

Casualties of Care: A Reflection on Gender, Imperialism and Humanitarian Imaginaries in (Post-) Taliban Afghanistan

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SUMMARY: 1.—Introduction 2.—A note on methodology. 3.—The humanitarian imaginary. 4.—Governing through self-empowerment. 5.—The Tyranny of Freedom. 6.—Conclusion.

ABSTRACT: This article is concerned with the ways in which humanitarian imaginaries in post-9/11 Afghanistan have shaped representations of women's needs as well as programs designed to answer them. Its aim is to examine the 'dark side' of care and the politics of worthiness on which humanitarianism relies. In conversation with scholars who have highlighted the disciplinary aspects of care, I show how apparently well-intentioned humanitarian discourses and practices have drawn boundaries within the Afghan population and reinforced nationalist sentiments. I argue that Orientalist imaginaries of Muslim women in need of rescue did not only serve to justify the military intervention but also the presence of international humanitarian organizations. Furthermore, such colonial fantasies have actualized specific regimes of care based on liberal notions of self-empowerment. The technologies of the 'self' on which these programs have relied have overlooked the various forms of structural inequalities responsible for triggering crises in the first place and the broader dynamics of violence and abandonment that have marked the history of the West's engagement with Afghanistan since the 1990s. The return of the Taliban in 2021 should therefore not solely be understood as the mere result of military strategies and political negotiations but also as the outcome of a broader movement of resistance against this humanitarian ideology, locally perceived as a form of cultural imperialism.

KEYWORDS: Gender, Humanitarian imaginaries, Care, Imperialism, Afghanistan.

1. Introduction

On 8 March 2007, a ceremony was organized by the Ministry of Women's Affairs on the occasion of International Women's Day. The event took place in a conference room of the luxurious Safi Landmark Hotel in Shar-e-Now, one of the few modern glass buildings that had erupted in Kabul's city center in the years that had followed the establishment of the Karzai government. The high ceiling room with extravagant golden chandeliers and thick carpets was filled with prominent Afghan women dressed in flamboyant clothes, members of women's organizations, civil servants and politicians, who had been invited to deliver speeches and to celebrate the progresses achieved by women since the fall of the Taliban regime. The room was decorated with banners on which popular Afghan proverbs were displayed, as is customary in Afghan political meetings. One in particular attracted my amused attention: "Never beat a woman, even with a bouquet of flowers!" A group of girl scouts in khaki uniforms with transparent white scarves under their berets opened the event by singing patriotic songs. As they exited the stage, General Khotul Mohamadzai, the first woman to have acceded to a high military rank during the Russian-backed communist government, appeared in full military gear behind the lectern and delivered a speech in which she celebrated the motherland and praised women for their primary role as mothers. "Women suffered during the war because they lost their husbands and sons! Women hate wars because their children are everything to them!" she exclaimed in a sobbing voice as a storm of applauses erupted from the audience. The ceremony concluded with a gift distributed to all female attendees as they left the room: a Koran and a white chador.

This unexpected manifestation of nationalism and overt celebration of traditional gender roles—at least in the speeches delivered, since the costumes women wore were contradicting such stereotypes— in an event sponsored by the Ministry of Women's Affairs was in sharp contrast with discourses of women's empowerment promoted by international aid agencies. I left disoriented, struggling to reconcile the ostentatious affluence of the venue with the material poverty in which the majority of Afghan women continued to live, in spite of the financial windfall promised by the reconstruction process. Was the gendered language of nationalism necessary for women to become credible and legitimate actors in the political life of the new Islamic Republic? Was there any room for alternative conceptions of femininity in a

country where nationalist sentiments were revived as a result of the presence of foreign military troops and international organisations?

To a great extent, nationalist conceptions of womanhood promoted by the recently established Ministry of Women's Affairs represented the reverse image of the 'liberated Afghan woman' that had been mobilized by the US and their allies to justify a military intervention in Afghanistan. Indeed, in November 2001, a few weeks after the US started bombing the country, the American first lady Laura Bush, in search of moral justifications for the war, triumphantly announced: "Because of our recent military gains in much of Afghanistan, women are no longer imprisoned in their homes. The fight against terrorism is also a fight for the rights and dignity of women"¹. She was soon echoed by Cherie Blair, the British first lady, who called for moves to "give back a voice" to Afghan women². This level of attention to the plight of Afghan women marked a radical rupture with Western governments' silence during the years of civil war that followed the withdrawal of the Red Army in 1989, revealing imperial powers' capacity to coopt women's cause so as to gather public support for military interventions abroad³.

While first ladies gave public speeches, Western media flooded TV channels and magazines' front pages with images of Afghan women covered from head to toe under blue burqas, a garment that had become the ultimate symbol of their oppression. The moral imperative to rescue Afghan women and relieve their suffering was presented as a means to restore justice after years of oppression under the Taliban, an oppression primarily explained in essentializing religious and cultural terms. Cultural explanations replaced historical ones, leaving the role of the US in the development of oppressive regimes in the region largely unexamined⁴. Mobilising a classic trope of 'colonial feminism' in which "white men save brown women from brown men", the figure of the Afghan woman that emerged out of these discourses

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1. Laura Bush. "Laura Bush delivers Radio Address". CNN/Transcripts, November 17, 2001, accessed April 15, 2024, <http://transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/011117/smn.23.html>
 2. Lucy Ward. "Cherie Blair Pleads for Afghan Women," *The Guardian*, November 20, 2001, sec. Politics.
 3. See Leila Ahmed. "Feminism and Feminist Movements in the Middle East, a Preliminary Exploration: Turkey, Egypt, Algeria, People's Democratic Republic of Yemen." *Women's Studies International Forum*, Special Issue Women and Islam, 5 (2): 153-68; Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Ann Russo, and Lourdes Torres, *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991).
 4. Lila Abu-Lughod. "Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving? Anthropological Reflections on Cultural Relativism and Its Others." *American Anthropologist* 104 no. 3 (2002): 783-90.

was one of a model subject of humanitarian aid: a victim in need of rescue, innocent, silent, powerless⁵. Instead of locating the root causes of women's suffering within a situation of structural violence derived from the destruction of infrastructures and political turmoil resulting from Cold-War and post-Cold-War geopolitical dynamics, their plight remained over-determined by assumptions about cultural gender norms.

But portrayals of a-historical victimized Afghan women in need of rescue and care did not only serve to attract popular support for the intervention. The spectacle of women's distant suffering activated moral sentiments grounded in what Luc Boltanski identifies as the "politics of pity"⁶: validating women's deservingness and the need to take swift military action on their behalf. Through the narrative aesthetics of news reports Western spectators were constituted as publics with a will to act⁷.

This article is concerned with the ways in which humanitarian imaginaries in post-9/11 Afghanistan have shaped representations of women's needs as well as programs designed to answer them. Its aim is to examine the 'dark side' of care and the politics of worthiness on which aid practices are grounded. In conversation with scholars who have highlighted the disciplinary aspects of care⁸, I show how apparently well-intentioned discourses and practices of care have drawn boundaries within the Afghan population and reinforced nationalist sentiments. I argue that Orientalist imaginaries of Muslim women in need of rescue⁹ did not only serve to justify the military intervention but also the presence of international humanitarian organizations. Such colonial fantasies have actualized specific regimes of care based on liberal

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5. Lila Abu-Lughod. *Women and Gender in Islam* (Newhaven, London: Yale University Press, 1992); Gayatri Spivack. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, eds Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 271-313; Miriam Ticktin. "Where Ethics and Politics Meet." *American Ethnologist* 33 no. 1 (2006): 33-49.
 6. Luc Boltanski *Distant Suffering: Morality, Media and Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).
 7. Chouliaraki, Lilie. 2010. "Post-Humanitarianism: Humanitarian Communication beyond a Politics of Pity." *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 13, no. 2 (2020): 107-126.
 8. Heike Drotbohm. "Care Beyond Repair." In *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Anthropology*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022). <https://oxfordre.com/anthropology/display/10.1093/acrefore/9780190854584.001.0001/acrefore-9780190854584-e-411>; Miriam Ticktin. "Where Ethics and Politics Meet." *American Ethnologist* 33, no. 1 (2006): 33-49. Miriam Ticktin. *Casualties of care: Immigration and the politics of humanitarianism in France*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011).
 9. Abu-Lughod, "Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving", 783-790; Mohanty, Russo, and Torres, *Third World Women*.

notions of self-empowerment¹⁰. The technologies of the 'self' on which these humanitarian programs have relied have overlooked the various forms of structural inequalities responsible for triggering crises in the first place and the broader dynamics of violence and abandonment that have marked the history of the West's engagement with Afghanistan since the 1990s¹¹. Far from being neutral, technical and pragmatic answers to identified 'needs,' 'self-empowerment' programs represent a distinct mode of governing, harnessed to an advanced liberal political project emphasizing the need for certain groups to improve themselves through individualistic self-management¹². The return of the Taliban in 2021 should therefore not solely be understood as the mere result of military strategies and international political negotiations but also as the outcome of a broader movement of resistance against this humanitarian ideology, locally perceived as a form of cultural imperialism.

2. A note on methodology

My reflections on gender, imperialism and humanitarian aid are primarily informed by a twelve-month fieldwork carried out in Afghanistan in 2007 in the context of my doctoral researches as well as observations conducted over a year in 2004 as a humanitarian practitioner employed by a French medical NGO. My long-term involvement with the country enabled me to develop linguistic skills and to embed myself among various groups of women targeted by humanitarian programs: women Members of Parliament, women's rights activists, students boarding at the Women's National Dormitory as well as women civil servants. Through volunteering at the Afghan Women's Network, sharing a room with women studying at the University of Kabul, shadowing the work of women's rights activists, interviewing women MPs, and observing meetings at the Ministry of Women's Affairs, I gained insights into these women's everyday struggles and their complex engagement with the 'reconstruction' enterprise. Even though I never returned to Afghanistan

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10. Barbara Cruikshank. "The Will to Empower: Technologies of Citizenship and the War on Poverty." *Socialist Review* 23, no. 4 (1999): 29-55.
 11. João Biehl. *Vita: Life in a Zone of Social Abandonment* (Berkeley, CA.: University of California Press, 2014; Omar Dewachi *Ungovernable Life: Mandatory Medicine and Statecraft in Iraq* (Stanford, C.A.: Stanford University Press, 2017).
 12. Suzan Ilcan and Anita Lacey. "Governing through Empowerment: Oxfam's Global Reform and Trade Campaigns." *Globalizations* 3, no. 2 (2006): 207-25.

since then, I continued following political developments, notably through contacts I maintained with the women I met during my fieldwork (some of whom have been able to leave Afghanistan and find asylum in Europe) and through Afghan friends and relatives based in Europe who run educational programs in Kabul. It is through these interactions and my own interest in critical humanitarian studies —a field I have taught and written about for the past fifteen years— that I have started to think about the intersection between humanitarian imaginaries, imperialism and gender. In the present article, I pay close attention to discourses and representations conveyed through the press and the mediums of humanitarian communication during the twenty-year presence of the humanitarian-military apparatus in Afghanistan as well as aid practices observed during my fieldwork. The cultural dimension of the occupation of Afghanistan has been largely overlooked in scholarly analyses when it played a crucial role in the re-emergence of the Taliban only a few years after their eviction from power in 2001. It is my contention that humanitarianism, as an ideology and a cultural project, has been instrumental in feeding nationalist feelings and therefore, the Taliban-led insurgency.

3. The humanitarian imaginary

Historians define humanitarian reason as a revolution in moral sentiments that occurred in Western Europe, England and Northern America in the hundred years following 1750 and as the result of the rise of modern industry, the development of states, the early achievements of sciences and technology and the rise of capitalism¹³. Humanitarianism as a moral tradition therefore takes its roots in the Enlightenment and its consecration of secular reason. As such, it is generally conceived as a form of rationality that radically rejects the imaginary. Humanitarianism is supposed to derive its legitimacy and impulse from measurable needs, not from imaginary representations¹⁴. However, Liisa Maalki in her book *The Need to Help*, takes the example of the “aid bunnies” knitted by Finnish Red Cross volunteers for Middle

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13. Thomas L. Haskell “Capitalism and the Origins of the Humanitarian Sensibility,” Part 1. *American Historical Review* 90, no. 2 (1985): 339-361. Part 2. *American Historical Review* 90, no. 3 (1985): 547-566. Michael Barnett. *Empire of Humanity: A History of Humanitarianism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011).
 14. Joël Glasman. *Humanitarianism and the Quantification of Human Needs: Minimal Humanity* (London and New York: Routledge, 2019).

Eastern refugee children to illustrate the imaginative practices that underlie humanitarian projects. The way needs are imagined has a significant impact on how humanitarianism, as a global endeavor, plans its course of action. The imaginary, Malkki argues, “is not false nor illusory. The imaginary is not a mode of unreality but indeed a mode of actuality”¹⁵. Rather than being seen as incompatible with humanitarian reason, the imagination should be seen as a generative process with practical applications.

I use the term ‘humanitarian imaginary’ here in reference to critical scholars who have reflected on the role of humanitarian communication in the formation of modern social imaginaries; i.e the socialization of spectators into ways of feeling and acting that are perceived as moral, desirable and legitimate in a specific culture and at a particular historical moment¹⁶. Chouliaraki defines the humanitarian imaginary as “that configuration of practices which use the communicative structure of the theater in order to perform collective imaginations of vulnerable others in the West, with a view to cultivating a longer-term disposition of thinking, feeling and acting toward these others”¹⁷. The humanitarian imaginary can be understood as a structure of the imagination forged through moral education and regular exposure to standardized representations of ‘vulnerable others’ calling an ethics of solidarity and care into existence.

In the case of post-9/11 Afghanistan, humanitarian communication produced representations of afghan women as pure and deserving and prompted the establishment of a heavy military-humanitarian apparatus legitimized by the promise to bring freedom to them. On December 3, 2001 the front cover of *Time* featured the face of a blue-eyed Afghan woman lit up from below by a warm ray of light —as a symbol of her newly acquired freedom and release from darkness— and entitled “Lifting the Veil: the shocking story of how the Taliban brutalized the women of Afghanistan” (see figure 1). In this cover story like many others published at the time, the singling-out of women derived from analyses that conceptualized women as

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15. Liisa H Malkki. *The Need to Help: The Domestic Arts of International Humanitarianism* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2015), 18.
 16. Charles Taylor. “Modern Social Imaginaries.” *Public Culture* 14, no. 1 (2002): 91-124; Craig Calhoun. “A World of Emergencies: Fear, Intervention, and the Limits of Cosmopolitan Order*.” *Canadian Review of Sociology/Revue Canadienne de Sociologie* 41, no. 4 (2004): 373-95; Boltanski, *Distant Suffering*.
 17. Lilie Chouliaraki. *The Ironic Spectator: Solidarity in the Age of Post-Humanitarianism* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Books, 2012), 45.



Figure 1. Time's front cover, 3 December 2001.

victims and implicitly men and 'culture' as perpetrators¹⁸. The juxtaposition of images of suffering women and Taliban extremists created a gendered distinction between worthy and unworthy subjects of humanitarian aid. While representations of misogynistic and anachronistic Taliban men dominated Western conceptions of Afghan masculinity, Afghan 'culture' and 'traditions' were identified as catch-all explanations for women's oppression. Such stereotypical depictions of "Third World Women" as suffering victims of oppressive patriarchal cultures were shaped by Orientalist representations equating the Global South with passivity and "apolitical corporeal existence" and the Global North with freedom and civilization. The racial and gendered

18. Anila Daulatzai. "Acknowledging Afghanistan: Notes and Queries on an Occupation." *Cultural Dynamics* 18, no. 3 (2006): 293-311.

hierarchies that such discourses sustained positioned women within the moral realm of innocence and excluded men from such a possibility¹⁹.

Sketched against the backdrop of images of burka-clad women that invaded Western media reports on Afghanistan short after the terrorist attacks of 9/11, images of the new Afghan woman promoted by international humanitarian organizations and the press were informed by liberal conceptions of femininity: visible, autonomous, self-driven, emancipated from religion and tradition. Such heroic feminine figures regularly appeared in Western news, with media outlets eager to feature stories that would resonate with the imagination of their readers. Like Soviet heroine tractor-drivers or factory workers used as symbols of modernization during the Russian occupation of Afghanistan, reports were published on the first female Olympic boxing team²⁰, the first female mountaineer²¹, the first female orchestra conductor²², the first female air force pilot²³, the first female judge nominated to the Supreme court²⁴ and even the first woman to win the Afghan version of “American Pop Idol”²⁵. Such life stories, wheeled out to an audience who expected every single woman from that part of the world to have been threatened, raped or tortured, simultaneously obliterated the possibility of loving husbands, fathers

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19. Miriam Ticktin. “A World without Innocence.” *American Ethnologist* 44, no. 4 (2017): 582.
 20. Huffington Post. 2012. “Afghanistan’s First Female Boxing Team,” January 3, 2012, accessed, April 15, 2024. https://www.huffpost.com/entry/afghanistan-female-boxing_n_1182123?guccounter=1&guce_referrer=aHR0cHM6Ly93d3cuZ29vZ2xllmNvbS8&guce_referrer_sig=AQAAAE05FBaVkbJu0OwaQGc-grC62995PWyondCarF3O2N5eHyC5on6Pw7b02pZ8QvyWUWkq9WtZsvCRHisZ0_l2KGsXU1urhSyqnjsGtWcw1s7RVz-_S43_-uODKnGkfymU7Uk8wBiQjuYMjAZFX5lmXrZukbi9O5e8Hz7IM0tfn7O9.
 21. *The Guardian*. “‘I Did It for Every Single Girl’: The First Afghan Woman to Scale Mount Nushaq Global Development,” September 11, 2018. Accessed, April, 15, 2024. <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2018/nov/09/for-every-single-girl-first-afghan-woman-to-scale-mount-nushaq-hanifa-yousoufi>
 22. Vincent Dowd. “Meet Afghanistan’s First All-Female Orchestra.” *BBC News*, March 15, 2019, sec. Entertainment & Arts. Accessed, April, 15, 2024. <https://www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-47571463>
 23. *The New York Times*. “A Female Afghan Pilot Soars and Gives Up,” December 23, 2016. Accessed, April, 15, 2024. <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/23/opinion/a-female-afghan-pilot-soars-and-gives-up.html>
 24. *Radio Free Europe*. 2015. “Afghanistan Nominates First Female Judge To Supreme Court,” June 30, 2015. Accessed, April, 17, 2024. <https://www.rferl.org/a/afghanistan-female-judge-supreme-court/27102086.html>
 25. *Washington Post*. 2019. “For First Time, a Woman Won Afghanistan’s Version of ‘American Idol,’” March 23, 2019. Accessed, April, 17, 2024. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2019/03/23/first-time-woman-won-afghanistans-version-american-idol/>.

and brothers, or forward-thinking male leaders. Images of modern Oriental women clawing their way out towards the media light were constructed against a backdrop of an imagined eternal medieval darkness. The artificial bubbles where outstanding women were molded, groomed and heaped with honors, concurrently reinforced resentment toward gender programs within a population that failed to see the material benefits of the reconstruction, was subjected to the everyday violence of the occupation and experienced the foreign presence as a form of acculturation. Discussions in the parliament and the media about the necessity to re-establish the moral police²⁶, monitor women's clothes in public spaces²⁷, ban 'foreign' films²⁸ or to inscribe in law a married woman's duty to submit to her husband's sexual desires²⁹ a few years only after the fall of the Taliban regime demonstrate how in a context of foreign interference and military occupation women's bodies became the symbolic territory over which national boundaries were reasserted.

Tales of heroic Afghan women told in the glossy brochures of humanitarian agencies and in the press were instrumental to bolster an impression of absolute reversal from an old theocratic order to a modern one, in which women were finally 'liberated'. The implicit storyline of these reports was that thanks to the intervention of the coalition forces Afghanistan had moved away from an authoritarian and patriarchal regime embodied by the Taliban to a modern one based on democracy, the market economy and the rule of law. Ironically, those who presented themselves as the saviors of Afghan women, i.e the US and their allies, were also those who had brought back to power leaders of armed political groups —also known as *mujahedin* supported by Western governments during the Cold War— responsible for the destruction of Kabul and major human rights violations such as mass rapes and killings during the civil war that followed the withdrawal of the Red Army

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26. Golnaz Esfandiari. "Afghanistan: Proposed Morality Department Recalls Taliban Times." RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty. July 18, 2006. Accessed, April, 17, 2024. <https://www.rferl.org/a/32858547.html>
 27. Pia Heikkila. "Afghan MPs May Ban Jeans and Makeup." *The Guardian*, April 24, 2008. Accessed, April, 17, 2024. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2008/apr/24/afghanistan.islam>
 28. Cheragh. "Dokhtar-e Afghan Film Is the Lowest Example of Western Debauchery." September 23, 2007.
 29. Tom Coghlan. "Women Protesters against 'marital Rape' Law Spat on and Stoned in Kabul." *The Times Online*, April 16, 2009. Accessed, April, 17, 2024. <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/asia/article6098614.ece>



Figure 2. Factory Worker - From "The Revolution Continues", ed. Makhmud Baryalai, Abdullo Spantghar, Vladimir Grib (Moscow: Planeta, 1984).

in 1989³⁰. Yet Western leaders sought to establish a clear distinction between the two regimes. While the Taliban had ruled the country through religious edicts, the new Islamic Republic was now ruling through laws voted by an elected parliament and enforced by an effective judiciary. Most importantly,

30. Human Rights Watch. "Blood-Stained Hands: Past Atrocities in Kabul and Afghanistan's Legacy of Impunity." *Human Rights Watch*, July, 2005. <https://www.hrw.org/report/2005/07/06/blood-stained-hands/past-atrocities-kabul-and-afghanistans-legacy-impunity>

women were given equal rights to men, were encouraged to participate in public life and were no longer forced to hide under burkas. The utopia of abundance and freedom that the reconstruction agenda had promised and that had come to fruition in humanitarian communication campaigns was based on a vision of radical reversals, with women as main embodiments of this dramatic transformation. Women's bodies, exposed in NGOs' communications had become the ultimate symbol of the reconstruction and state-building process. As feminist scholars have demonstrated, state-sponsored feminism in Middle Eastern countries has historically been used by otherwise authoritarian governments as a means to assert their legitimacy and maintain the political support of their Western allies³¹. In Afghanistan from the 1920s until the 1979 revolution and the Soviet-backed governments—like in Iraq, Iran and Turkey during the same period—the regimes that have succeeded one another, have promoted various versions of feminism with the view of projecting an image of modernity toward the outside world³².

In the section that follows, I illustrate how regimes of care designed in order to address perceived women's need for emancipation informed self-empowerment programs. I show how such programs aligned with the "first phase of care" according to Tronto's typology (Tronto 2008)—namely "caring about"—without engendering the responsibilities associated with "taking care of". I qualify these initiatives as carnivalesque³³ in the sense that, like in the context of a carnival where ordinary life is suspended and customary norms are turned upside down, they offered a semblance of political transformation. Indeed, the 'freedom' they sought to promote was abstracted from the political reality of the country where former *mujahidin* were brought back to power by their Western supporters. Besides deepening a sense of uncertainty, these contradictions were a source of intense social tensions which contributed to radicalize conservative political visions for the future of the country. The

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31. Deniz Kandiyoti. *Women, Islam and the State* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1991); Nadjie Sadig-Al Ali. *Iraqi Women: Untold Stories from 1948 to the Present* (London: Zed Books, 2007). Ahmed, "Feminism and Feminist movements in the Middle East".
 32. Nancy Dupree-Hatch. "Revolutionary Rhetoric and Afghan Women," in *Revolutions and Rebellions in Afghanistan*, eds. M. Nazif Sharani and Robert L. Canfield (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 306-340; Valentine Moghadam "A Tale of Two Countries: State, Society, and Gender Politics in Iran and Afghanistan." *The Muslim World* 94, no. 4, 2004: 449-67; Maliha Zulfacar. "The Pendulum of Gender Politics in Afghanistan." *Central Asian Survey* 25, no. 1 (2006): 27-59.
 33. Julie Billaud. *Kabul Carnival: Gender Politics in Postwar Afghanistan* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015).

artificial creation of a constituency of women subjected to expert authorities and linked to demands for self-management and self-empowerment was part of a broader political project aimed at transforming women into self-sufficient, active, productive and autonomous decision makers.

4. Governing through self-empowerment

In Kabul and other Afghan cities, a plethora of programs supporting women started to emerge soon after the US and NATO troops set foot on the country. The emphasis on 'gender' was mostly translated as a focus on 'women', hence forming the category 'women' as a unified object of intervention. Because it symbolized the economic well-being of the nation, a central feminine role model of the liberal peace project³⁴ —with its standard recipe combining democracy, free market and rule of law— was the female entrepreneur. Such a figure epitomized the culture of liberal modernity embedded in 'economic citizenship' that guided the reconstruction enterprise³⁵. Her presence appeared in the geography of the city through projects such as *bagh-e-zanana* (the women's garden) where a women's bazaar together with a vocational training center had been established, as well as the Rural Women Exhibition organized once a year on Kabul University campus with the support of the United Nations Development Program.

In addition to being the target of traditional micro-finance programs, women benefited from capacity building initiatives that consisted in self-empowerment workshops designed to boost their self-esteem and develop their networking, interpersonal and leadership skills. UN Agencies such as UN Women, UNDP and UNITAR, private foundations such as the Friedrich-Ebert-Foundation and national development agencies such as the GIZ and DFID, all ran similar programs for women combining economic empowerment with leadership skills development. Using a mix of peer-coaching, wellness and introspection methods, Western trainers sponsored by international donors and employed by NGOs encouraged women to trust themselves so as to 'realize their full potential' as a brochure of a Women's Empowerment

34. Oliver Richmond. "The Problem of Peace: Understanding the 'Liberal Peace,'" *Conflict, Security & Development* 6, no. 3 (2006): 291-314.

35. Mitchell Dean. "Powers of Life and Death Beyond Governmentality." *Cultural Values* 6, no. 1-2 (2002): 119-38.

and Leadership Programme funded by a German aid organization advertised. The individual women who benefited from the gift of self-empowerment were responsabilized to work on their 'Self' so as to become the agents of their own destiny. The guiding rationale of such projects was that the state was weak, corrupt and unreliable, and therefore its welfare functions had to be shared with the reinvigorated forces of the market, namely resilient and creative entrepreneurs able to rely on themselves to realize the neoliberal dream of the consumerist 'good life'.

Such a framing forced individuals to internalize their everyday struggles for survival as individual and collective failures of their kin instead of the result of the unequal world economic order, successive waves of violent military occupations, armed conflict and the collapse of infrastructures³⁶. Presented as a quantitative increase in capacity, in reality self-empowerment worked to qualitatively transform women's subjectivity, emboldening them to assume the identity of active citizens and participants in social reform. In this sense, self-empowerment functioned as a "technology of citizenship", namely a political rationality for governing people and securing their compliance through the regulation of their capacity to act³⁷.

In 2007, the Ministry of Women's Affairs regularly hosted such trainings funded by various international aid agencies. The workshops were meant to "help women work on themselves so as to be able to give back to society", the international sponsor explained to me. They involved elements of relaxation, mindfulness as well as peer-coaching. The American trainer —a woman in her early fifties who worked as a 'life coach' in the US— who ran them invited participants to imagine aloud their dream house in front of the other participants. "How many rooms would you like to have in your house?" she asked with excitement while the Afghan interpreter translated in Dari with embarrassment. Struggling to project themselves in such a utopian future of richness, participants shared their uncertainties. "In my neighborhood, girls cannot go to school because of insecurity. We can barely make ends meet. How can we think about a new house?", a woman responded. Interpreting such explanations as a sign of their lack of optimism, the trainer rebuffed

36. Julie Billaud "The Making of Modern Afghanistan: Reconstruction, Transnational Governance and Gender Politics in the New Islamic Republic." *Anthropology of the Middle East* 7, no. 1 (2012): 18-37.

37. Barbara Cruikshank. "The Will to Empower: Technologies of Citizenship and the War on Poverty." *Socialist Review* 23, no. 4 (1993): 29-55.

them with encouragements to adopt a “positive attitude in life.” She insisted that “in each person, there is a potential to initiate significant change.” The sessions often ended with relaxation exercises meant to diffuse tensions when discussions became ‘too emotional.’

The women who took part in these workshops were NGOs employees or had recently launched their businesses of saffron, packaged dried fruit, carpeting, handicrafts and jewelry thanks to micro-credit schemes. They reacted to these new discourses and practices with a mix of distanced amusement and gratefulness for the opportunity of socializing between unrelated women. The awkwardness they felt during meditation exercises, which sometimes manifested itself in chuckles and questioning glances, was counterbalanced by a desire to please “(their) foreign guests who came here to help (their) country”, as the Afghan etiquette requires. The “freedom” they were supposed to embrace remained an abstract idea. A comment a participant shared with me at the end of a training session made this particularly clear: “Don’t you feel lonely, here, all by yourself, far away from your family, in a war-torn country?”. The language of empowerment with its corollary ideas of individual agency and personal autonomy was not acquired by the women but instead bestowed upon them, as women’s networks were established and behaviors governed according to the standards and priorities of international aid agencies. Self-empowerment, in the neoliberal sense of ‘caring for oneself’ through the maximization of one’s own utility and value³⁸, therefore functioned as a nongovernmental means to govern, service and control Afghan subjects³⁹.

Far from being mere technical and therefore neutral instruments of good governance, workshops of this type could be conceived as instruments of “transnational governmentality” (Ferguson and Gupta 2002), part of a civilizational project with deep symbolic and cultural implications. Their subtext was that Afghanistan suffered from a fundamental lack of management skills and that citizens had to break away from ignorance and tradition by publicly embracing the ideology of self-help. Their implicit “racial vernacular”

38. Michel Foucault. *Histoire de la sexualité (Tome 3) - Le souci de soi* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 2014).

39. Didier Fassin. *Humanitarian Reason: A Moral History of the Present* (Berkeley, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2012).

maintained “whiteness and the West as symbols of authority, expertise and knowledge” while relegating the “rest” to its inherent lack⁴⁰.

Inspired by corporate management culture and influenced by neoliberal thought, their message was based on the view that the main actor of social change is the individual, an individual detached from external constraints and whose will is essential to bring about progress. Workshops and trainings were therefore colonial technologies of power mobilised to diffuse narratives of progress, rationality and freedom in society. The forms of expertise on which they relied involved specific assumptions about Afghan women’s needs, and the means through which to achieve the objective of ‘emancipation’. Relations of empowerment involved what Cruikshank calls a “voluntary and coercive exercise of power upon the subjectivity of those to be empowered”⁴¹.

It was not rare to see participants drop-out in the middle of such programs, unable to confront the skepticism of their relatives and a general climate of suspicion toward activities targeting women exclusively. The international experts rationalized drop-outs through formulaic cultural explanations: “Afghanistan is a very traditional and conservative society that considers women as primarily belonging to the family”, international aid professionals constantly told me in interviews.

Hassina Sherjan, an Afghan woman who had returned to Kabul in 2001 after twenty years of exile in the US to open a manufacture of home accessories alongside an NGO running schools for girls, was equally skeptical about the language of ‘empowerment’. In 2007, her factory employed fifty workers, with men and women on an equal number. “Afghans have been merchants and traders for as long as this country has existed. Women have worked alongside men, running family businesses since time immemorial. We do not need trainings to do business! The income people make is for the entire family. Of course, I want women to be equal to men, but to achieve this, we should not set women apart and employ and educate men too”, she insisted while giving me a tour of her factory located in Bagrami Industrial Park.

Disconnected from the social reality and material needs of ordinary people, it is not surprising that the liberal conceptions of freedom and progress such workshops sought to transmit quickly became sources of intense anxieties

40. Jemima Pierre. “The Racial Vernaculars of Development: A View from West Africa.” *American Anthropologist* 122, no. 1 (2020): 88.

41. Barbara Cruikshank. “The Will to Empower: Technologies of Citizenship and the War on Poverty.” *Socialist Review* 23, no. 4 (1993): 35.

within Afghan society. Because of its abstract “gender mainstreaming” mandate, workshops were pervasive professional activities within the Ministry of Women’s Affairs. In a context marked by widespread poverty and heavy militarization, the ubiquitous visibility of these governance rituals contributed to feed critiques against this already fragile institution. In an article published in the magazine *Irtiqa* (“development”) in February 2007, a political analyst commented on the MOWA in the following terms:

Expensive seminars organized by the Ministry of Women’s Affairs in luxurious hotels during which empty speeches are delivered are deceitful events. Women’s future is not determined in such spaces. It belongs to them to take their destiny into their own hands⁴².

The director of the Department of Provincial Relations at the time of my research herself admitted that priorities should be placed elsewhere and exclaimed in an outburst of anger: “We don’t want pens! We don’t want workshops! We want money to run real projects!”. While the workshops promoted notions of ‘self-care’ and ‘empowerment’, their outcome was rather harmful for women whose cultural legitimacy was guaranteed through their explicit adhesion to more collective values.

As Heike Drotbohm argues, care should not solely be conceived as repair work. Care can also involve disciplinary dimensions and function “as a classificatory boundary-drawing practice that both includes and excludes”⁴³. In the case at hand, the prioritization of women and the promotion of individualistic conceptions of self-care and autonomy were locally perceived as a form of acculturation, a threat to patriarchal authority and to national sovereignty more broadly. Regular debates in the Afghan national press and the parliament questioning the relevance of the MOWA and the eventual closure of this Ministry once the Taliban returned to power should not be exclusively understood as the outcome of reactionary politics. The Taliban’s replacement in 2021 of the MOWA by the Ministry for the Propagation of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice was a symbolically powerful means to express political independence and resistance against “foreign ideology”. In May 2022, the Ministry published a decree requiring all women in Afghanistan to

42. Qassim Akhgar. “Society’s Development Depends on Women”. *Irtiqa*. Issue 7 (2007) : 6-7. Translated from the *Dari* by the author.

43. Drotbohm, “Care”, 2.

wear full-body coverings when in public⁴⁴. In the same year, women's access to employment and education was severely curtailed by additional decrees. These political moves demonstrate the symbolic significance of women's bodies in the definition of Afghanistan's national boundaries. This scenario, already observed during the first Taliban government (1994-2001), highlights how foreign interference in the form of military-humanitarian interventions, instead of creating the conditions of possibility for women's autonomy, contributed to the tightening of conservative gender norms.

These dynamics are perhaps best captured in the poetry produced by the Taliban during the twenty-year long NATO/US occupation and collected by Alex Strick Van Linschoten, Felix Kuehn, Rahmany Mirwais, and Hamid Stanikzai⁴⁵. As a popular and well-respected means of political expression, Afghan poetry is an aesthetic form characterized by patriotism and a remarkable historical consciousness. Taliban's *ghazal* celebrate the simple humanity of rural Afghans, their love for the mountains, the streams, pastoral life and the brutality and corrupting power of the foreign occupation. In this poem by Matiullah Sarachwal entitled "How many are the NGOs" for example Western norms such as letters of recommendation and women's empowerment are sketched against a backdrop of generalized poverty and disempowerment:

Wasting time, they merely sit in their offices,
How many are the NGOs!
Their salaries, more than ministers',
How many are the NGOs! [...]
When you are interviewed, they ask for recommendations,
Those who have no recommendations are forgotten.
How many are the NGOs! [...]
If the applicants are girls, they will be admitted without interview;
Women in large numbers but men are few.
How many are the NGOs! [...]
People come from here and there taking salaries in dollars;
They don't work in the government because they have their hearts broken [...]⁴⁶

44. According to information I gathered from personal contacts based in Afghanistan, this law is not being enforced.

45. Alex Strick van Linschoten, Felix Kuehn, Rahmany Mirwais, and Hamid Stanikzai. *Poetry of the Taliban*. (London: Hurst, 2012).

46. Matiullah Sarachwal. "How Many Are the NGOs!" in Strick van Linschoten *et al.* (2012): 129.

5. The Tyranny of Freedom

Because of the deep symbolic and political implications of humanitarian programs, the ‘gift’ of empowerment was poisonous for the women who were supposed to benefit from it. Caught in a bind between humanitarian organizations’ requests to take part in public life and become visible and populist pressures asking them to respect Afghan culture and Islam, women targeted by aid agencies had to redouble efforts to be seen as culturally legitimate subjects. While the reconstruction failed to improve the material conditions of life for the majority of the population, narratives of freedom reiterated by international organizations awakened social apprehensions around culture, identity and national sovereignty. As Harry Englund highlights in the case of democratic reforms undertaken after the fall of the dictatorship in Malawi, translations of human rights as ‘freedom’ is congenial to neoliberal reforms in the economy⁴⁷. The emphasis on freedom does not only confine the scope of what can be publicly discussed —by pushing aside issues such as poverty, public health or labor conditions— but also contributes to the disempowerment of the majority whose only means of resistance is to reassert ‘culture,’ often along conservative gender lines.

Some articles published in the press during the time of my fieldwork illustrate these tensions particularly well. For example, in March 2007, an article entitled ‘women misuse democracy’ was published in *Arman e Milli*⁴⁸, a national weekly newspaper. The article reported that the Director of the Department of Women’s Affairs (DOWA) of Balkh province complained about “the semi-naked (sic) and skimpy clothes worn by women at wedding parties and other ceremonies in the province.” In the interview she gave to the newspaper, Feriba Majid expressed her concern towards what she thought was a misunderstanding of women’s rights and democracy. She added that, “we know that everyone interprets democracy in his own way, but some women are shaming other women by showing up half naked (sic) at parties. This is quite wrong and Islam condemns it.” She finally announced that female

47. Harry Englund. *Prisoners of Freedom: Human Rights and the African Poor*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006).

48. “Women Misuse Democracy.” *Arman-e Milli*, May 3, 2007. Among private publications in Afghanistan, *Arman-e-Milli* is one of the most popular. Launched just after the fall of the Taliban, *Arman-e Milli* is widely seen as the mouthpiece of *Jamiat-e Islami*, the political party associated with the Northern Alliance (Commandant Massoud’s party).

security officials would be hired to check women's appearance on specific occasions like weddings and other ceremonies.

The publication of an article like this was not an isolated occurrence in public debates. During the same year (2007), a number of similar articles were published in national newspapers, weaving together the threat of cultural dilution and loss of Islamic values. In July 2007, for example, the following article was published in *Cheragh*⁴⁹, under the title 'Strange cultural invasion with officials as watchers':

A number of countries use propaganda to try and impose their culture in Afghanistan. By doing this, they seek to lead our young generations — the backbone of our society — towards ethical corruption and to destroy our society. We should warn them that we are an Islamic country and that most of our people are faithful to Islamic principles. They will therefore oppose those who have been sold to foreign culture. There is no compatibility between our two cultures, and conflicts will automatically erupt between these two ways of thought. The intensification of the foreign invasion will revive the opposition against the government of Afghanistan. In such a situation, our government officials should advise foreigners who come to Afghanistan to strictly observe Islamic customs, because foreigners walking in the city and bazaars wearing semi-naked clothes (*sic*) will provoke people's hatred. We recommend that officials of the ministries of Hajj and Religious Affairs and Information and Culture conduct research on the exact nature of the foreign invaders' plot and that they search for ways to prevent it. One solution to this problem could be the re-establishment of the police (for the prevention of) Vice and (the promotion of) Virtue. If we remain observers, the crisis will intensify, and carelessness will harm society as a whole⁵⁰.

Because of their recurrence, the sensationalized tone used by journalists, and the political reactions that ensued, this phenomenon can be described as a moral panic: a threat created through the collusion of the media and conservative political leaders in order to stir up popular fears and fuel nationalist sentiments. But the panic also revealed deeper concerns for national autonomy and longings for a strong and independent state. With a myriad of actors (such as NGOs, UN agencies, the World Bank, private companies,

49. Independent daily newspaper; generally critical of the government. *Cheragh* is financed by Burhanuddin Rabbani, the recognized president of Afghanistan before Karzai and who also heads the Tajik political party *Jamiat-i-Islami-ye Afghanistan*.

50. "Strange Cultural Invasion with Officials as Watchers." *Cheragh*, July 30, 2007.

militias and narco-traffickers) assuming some of the traditional Weberian functions of the state, State sovereignty in Afghanistan had remained, like in many other postcolonial contexts, largely “fuzzy”⁵¹. Dispossessed of its sovereign functions, the State could only maintain a semblance of authority through the control of the moral order. As scholars of gender and nationalism have well demonstrated, women occupy a central symbolic function in the reproduction of this moral economy⁵². In a society torn apart by violence and war, women’s bodies represent the symbolic terrain through which statehood enacts its sovereign power.

Discourses of “women’s liberation”, locally interpreted as a form of “cultural invasion” and a disrespect for Islamic values, had therefore reinforced a sense of urgency among the political elite in maintaining communal boundaries along stereotypical gender lines with the nation imagined as an idealized desexualized maternal figure in need of “protection.” In the process of rendering the state legible and as a result of the deep entanglement of women’s rights with nationalist discourses, the political elite tended to support patriarchal versions of culture in an effort to thwart its local critiques and assert its independence. Calls to re-establish the moral police should therefore not be interpreted as mere signs of a “patriarchal conservative culture” but rather be placed in the context of an occupation where external injunctions of “women’s empowerment” bear significant colonial traces. Indeed, as observed in other colonial encounters⁵³, the control and disciplining of women is a symbolic means of asserting domination.

Caught between abstract humanitarian discourses of self-care and empowerment on the one hand, and nationalist ones defending orthodox versions of “culture” and “religion” on the other hand, Afghan women’s capacity to remain in control of their own lives remained extremely constrained and limited. Such tensions created existential doubts among them about the kind of performance the most apt to express their continued allegiance to their communities, culture and religion. Because women feared the social sanction reserved for those who are considered traitors, they could not make

51. Alessandro Monsutti. “Fuzzy Sovereignty: Rural Reconstruction in Afghanistan, between Democracy Promotion and Power Games.” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 54, no. 03 (2012): 563-91.

52. Anne McClintock. *Dangerous Liaisons: Gender, Nation, and Postcolonial Perspectives* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1997).

53. Fanon, Frantz. “Algeria unveiled.” *Decolonization: Perspectives from Now and Then*. Prasenjit Duara Ed. (Routledge, 2004) : 60-73.

choices that did not show some level of adherence to the patriarchal norms promoted by nationalism. This did not mean, however, that women were bound to passivity. Rather, their agency had to be placed in the polarized socio-political environment created by the occupation. In other words, caught in the dynamics of identity politics, women's public presence needed to have local cultural resonances in order to be perceived as legitimate.

6. Conclusion

Women's empowerment programs are promoting a vision of the individual that is functional to the corporate market economy. The woman who is meant to emerge out of them is a woman who is free to choose, resilient, in control of her life and detached from communitarian and family responsibilities. The characteristics of this ideal woman, imagined outside of the specific social, material and political reality that shapes ordinary Afghan women's lives, reflects the turning of the humanitarian gaze away from those in need and the reframing of "helping others" in terms of narcissistic self-work: a dynamic that Ofra Koffman, Shani Orgad & Rosalind Gill have coined "selfie humanitarianism"⁵⁴.

In post 9/11 Afghanistan, the political category "woman" has been a creation of exogenous forces, a product of the humanitarian imaginary that bore little resemblance with "real" Afghan women. The ideal woman targeted by humanitarianism was at once a victim of oppressive patriarchal culture and a heroic, courageous, resilient agent refusing to be silent. "Self-empowerment" was intended to unleash her inner potential: the neoliberal logic that guided this discourse was grounded in the view that it was internal processes rather than external objective conditions which were to blame for her predicament. By obscuring global inequalities, imperial logics and reinforcing neoliberal psychological imperatives to work on the self, empowerment programs imposed on its subject what Nikolas Rose has succinctly called in the title of his book, the "powers of freedom"⁵⁵. The objective of this form

54. Ofra Koffman, Shani Orgad and Rosalind Gill. "Girl Power and 'Selfie Humanitarianism'," *Continuum* 29, no. 2 (2015): 157-68.

55. Nikolas Rose. *Powers of Freedom: Reframing Political Thought*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

of governmentality was to trigger “revolutions within the self”⁵⁶ so as to normalize the same postsocial forms of citizenship already at play in advanced liberal democracies⁵⁷. By promoting forms of moral discipline devised to activate the capacities of citizens in a cost-effective way, the individual was molded to assume responsibility for the many disorders and dysfunctions that continue to prevail in the country. As empowerment schemes delegated sovereignty onto individual women, they simultaneously promoted a model of “economic citizenship” which justified the violent exclusion of those who could not comply with the liberal and paternalistic obligation of autonomy. It is under this regime of powers that ‘freedom’ has been radicalized and that Afghanistan has been maintained in a permanent “state of exception” marked by military occupation and neoliberal reform⁵⁸.

Most importantly, such dynamics have to be placed within a longer history of imperial engagement with Afghanistan from the 1920s onward, during which the country has been conceived as “ungovernable”. Successively labelled as “the kingdom of insolence”⁵⁹, “the graveyard of empires”⁶⁰ and “the land of the unconquerable”⁶¹, journalists and political pundits have regularly alluded to Afghanistan as ungovernable, using an increasingly familiar litany of tropes: authoritarianism, sectarianism, tribalism, terrorism, etc. The ungovernability that is assumed to characterize Afghanistan is used to explain the condition of spiraling violence and failures to establish order in the country. In my opinion, the ‘ungovernability’ cliché is not merely a representational device designed to create an inherently wild and primitive other whose requirement for redemption is civilizational self-help. Rather, I posit “self-empowerment” and other “self-care” programs as instruments geared toward the continuation of a form of government predicated on continuous chaos. As Omar Dewashi argues for the case of Iraq, “ungovernability” is to be conceptualized as “a feature of the internal dynamics of power enmeshed in

56. Cruikshank, “The Will to Empower”, p. 87.

57. Dean “Powers of Life”, 131.

58. Giorgio Agamben. *State of Exception*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

59. Michael Barry. *Le Royaume de l'Insolence: L'Afghanistan 1504-2001*. (Paris: Flammarion, 2002).

60. David Isby. *Afghanistan: Graveyard of Empires*. (New York: Pegasus Book, 2011).

61. Jennifer Heath and Ashraf Zahedi. *Land of the Unconquerable: The Lives of Contemporary Afghan Women* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011).

its disordered operations”, a framing particularly apt at capturing conditions of governance within zones of exception and abandonment⁶².

This last point is particularly well illustrated by the fact that twenty years after the intervention of the coalition forces, the Taliban are back in power and women’s situation continues to be presented in the press and NGOs’ reports as a reflection of Afghanistan’s inherent disarray and conservative culture. Omitting to consider the long-term global dynamics that have contributed to shape Afghan women’s position in society, Human Rights organizations keep on locating the cause of their oppression solely with the gender policies enforced by the Taliban not with the imperial wars that have left the country poverty stricken, aid dependent and deeply traumatized⁶³.

In this article, I have argued that in the context of the Global War on Terror, the systematic association of Afghan women’s suffering with Islamic fundamentalism and humanitarian responses to such suffering have produced specific forms of care which have had harmful consequences. I have revealed how discrimination against women, a political issue of the highest order, has come to be managed in significant ways by sentiments and practices of care that have been locally perceived as a form of cultural domination. International agencies’ attention to women, while creating a distinction between deserving and underserving Afghans, has been accompanied by acts of violence such as villages bombed by NATO troops, houses raided by US special forces and CIA-funded militia groups, pushed through under humanitarian pretexts. This form of ‘armed love’, to use Miriam Ticktin’s expression⁶⁴, which enabled to combine narratives of rescue and violent repression and which allowed foreign troops to kill without committing homicide⁶⁵, have reinforced an oppressive order and curtailed the possibility for genuine transnational forms of solidarity to develop between the global feminist movement and Afghan women.

This limited version of ‘humanity’ implemented through such an exclusionary regime of care is once again powerfully captured in the poetry of the Taliban⁶⁶. A manifestation of the deep historical consciousness that

62. Omar Dewachi. *Ungovernable Life: Mandatory Medicine and Statecraft in Iraq*. (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2017); Fouad Gehad Marei, Mona Atia, Lisa Bhungalia, and Omar Dewachi. “Interventions on the Politics of Governing the ‘Ungovernable,” *Political Geography* 67, November (2018): 176-86.

63. Human Rights Watch 2022; UN News 2023.

64. (2006; 2011).

65. (Asad 2015).

66. (Linschoten *et al.*, 2012).

shaped Taliban's understanding of contemporary geopolitics, the following *ghazal* written by Samiullah Khalid Sahak and entitled "Humanity" is an expression of moral outrage against the unequal international world order. By using the most traditional and powerful aesthetic medium of Afghan mode of expression and the ambiguous meanings that classic poetry cultivates, the insurgents sorrowfully acknowledged that their refusal to endure the tyranny of liberal freedom threatened both their lifeworld and their humanity.

Everything has gone from the world
The world has become empty again.
Human animal
Humanity animality.
Everything has gone from the world,
I don't see anything now.
All that I see
Is my imagination.

They don't accept us as humans,
They don't accept us as animals either.
And, as they would say,
Humans have two dimensions.
Humanity and animality,
We are out of both of them today.

We are not animals,

I say with this certainty.
But,
Humanity has been forgotten by us,
And I don't know when it will come back.
May *Allah* give it to us,
And decorate us with this jewelry.
The jewelry of humanity,
For now it's only in our imagination⁶⁷. ■

67. Samiullah Khalid Sahak. "Humanity" In Alex Strick van Linschoten et al. (2012): 210-211.

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