frequently challenged the Taliban for their Wahabi interpretation of Islam, with the implication that this was influenced by the funding they received from Saudi Arabia. They thus chose to wear the traditional ‘shuttlecock’ burqa rather than the Arab hijab that some Taliban attempted to enforce. Instead some women told the Taliban to don Arab style dress in view of the funds they received (Shah, 1998). Meanwhile, many Afghan women have not abandoned the veil, viewed by many Westerners as the ultimate symbol of oppression. Afghan women explain that, rather than the veil, the Taliban’s decree requiring that a male relative accompany them created many practical problems for them because of the absence of male relatives and in having to use segregated public transport.
Many women questioned and condemned the Taliban's erratic policies on women, especially regarding employment and mobility. One anonymous respondent said, 'Women cannot work outside. Who will earn for a widow? ... it was our women who worked with men to build our country'. Another respondent, Malala Bibi, an uneducated woman, contesting the idea that there was peace under the Taliban said, 'Peace is something else. There was nothing, no jobs, and no work. There may have been no fighting but people faced severe hardships.'

**War Against Terror: Effects on the Women of Afghanistan**

The US-led carpet bombing of Afghanistan, unjustifiable by many standards, was nonetheless justified by the US as its attempt to liberate Afghan women from the shackles imposed upon them by the Taliban. Though the Taliban regime was misogynist, the American concern for Afghan women's rights resulted from other considerations. According to the US first lady, Laura Bush, 'Life under the Taliban is so hard and repressive, even small displays of joy are outlawed, children aren't allowed to fly kites, their mothers face beatings for laughing out loud.' She concluded that 'the brutal oppression of women is a central goal of the terrorists', and that the Taliban's treatment of women and children is a clear picture of 'the world the terrorists would like to impose on the rest of us' (CNN, 2001a). Soon the US State Department issued a nine-page report entitled, 'The Taliban's War Against Women', and within a month President Bush declared,

> For several years the people of Afghanistan have suffered under one of the most brutal regimes in modern history. A regime allied with terrorists and a regime at war with women. Thanks to our military and our allies, and the brave fighters of Afghanistan, the Taliban regime is coming to an end. (CNN, 2001b)

Such pronouncements are reminiscent of British colonial discourse about Indian women. The colonization of India was justified in terms of the White Man's Burden and pointed to the practice of child marriage, sati and purdah to indicate the uncivilized manner in which Indian men treated Indian women. The British, by providing different decrees, were thus introducing these subject populations to civilized norms and rescuing brown women from brown men (for more details, see Ahmed-Ghosh, 2004; Enloe, 1989; Mohanty et al., 1991). It is also noteworthy that 'the brave fighters of Afghanistan' Bush was referring to in fact threatened Afghan women's security, as these fighters had a reputation for loot and rape. According to some accounts, ethnically Pashtun women because of their supposed kinship with the Taliban have especially been targeted for violence and harassment, sexual and otherwise (HRW, 2002).

While information about the total tonnage of bombs dropped on Afghanistan was withheld, it is known that over the course of one month
alone, the US dropped more than half a million tons worth of bombs. This converts to 20 kilos for every man, woman and child in the country (Saleem, 2001: 8). As one respondent, Farheen Bibi, a survivor from the US attacks on Jalalabad, said to me, ‘bombs do not know who they are killing’, meaning that if they were meant for terrorists, they still killed innocent people. Another woman, Mariam Bibi, said that after they reached Peshawar, Pakistan, ‘At night aeroplanes would fly over Peshawar and my children would start crying, thinking that they are bombing. They would cry in their sleep that planes are coming to drop bombs’. Another respondent, Surraya Bibi, talking about her daughter’s trauma said,

My children have faced a lot of hardships. My daughter lost her speech during the war. Doctors say it is due to extreme sense of fear. I cannot afford to buy her medicines. There is a beautiful hospital near Balahisar but I just look at it as we cannot even buy enough food.

Describing the helter-skelter process through which people fled and got killed, Mariam Bibi said,

All of them fled . . . streets were empty. People were running in every direction. Some fled toward Lughman. Some fled toward Jalalabad. From Jalalabad they went towards Surkho and Kakrak. Many people got killed in Kakrak and others came back to Jalalabad. People lost their lands and homes in the process.

Between October and March, when Afghanistan was sprayed with bombs, many women experienced loss and few, if any, became empowered as a result of President Bush’s wish, ‘I wanted us to be viewed as the liberator’ (Clark, 2004: 90). When questioned if she felt more in control as she now had more decision-making powers, one uneducated widow, Qandi Gul, responded,

I don’t know . . . we are powerless. I would never have stepped outside my house if we were not poor. I work for them [children] so that they wear clothes and shoes. My little sons have lost their healthy fresh looks and rigorous work has weakened them.

A doctor dealing with many of the post-9/11 refugees in Afghanistan said,

Depression and flashbacks of the event are common psychological problems within mothers and sisters. We call it PTSD. They suffer from fits and they feel that the bombing is still going on and that their children are not safe. They cannot sleep at night and cry out in fear.

Liberation was certainly not achieved for the women from Tara Bora (where supposedly no communities lived) who lost their husbands and children in one instance of bombing. Sultana’s story is among the most painful for she lost her feet and almost all her family at 3 a.m. when her house was bombed. She recalled,

The flesh and severed heads of my husband, five sons and four daughters were scattered on the ground . . . How can I not wear this veil when I have gathered the flesh of my children in it . . . I don’t know if they got any coffin or not. Now I have only one
son who became deaf and mentally ill after the bombardment. He starts crying and has convulsions when we pass a butcher's shop saying that it is his brothers' and sisters' flesh. One of my daughters is dying of TB here but I can't give her fresh food and fruit. I can't afford these.

Fatima's story from Tora Bora is not much different. She had gone to fetch water when a bomb killed her husband and two children. Pregnant, extremely young and with nowhere to go, she walked, destitute and dependent, to Pakistan. In other stories of US-bombed Afghanistan, men on the run appear to have married off their daughters overnight as they wanted to ensure that they would have the protection of another man and family at a time when they could not protect them. In addition there are accounts of abandonment and divorces, especially of women of Arab descent who had nowhere to go.

For such women, for whom the events of the conflict led to either the death of innocent loved ones or the deprivation of some semblance of security, there is no respite from the oppressiveness of poverty, the despair of profound loss, helplessness and depression. Bombing and mechanized violence may help the perpetrators target faceless numbers, but they are incapable of delivering liberation.

The Karzai Government: Unfulfilled Promises?

Afghanistan is now at peace.
The women of Afghanistan are increasingly participating in political decision making.
Afghans are going back to work, and rebuilding their lives . . .
(Women for Women, Afghanistan, 2004)

Statements such as these are floated frequently in the western press. However, the situation on the ground continues to be complex and challenging. The ATA exercises limited effective control over the country in the face of internecine conflicts and Taliban remnants. While there is pressure to show dramatic results to justify the actions of 2001, the pace of progress is slow for several reasons. Some parts of Afghanistan have not emerged from conflict while other, relatively stable areas such as Herat, witness sudden eruptions of violence. Civic amenities still do not reach a majority of the rural population and in the absence of fully functioning government machinery, tribal warlords fill the security gaps.

What is the Karzai government's stance on women and how have women fared? The situation has not changed drastically in terms of women's everyday life under the present setup, assert many analysts and reports (Amnesty International, 2003; Donini et al., 2004). A stated objective of the ATA was that it would lead to the establishment of a ‘broad-based, gender sensitive, multi-ethnic and fully representative government’ (Amnesty International, 2003: 2). The symbolic presence of women was ensured at
Bonn, even though RAWA was conspicuous for its absence when the peace accord was cobbled together. RAWA was one of the first organizations to point out that the US alliance with the Northern Alliance would be dangerous for Afghan women. However, their voices and concerns were completely ignored.

Two major trends emerge when we look at the Karzai administration: visible change in rhetoric compared to the Taliban, and little change in women's everyday life, especially in rural contexts. The change in rhetoric at the policy level led to some gains for urban women compared to the past, e.g. the opening up of education and employment (especially public sector employment) to women is ensured. Political symbolic representation was provided through the selection of two women as the ministers for women and for health, while a woman was appointed to head an independent Human Rights Commission. The Karzai government included women in the process of constitution drafting and in the Constitutional Review Commission (US Department of State, 2004). However, even the gains at the rhetorical level, as we shall see below, are limited.


Ironically, even though the Constitution finally passed because of intense pressure from the US and U.N., mentions of women's rights and human rights remain somewhat invisible in the document. The current Constitution . . . states that no Afghan law can be contrary to the beliefs and provisions of Islam. The head of the Supreme Court continues to be a religiously trained Mullah with fundamentalist beliefs. If the law is to be interpreted by the Supreme Court, there could be a contradiction in the formulation of rights, especially for women. Furthermore, the implementation of the Constitution still rests on elections that according to experts can be moved from September 2004 to Spring next year due to security issues. (Ahmed-Ghosh, 2004)

However, even if the current constitution ensures women equal rights, social relations within Afghanistan have not changed significantly, especially in the rural areas of southern and eastern Afghanistan. According to the UN Secretary General's Report (2003: 9), 'The serious lack of security for women and girls continues to create major impediments to their full integration into political, economic and social public life.' Afghan women continue to face discrimination and violence, while their basic rights such as the right to (physical) security and the right to livelihood are almost as fragile as they were under the Taliban. According to Amnesty International (2003: 1):

Two years after the ending of the Taliban regime, the international community and the Afghan Transitional Administration (ATA), led by President Hamid Karzai, have proved unable to protect women. Amnesty International is gravely concerned by the
extent of violence faced by women and girls in Afghanistan. The risk of rape and sexual
violence by members of armed factions and former combatants is still high. Forced
marriage, particularly of girl children, and violence against women in the family are
widespread in many areas of the country. These crimes of violence continue with the
active support or passive complicity of state agents, armed groups, families and
communities. This continuing violence against women in Afghanistan causes untold
suffering and denies women their fundamental human rights.

If physical security is questionable, the arena of political representation is
also problematic. According to Meena Nanji (quoted in Ahmed-Ghosh,
2004), the women’s ministry has no legal jurisdiction or implementation
power; it was established to keep international donors happy. The UN
Report of the Secretary General confirms that the minister can only provide
policy advice to the government (2003: 6). In addition, the more articulate
and radical women’s rights activists were replaced by others, more accept­
able to the delegates of the Loya Jirga (grand council/assembly). The Loya
Jirga in Afghanistan’s political history over the last 200 years has been
constituted during times of important national decision-making. The recent
emergency session of the Loya Jirga was to choose a ‘Head of state for the
Transitional Administration and to . . . approve proposals for the structure
and key personnel of the Transitional Administration’ (Bonn Agreement,
Art. IV[5], as quoted in Their, 2004: 60).9 The Loya Jirga delegates have
been criticized for being from the same groups who have been against any
role for women in the public sphere. Although 160 seats were reserved for
women in the Loya Jirga, warlords or local people of influence, who are
supposedly aiding the fight against Al-Qaeda, handpicked most of the 1650
delegates (Cherain, 2002). Karzai’s candidacy was backed by a former
Mujahideen fighter, Mohammed Asef Mohsoni, who submitted a list with
1050 names—seven times the number required to confirm the nomination
and well over half of the 1650 delegates. This illustrates the kind of alliances
that were in play before Karzai was appointed president. While the other
aspirant for the position of president was a woman, she received only 171
votes compared to Karzai’s 1295 votes (Afghanland.com, 2004). While this
indicates women’s bold initiative and bid for power, it also demonstrates
the political odds women continue to face. The heavily conservative Loya
Jirga delegates exhibited significant intolerance when it was criticized for
inducting former Mujahideen into the assembly. According to the Feminist
Daily News Wire (2003), Malalai Joya, a delegate to the Loya Jirga, had to
be placed under UN protection when she criticized the appointment of
Mujahideen commanders to (all 10) committee chair positions established
by the Loya Jirga: ‘Why have you again selected as committee chairmen
those criminals who have brought these disasters for the Afghan people. In
my opinion, they should be taken to the world court.’ She was not only
admonished, she received death threats from many who chanted ‘death to
communists’ in response. Thus, while women express their agency, it is
done so under extremely difficult circumstances. According to Habiba Sarabi, the Minister of Culture and Education (Avvenire, 2002):

> The transition government is trying to create democratic rules to be able to guarantee rights and liberties to women, but this cannot happen in a short time – especially while there continue to be people who are opposed to these changes for all women.

This perhaps explains why, soon after her appointment as the Minister for Women's Affairs, Dr Sima Samar was accused of blasphemy and forced out of office (Heard, 2003). The former minister was known for her activism and strong views on issues relating to women's empowerment. Similar actions in other contexts also indicate the present government's weaknesses. For example, some delegates have complained that they are not involved or consulted in the selection of the cabinet candidates, half of whom are from the Northern Alliance (Cherain, 2002). When Karzai reintroduced the much dreaded Council of Vice and Virtue (renamed Ministry of Religious Affairs), this was termed a decision 'valued by the President's Cabinet' by Habiba Sarabi. Recently, President Karzai upheld the 1970s law prohibiting married women from attending high school, resulting in the expulsion of 2000-3000 girls, while he banned coeducation under pressure from the conservative lobby (Ahmed-Ghosh, 2004). While these developments are disappointing, they should not come as a surprise because state formation in itself is a modernist and masculinist project (see Brown, 1992; Parker et al., 1992), and does not espouse women's rights as a priority. According to Atmar and Goodhand (2002: 114), 'A central challenge now is reconstituting the Afghan state—at the heart of the Afghan conflict is the crisis in legitimacy and capacity of the state.' This crisis of state deeply impacts women in Afghanistan. We find that, as the Afghan government and the state are being reconstituted, women's emancipation and rights continue to suffer. In Afghanistan, a country awash in neo-conservative ideologies for almost 25 years, and where geopolitical considerations dictate coalition-building with groups holding misogynist views, pro-woman changes will be hard to accomplish.

Livelihood security becomes critical in a wartorn country that has undergone a major drought in recent years, where irrigation systems for agriculture, the mainstay for a majority, have been destroyed. There are reports that many Afghans trickling back to their villages find their houses looted and demolished. This, combined with the human loss that they have suffered, and with few livelihood choices in a war economy where increased opium production under the Karzai government and weapons seem to be the only market options, all but guarantees that they slide into depression. The reports of violence against women, suicides, maternal deaths and trafficking of women and children are only some of the indications that all is not well. UNHCR (2003: 10) data indicate that 51 percent of the returnees from Pakistan in 2003 were children less than 12 years of age,
while those over 18 years constituted 38 percent. The UN Secretary General’s Report (2003: 13) confirms that

... livelihood security is a pressing concern for the majority of returnees and displaced women... the majority of returnee families own little or no land, no longer have access to rural employment and have either lost or lack cash to buy livestock. Thus both rural and urban women are increasingly likely to find themselves with the responsibility for the well-being of their children, while male family members migrate in search of work.

We thus find that, while some women might have gained symbolically after the US intervention, the actual impact of policy pronouncements has not extended beyond a few urban centres. Women’s lives in rural Afghanistan continue to be insecure, especially because the government has formed partnerships with many of the same forces that have historically impinged upon, and currently restrict, women’s mobility, schooling and employment. Very recently, such limitations were imposed on women in Herat by the local warlord. Meanwhile, women’s physical security is not assured, and human rights abuses are neither protested by the UN system (Niland, 2004: 75) nor are they a high priority either for donor agencies or the transitional government that has formed alliances with the people who exacerbate such violations.

Although stray aid figures that sound significant are frequently highlighted by donor agencies, these need to be understood in three major contexts: declining trends in per capita aid; the overall directions of international funding available to Afghanistan; and aid agencies’ pre-set priorities. According to Their (2004: 59), the per capita annual giving by the international community for Bosnia was US$326, Kosovo was US$288, and East Timor was US$195, compared to the US$42 per year in Afghanistan. During the first year, according to Care International, out of the total international funds of almost US$11.5 billion for Afghanistan, only 9 percent were allocated to humanitarian assistance, 3 percent to reconstruction, 4 percent to international peace keeping, and the remaining 84 percent went to military expenditures for fighting the Al-Qaeda and Taliban (Care International, 2002). International humanitarian aid has been criticized for being ‘one more weapon in the war against terrorism’ (O’Brien, 2004: 193). Perhaps the western world’s anti-Muslim stance, exacerbated post-9/11, which resulted in the bombing and therefore the reconstruction of Afghanistan in the first place, has something to do with the low budget for aid and the use of the available funds.11

In some cases reconstruction activities had to be brought under the control of provincial warlords and in other cases have been perceived to be heavily concentrated in Kabul rather than the rest of Afghanistan (Rubin et al., 2003: 13, 17). Such prioritizing will only exacerbate violence, not bring peace. Furthermore, according to Leader and Atmar (2004: 184), ‘the structure, resourcing, principles, and ideology of large parts of the aid
system have made it very difficult to even recognize, let alone adapt to the new realities of Afghanistan'. Many analysts have criticized humanitarian agencies for acting on their narrowly interpreted mandates without significant Afghan involvement, thereby focusing their resources in areas that might not be their best utilization (Rubin et al., 2003). Others have pointed to the contestation of funds between the NGO community and the government that claims to represent the Afghan people. In this overall context, women-centred social change work, challenged and contested at every turn in the past, is not without its problems due to the multiple priorities of different actors in the aid arena. According to figures Rubin et al. quote (2003: 22) from Afghan official sources, from a total of US$1030 million for different sectors, only US$10 million has been allocated to human rights and women’s rights, while the actual disbursement is even less. The betterment of women fades into insignificance in the larger game of fund allocation and utilization in the war against terror.

The agency of Afghan women, under the Taliban and after their fall, was neither appreciated by the Taliban nor by their self-proclaimed international champions. In their report following the visit to Pakistan of the UN Gender Mission headed by Angela King, the Afghan Women Network (AWN)—made up of professional Afghan refugee women in Pakistan—stated that they were left ‘confused, insulted, hurt, angry and substantially ignored ... [A]part from the Taliban, no one else has humiliated Afghan women as Ms. King has.’ The AWN noted, ‘this is not an unusual situation—either within our society, or within the UN agencies where we work’ (Balchin, 1998: 95). Despite appearing unwilling to spend time with actual Afghan women, and despite the AWN’s adverse reactions to her, King continued to speak for Afghan women after September 11 in her capacity as special adviser to the UN on gender issues and the advancement of women. Before a UN Security Council meeting in December 2001 on reconstruction aid, King was quoted as saying:

"Between myself, [Lakhdar] Brahimi, the UNIFEM leaders, as well as the other ambassadors, international NGOs and prominent women leaders who have written in support of these women’s issues, there is a very good chance that [Afghan women’s] voices will be heard. (Brown, 2001)"

For these reasons, I assert that it is problematic to stereotype Afghan women, the Taliban regime as the only misogynist government, or the international community and donor agencies as the sole promoters of women’s rights. The Taliban government as well as the international donor community is characterized by viewpoints and approaches that denigrate or reduce Afghan women’s agency and resistance, and in the case of donor agencies, racism intersects with their subtle misogyny. While the manifestations might be different, the intention and impact are very similar because the well-being and real emancipation of Afghan women get discounted.12
Conclusion

What gave the Bushes the authority to speak for and intervene on behalf of all Afghan women who have neither gained from the recent bombing nor been liberated as a result of it? The US discourse on Afghan women contained an implicit claim to know all Afghan women and children, and measured their status against a standard set in the West. This ostensibly provided the US the justification to proceed to bomb Afghanistan in order to liberate its women. This ‘liberation’ took place with the help of the Northern Alliance—a coalition that was accused of plunder and rape in 1992–6, and that tragically upheld its reputation through the US-led bombing and ensuing period. Through the entire drama, the Taliban come across as the arch villains. Only the Taliban, and not the larger patriarchal culture that was strengthened in conjunction with the war, were perceived to be the problem. The Taliban was only symptomatic of a pre-existing structural phenomenon, one that has not eroded with their exit from the scene.

What is presented as uniform and universal oppression is a misrepresentation of ground realities. Condemnable as the Taliban were with regard to their restrictions on women, Afghan women’s agency, no matter how limited, was present and continuously exercised on different occasions. Afghan women demonstrated such agency not only in the context of the Taliban decrees, but also before their government, and today. Thus the US representation of Afghan women as helpless, hapless and illiterate, who were not even allowed to laugh out loud, stripped of rights and by extension of consciousness, is as colonial as the British idea of the ‘White Man’s Burden’.

Can a politics exerted through the use of deliberate violence yield desired results? It appears, based on the analysis thus far, that this politics is embedded in different meanings connected with masculinity, and therefore, contains very little space for women. While this does not mean that women should or can disengage with the system—after all some women were able to negotiate even with the Taliban and continue to do so with the conservative elements that dominate the government even today—it implies that we should always be critical of our expectations from confrontations that are ostensibly about good versus evil, rather than justice and empowerment. I assert that women’s emancipation is neither the intent nor an achievement of conventional politics. We need to rethink the meanings of liberation and the implications of masculinist politics for women who have never really gained from the different stances that the dominant players adopt. This explains why both the Taliban and the US governments have been extremely oppressive towards Afghan women in different ways.

We will fail to address the issues at hand if we look at ‘Afghan women’s condition’ in terms of dichotomous constructions of liberators or oppressors, as, in the context of Afghanistan, there are commonalities and continuities
that are obliterated from such dualistic analyses. Critical reflection that facilitates relevant intervention demands the rejection of binary categories in order to analyse social complexity. The obscurantism of the Taliban is symbolized in western discourse by their attitude in three key areas: the imposition of the veil, women's right to education and their right to employment. This depiction only reproduces Afghan women as victims to re-inscribe racism and empire. Women's needs and priorities are rarely addressed by the politics and policies entrenched within the current system of unequal social relations. Women are frequently used as pawns in colonial and neocolonial discourse, and the recent example of Afghanistan is no exception. In the present context, the process that reversed the few gains regarding women's rights over the course of a century began with the takeover by the Mujahideen, who were assisted by western countries including the USA and Britain, as well as China, Saudi Arabia and Egypt. It is obvious that the issues surrounding Afghan women's employment, veiling and schooling were imperative, but the attack on Afghanistan was motivated by other geopolitical considerations, and not the liberation of Afghanistan's women. The removal of the Taliban is a short-sighted explanation of a complex phenomenon in which the US has been complicit due to its support to the Mujahideen and their offshoots. We cannot disassociate the conceptual basis of the Taliban ideology from the one that was promoted by the western coalition in Afghan refugee camps in Pakistan. In addition, the alliances between the US-supported Karzai government and the very groups that should have been disarmed, and who adhere to the same ideology as the Taliban, is clearly a duplicitous move. Underneath a facade of democracy, Afghanistan's political structures continue to be constituted by loose coalitions with the very forces who were perceived to be the enemy in 2001. This makes the task of implementing women's rights agenda difficult in the face of an overwhelmingly conservative Loya Jirga and an administration that partners with former criminals for the sake of realpolitik. The role of international aid in Afghanistan, concerning its impact on women, is questionable in the overall context of its focus on military rather than a rights-oriented focus. Such moves will certainly not enable women to be liberated or to exercise basic rights.

At the end of the horrendous tonnage of bombs that have fallen on Afghanistan, Afghan women are no closer to liberation than before the bombs rained. Empowerment does not come from the barrel of a gun. As one woman put it: 'We have been thinking and hoping for peace since our childhoods but do not know how peace can be restored in our country. There are no signs' (Mariam Bibi, SDPI, 2002). Who can speak for the women of Afghanistan? The claim to know and speak for/on behalf of women is a powerful, and often devious, one. Based on this claim, various governments in Afghanistan and elsewhere have formed and implemented their ideas about the political dispensation for women (Giles and
Hyndman, 2004). Is it really possible to know and speak for all women? Can we speak about women as a unified category without addressing the deep differences and divergences in women's political affiliations, and ideas and expectations about their place in the future? Women do not exist as a category, except in the imaginings of (masculinist) political agendas or in reaction to them; any reform or social change programmes are necessarily problematic if they are based upon contending/competing/adversarial schemes and solutions. Given the parameters and structures that shape, contain and construct women, there cannot, therefore, exist monolithic discourses and formulas for empowerment or emancipation. Ultimately, there is no one solution as there is no one category of women; there cannot exist monolithic discourses and formulas for empowerment or emancipation; there is no sweeping equivalent of a liberation theology for women. Given the parameters and structures that shape, contain and construct women, our imaginations and imaginings continue to be leashed and restricted by the masculinities that continue to be defining principles, despite contestation and challenges from some quarters.

NOTES

1. For a more detailed account, see Khattak (2002).
2. I largely draw upon Atmar and Goodhand's (2002) delineation of the phases of Afghanistan's conflict, while of course the analysis here is mine.
3. In tandem, women were also allowed to enrol in co-educational universities, and many did become engineers, doctors and teachers.
4. This indoctrination was possible for a number of reasons. On the one hand, Afghan refugees in Pakistan from rural areas believed that they had left their homeland due to the take-over of the Godless Russians whom it was their religious duty to fight, and on the other hand the different anti-USSR governments took advantage of the belief in Jihad to create a fighting force/army of Mujahideen where none existed before. For such a loose army to coordinate their resistance, the driving ideology that was most handy was that of Islam. Indeed, in the 1970s Islam appeared to reassert itself in very powerful ways against what were perceived to be either very westernized governments or harsh dictatorships. Thus the revolution in Iran, the success of the PNA campaign in Pakistan on the basis of Nizam e Mustapha (system expounded by the prophet Mohammad), the emergence of resistance in the Central Asian Republics, and defiance against the Saudi monarchy in Mecca when a group of disaffected nationals took over the Ka'aba, were all signs of the popular appeal of religion.
5. For example, see the fatwa quoted in Khattak (1995).
6. For example, the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) funded and World Bank administered 10-year $87 million Income Generation Project for Refugee Areas (IGPRA) did not provide a single Afghan refugee woman (constituting a majority of the refugee population) any employment. The World Bank and Pakistani Government representatives explained during
an evaluation session in Islamabad that Afghan men were averse to such women's employment in the public sector, therefore, they had little choice in how they couched any refugee-related initiatives (Khattak, personal inter-
action, 1996). Similarly, the UNHCR Protection office sometimes advised young women to return to their abusive husbands rather than process their case for asylum abroad due to the fear of disapproval from the Afghan community, but probably also because such ideas matched their own views about young women's place in the family.

7. SDPI: Sustainable Development Policy Institute, Islamabad, Pakistan. These interviews were conducted by SDPI staff in 2001 and 2002, and are archived at SDPI.

8. This is reinforced by reports that underscore women's physical insecurity in present-day Afghanistan. See for instance Amnesty International (2003).

9. For a detailed discussion on the Loya Jirga, its historical importance, evolution, and functioning, see Their (2004), Afghanland.com (2004); for details about women delegate's role in the Loya Jirga see Kazem (2002) and Feminist Daily News Wire (2003). Very briefly, the Loya Jirga, a representative and consensus-based body rooted in Afghanistan's tribal traditions, has been convened on an average once in 20 years to decide/legitimize a new head of state and in the recent case also to decide upon the structure of the transitional authority, and its key personnel (Their, 2004: 55). Ultimately, the Loya Jirga had little say in these matters due to multiple reasons, significant among which was the role of the US envoy to Afghanistan who acted as king-maker (2004: 55).

10. In my article, 'A Reinterpretation of the State and Statist Discourse' (1994), I explain how the modern state with its beginnings in the treaty of Westphalia (1648) was possible due to the 'coming of the Enlightenment and modernity, the birth of modern capitalism and the industrial revolution. These phenomena imply certain developments, such as the growth of institutions and organizational structures . . . [and are] directly linked with the ascendancy of man and masculinist values in all spheres of life including the cultural, social, economic and political. The emphasis on rationality and its synonymy with men was reinforced by modernity. For example, in modernity, historically science has been named male and nature female.' This article goes on to elaborate the division between the public and private and male and female spheres and ultimately male/patriarchal control over women.

11. For a current analysis of the West's relationship to Islam and the so-called Muslim world, see Khalidi (2004) and Mamdani (2004). I also maintain that the global war against terror follows in the footnote of the Cold War in that it is a replacement. The Afghanistan context provides the link in the continuity of the two phenomena: the US fought a proxy war in Afghanistan to finally oust and dismantle the Soviet empire, and then came back to bomb Afghanistan to punish it for the terrorist attacks upon the United States. While the first 'war' (i.e. the cold war) was against the Soviet Union and its satellite states, the second is aimed against the Muslim world.

12. Feminists have written extensively about the colonial underpinnings of development discourses. See Marchand and Parpart (1995) for a key collection of essays critiquing development from a postmodern feminist perspective. See Saunders (2002) for a recent take on the issue.
REFERENCES


**BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE**

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