

# The Stifled War on Afghan Women

*An Analysis on Why the Approach Toward Implementing Women's Rights in Afghanistan Needs to Be Reformed*



Student: Emily Smit

Supervisor: Prof. Dr. Leonard Rutgers

Course Code: GE3V18003

Date: 28/05/2021

## Abstract

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There are two main themes we think of when Afghanistan is mentioned: Islamic extremism and its toxic misogyny. But how much do we understand about Afghanistan's approach toward Islam and women's rights? We recognise that women's rights need to improve around the world, yet conflict-ridden countries like Afghanistan will continue to lag far behind as they fail to successfully implement these rights. Little research has been done into where the approach towards improving Afghan women's rights by international actors such as NGOs and member states has gone wrong. Additionally, there is not much research into what kind of approach should be taken to provide more promising and effective results. Therefore, in my thesis I will analyse "to what extent Afghan women's rights have improved since the fall of the Taliban?" This research question will enable me to weigh the advantages and drawbacks on the current approach taken by international organisations and the Afghan government on implementing women's rights. I will do so in three stages. Firstly, by explaining the history of the 'Taliban war against women' throughout the twentieth century. Secondly, by analysing the effectiveness of recent declarations on women's rights in Afghanistan. Lastly, I will look into how local and international actors that currently undermine the progression of Afghan women's rights could instead improve the implementation of said rights. By highlighting the local and international aspects that have both positively and negatively affected the rights of Afghan women, my main aim is to emphasize the importance of including more than just western-centric solutions toward improving women's rights in a country that is so culturally and historically different from the West. I conclude that, for international organizations to witness more effective results, they have to take an approach that should be tailored to the cultural and religious ideals of the local population. The best way of doing so is to understand the history of Afghanistan and provide agency to influential female Afghans who know so much better how to tackle the core issues of their poor treatment.

**Key Words:** *Women's Rights, Afghanistan, Afghan Culture, Feminism, International Declarations, Islam, United Nations*

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# Introduction

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For the past four decades, Afghanistan has been portrayed as a country in disarray, torn by radicalism and economically shattered. It is safe to say that there has been a lot of tragedy, resentment, and suffering among the Afghan population. Most notoriously, Afghanistan is known for its colossal mistreatment of women, especially after the Taliban began their rule in 1992. The United Nations among other supra-national organisations, especially advocated for human rights toward Afghan women who were most affected. They took on the role to protect women in Afghanistan, encouraging the set-up of Afghan women's councils and denouncing Taliban treatment of the Afghan population.

As of today, the resolutions, declarations, and councils on improving women's rights have not proven to be as effective as declared.<sup>1</sup> Even after the end of the Taliban regime, the conflict seems to have gone on with still no end in sight. Millions of Afghans are still being displaced, women and children are still being abused, and illiteracy rates are still staggering due to the lack of or destroyed education facilities. Furthermore, the Taliban are currently edging closer towards another full-blown reoccupation of Afghanistan.<sup>2</sup> Afghan women will be the ones taking the biggest blow if this event should occur as even the most miniscule progresses that they have achieved within Afghan society will be undone so that their general situation will revert back to how it was in the horrible late twentieth century. Nevertheless, the importance and efficacy of the advocacy of Afghan women should not be negated all too quickly: Afghan women can be shown to have been fighting very hard to improve their position after the Taliban had been overthrown. Even so, Afghan women still often continued to be hitting against a brick wall when it comes to progressing their rights significantly. In this thesis I will discuss and analyse why, twenty years after the fall of the Taliban, the treatment of Afghan women is still so poor. To do this I will start by explaining the provenance of Afghan women's rights, discuss, in breadth, the most relevant international declarations aiming to improve women's rights and their effects in Afghanistan, to then comprehensively analyse why many of the aims of these declarations, conferences and agreements have not been as successful as they could be. As a final step I will be suggesting alternative approaches toward improving Afghan women's rights.

This thesis takes inspiration from an eloquently written novel by Khaled Hosseini. Titled, *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, which portrays the Afghan civil war and the evolution of the Taliban regime through the eyes of a woman named Maryam and a girl called Laila. Through his own research and experiences with Afghan refugees Hosseini was able to place his readers into the minds of these characters. This allowed them to envision in what dangerous, misogynistic world these women were growing up in as well as how they survived through it with the help of external sources and sheer internal will. Further inspiring and insightful novels such as *The Pearl who broke its Shell* by Nadia Hashimi and the vastly read biography of Malala portray the hardships of women with strict customs and cultures in times of war in a similar light. With Hosseini's new sense of perspective in mind, this paper will attempt to answer my central research question, "to what extent have women's rights in Afghanistan improved since the fall of the Taliban in 2001?"

## Sources

I will be analysing primary sources such as newspaper articles about the civil war in the nineteen-nineties and various documents by the High Commissioner for Refugees from 2009 including press releases written by the UN Security council in 2003 that reflect on the disproportionate effects on women in war. I will also look into documents written during the Clinton and Bush administrations. These will be used to further describe the atrocities and immense impact of the civil war on Afghan women. Many of these documents are from the CIA and UN archives, which puts more weight to their validity because of their official background and lack of incentives for being falsified because declassified documents only come to light after at least 25 years.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, an interview with Maurits Jochems who served as NATO's Resident Senior Civilian Representative in Kabul in 2008 and from 2012 to 2014 will be an essential primary source to providing knowledge on his first-hand experiences with the Taliban, the effects of foreign influences, influential Afghan women, and the politics on Afghan soil. His voice on the matter is particularly important

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<sup>1</sup> Donald Steinberg, 'Protection and Participation: Women and Armed Conflict', Crisis Group, 10 September 2008, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/global/protection-and-participation-women-and-armed-conflict>.

<sup>2</sup> Davis S. Cloud and Stefanie Gliniski, 'They Grew up under U.S. Occupation. What Happens When the Troops Leave?', Los Angeles Times, 16 November 2020.

<sup>3</sup> 'Declassification Frequently Asked Questions', The United States Department of Justice Archives, 9 September 2014, <https://www.justice.gov/archives/open/declassification/declassification-faq>.

due to the fact that Mr. Jochems provides the type of insight that may not be gained in just reading secondary literature or official documents as he brings a more personal stance. These sources including the secondary sources will set a foundation for this essay to forward a set of suggestions as to how the employment of Afghan women's rights could further improve. In terms of secondary literature, I deliberately included the works of western as well as Afghan female writers to gain a broader perspective since the West stereotypically views Afghan women usually as people that have no rights and have no means to stand up for themselves which is partially untrue. Western literature discredits the women that advocate for their rights and risk their lives trying to be heard. The works of female Afghan activists are more often spoken about in Afghan literature and Middle Eastern documentaries such as those of Al Jazeera who have more of an understanding in eastern culture, politics, and history.

## Methodology

### Concepts

Before delving into the theory and the general outline of the paper, important concepts that will be used throughout this thesis need to be clarified. These are the following: Islam, feminism, and the subaltern. First of all, Islam plays a considerable role in Afghan society and dictates how women's rights were approached throughout the nineteenth-hundreds up to this day.<sup>4</sup> Due to Sharia law, it is oftentimes impossible to separate the Islamic from more generic cultural and political traditions when women's rights were taken in for consideration.<sup>5</sup> Throughout this paper, I will analyse how Islam and Afghan culture overlap. I will show it is of paramount importance to acknowledge that not all cultural traditions in Afghanistan are a feature of Islam.

Secondly, feminism is a very broad concept that generally refers to the agency of political, social, and economic equality of both sexes.<sup>6</sup> The role of feminism will be regarded from a non-western-centric perspective, namely in a Middle Eastern context in which, Islam and Afghan culture contribute a big role. As we delve further into the chapters, we will learn that approaching feminism in a manner that respects and acknowledges the Islamic values of the Afghan population is an important factor towards finding solutions on improving women's rights.

Lastly, I will be using the concept of the subaltern as defined in the works of Sarah Bertrand, who describes the subaltern as referring to and defining marginalized communities from developing countries who are the "voices that cannot be heard while other voices (the west/ developed countries/ media) try to speak for those who are silenced".<sup>7</sup> Although Afghan women are in a position to speak for themselves, the subaltern theory still relates to them as Afghan women are still often either ignored or not heard at all by the rest of the world, thus, frequently silencing them altogether. This will be regarded within the realms of whether it is goodwilled for western states and the media to take the voices of women in Afghanistan to call them out as solely helpless victims of a ruthless war-torn country. Would the same truth be uttered by Afghan women themselves if they were to be given their voice back and talk about their experiences on the world stage?

### Approach

I will attempt to demonstrate that the employment of Afghan women's rights will improve by empowering Afghan activists and allowing them the control to take a more local approach towards implementing women's rights in their country. By taking note from NATO which reformed its military strategy in Afghanistan, we can analyse how the UN, which has claimed significant responsibility over improving women's rights could improve the employment of women's rights in Afghanistan. NATO went from placing foreign forces to fight in Afghanistan in the early stages of the war to placing their focus on training more Afghan soldiers to properly defend their country against Afghan fundamentalists instead.<sup>8</sup> In regard

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<sup>4</sup> Huma Ahmed-Ghosh, 'A History of Women in Afghanistan: Lessons Learnt for the Future or Yesterdays and Tomorrow: Women in Afghanistan' 4 (2003): 8.

<sup>5</sup> Zohreh Soleimani, *Thousands of Afghan Women Jailed For 'Moral Crimes'*, To Kill A Sparrow, 2014, 11. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xf1tt3-Zig>.

<sup>6</sup> Definition of FEMINISM', in *Merriam-Webster*, accessed 18 January 2021, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/feminism>.

<sup>7</sup> Sarah Bertrand, 'Can the Subaltern Securitize? Postcolonial Perspectives on Securitization Theory and Its Critics', *European Journal of International Security* 3, no. 3 (October 2018): 281.

<sup>8</sup> Andrea Carati, 'No Easy Way Out: Origins of NATO's Difficulties in Afghanistan', *Contemporary Security Policy* 36, no. 2 (4 May 2015): 201.

to this strategy, the UN should perhaps aim to place Afghan female activists in the forefront by training and aiding them to defend their rights instead of solely speaking for and making decisions on behalf of Afghan women. Since the international resolutions and declarations on bettering women's rights worldwide did not have as much of an impact in Afghanistan as they originally anticipated, serving to show that Afghan women who have already taken up agency since the end of the Taliban rule, may provide better solutions towards how their rights could be addressed. One of the benefits of this approach I am proposing here is that I will be in a position to show that there were major flaws that outweighed the benefits within the resolutions of supra-national organisations to help women in conflict. At the same time, one should bear in mind that there is only so much international entities such as the UN or NATO can do to put a country back on its feet, the rest depends on the will and agency of the population.<sup>9</sup>

## Chapters

Chapter one will begin with a historical survey of the development of Afghan women's rights as it is crucial to recognise that there were Afghan men and women that laboured to improve women's rights in the earlier part of the twentieth century and that partially succeeded in doing so. Secondly, in order to recognize what abuses specifically are being suffered and to establish which struggles Afghan women experienced under the Taliban regime, it is useful to contextualize the Afghan situation by studying both the commonalities and local differences in how women are treated in war situations. Finally, after comparing those recurring characteristics, chapter one will proceed to analyse the war on Afghan women specifically, as this will enable us to comprehend why women are still being cruelly mistreated in many parts of post war Afghanistan. Thus, the sub-question that will dominate this chapter is "how did the war on women affect women in Afghanistan and how did this affect the development of women's rights in Afghanistan over the course of the twentieth century?"

In chapter two I will delve into the responsibilities that supra-national organisations such as the UN have assumed for themselves on working towards better standards of women's rights in places of conflict. Four of the most relevant declarations will be addressed in terms of how they have aimed to improve women's rights. This chapter will then proceed, by looking at the implementation and execution of said declarations to determine both their positive as well as the negative outcomes. Here I will explore these outcomes by reflecting specifically on the effects they had on women in Afghanistan.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, these discussions will be divided into two sections, the first one addressing the two declarations that aim at curtailing cultural and political violence against women and the second one which will discuss women's abuses against reproductive and educational rights. The successes and failures of these declarations will be highlighted and studied over against the question of how these declarations have affected women in Afghanistan. The sub-question of this chapter will therefore be, "to what extent have the aims of the international declarations discussing the human rights of women drafted in 1993-2000 been successfully executed by international organisations and how did this impact Afghan women?"

Building on chapter one and two, chapter three will highlight which developments are stunting the progression of women's rights in Afghanistan and what measures should be taken to improve the employment of Afghan women's rights. This chapter will discuss two of the main factors that have affected the progression of Afghan women's rights on a national level, namely the role of the Afghan government and the role of madrasas. This discussion will also identify the two main factors that affect the progression of their rights on an international level, namely the lack of- or mis- representation of Afghan women in the western media and the United Nations discussions. This chapter will emphasize the importance of taking a culturally appropriate, locally accepted stance on helping Afghanistan progress as well as highlight the significance of empowering Afghan women to take control over how the abuses of their rights should be tackled. Championing a non-western approach, chapter three will therefore seek to find answers to the following sub-question: "Which factors currently affect the employment of Afghan women's rights and what approach needs to be taken to improve Afghanistan's adoption of these rights?"

Lastly, the concluding chapter will bring the results of each of the three chapters together in order to round up the thesis. It will also address what further qualitative research could be made on women's rights in Afghanistan. By the end, the readers should be able to comprehend the origins of the war on women, how

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<sup>9</sup> Maurits Jochems, *Insight into NATO's Resident Senior Civilian Representative's experiences in Afghanistan*, 22<sup>nd</sup> January 2021.

<sup>10</sup> OHCHR, 'Women's Rights Are Human Rights' (United Nations Publications, 2014), 11.

successfully women's rights, addressed in declarations, have been put into practice in Afghanistan, and how the employment of the rights of women can be further improved.

The topic of Afghanistan's past has become increasingly relevant ever since the US and NATO forces have begun their retreat. This is because many Afghans fear that this retreat will catalyse a Taliban reoccupation, which translates into the loss of all progresses Afghan women have achieved since 2001. Therefore, now that Afghan women have a wider platform to portray their struggles and reach out, it is only fair to put forward and make available analyses of their development and impacts that have been made throughout the twentieth and twenty first century. This is significant as it should give us a better understanding to why Afghanistan is still the corrosively misogynistic and war-plagued country it is now. More importantly, it is quintessential to put the actions of Afghan women in the foreground and let them have their achievements be acknowledged for once.

## Chapter one

### *What is meant by the war on women and how have the origins of women's rights in Afghanistan developed in the twentieth century?*

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We will start by looking into the historical development of women's rights in Afghanistan. In order to understand and analyse the war on women and their ongoing abuse within Afghanistan, it is important to know the background of Afghan women's rights that built up in the twentieth century before they were dismantled from the Soviet-Afghan war onwards. Moreover, before going into the notorious Afghan war on women, this chapter will review what other scholars have identified as universal characteristics where it concerns violence that women face in conflict. It will take into account the findings of Mayra Buvinic and collaborators (2012) on violence and breaches of women's rights as well as the empirical discoveries of Vijayan Pillai and collaborators (2002) relating to health and lack of women's reproductive rights. These statements on women and conflict will be compared with the analyses on the treatment of Afghan women by, amongst other scholars, Huma Ahmed Ghosh, and Dr. Minakshi Das, who have written on Afghan women's rights concerning health, and their mistreatment during the Afghan civil war and Taliban rule. This comparison is made to assess why the war on Afghan women is in some ways distinctly different from the ill-treatment women have experienced in other contemporary civil wars. These findings will provide background knowledge on which rights women have gained or still lack since the end of the war.

Surveying the literature referred to above, it should be observed that authors adopt different stances on whether women suffer disproportionately worse than men during times of violent conflict. Plümper and Neumayer as well as the UN Security Council staunchly argue that women do disproportionately suffer.<sup>11</sup> On the other hand, Buvinic contends that the proportion of men and women suffering differs vastly depending on where the conflict takes place as some in areas men proportionately suffer more than women and vice versa.<sup>12</sup> In the case of Afghanistan, research suggests that it is the women who have been suffering disproportionately more. This is in part due to the cultural and religious themed conflict Afghans have been experiencing, that has spanned over several decades before the war even occurred. This is why the background of women's rights leading up to the Taliban regime is even more significant to put forward. Ultimately, I will have explained the meaning of the war on women as well as analysed how the origins of women's rights have developed in twentieth-century Afghanistan.

### What came before...

Considering what women in Afghanistan have experienced after the Civil War and the Taliban rule, it is hard to believe that Afghanistan once experienced more peaceful and liberal times, especially in relation to the role of women in Afghan society. In this section, I will illustrate that there used to be more progressive efforts to enhance women's rights.<sup>13</sup> These more progressive decades are still very strongly set in the collective memories of many Afghan women who had ever since, striven to be able to provide half of the Afghan population the access to such kinds of jobs, education, and fashion as they once did. Their hopes for a better future for Afghan females as well as males has definitely not been forgotten.

Already starting from the late nineteenth through to the early twentieth century, successful attempts were made aimed at improving the position of Afghan women on the elite level. Abdul Rahman Kahn (r. 1880-1901) was the first Afghan king who catalysed the improvement of women's rights. His reforms included:

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<sup>11</sup> UN Security Council, 'Women Suffer Disproportionately during and after War, Security Council Told during Day-Long Debate on Women, Peace and Security', *United Nations Press*, 29 October 2003, <https://www.un.org/press/en/2003/sc7908.doc.htm>; Thomas Plümper and Eric Neumayer, 'The Unequal Burden of War: The Effect of Armed Conflict on the Gender Gap in Life Expectancy', *International Organization* 60, no. 3 (2006): 723.

<sup>12</sup> Mayra Buvinic et al., 'Violent Conflict and Gender Inequality: An Overview', *Households in Conflict Network*, October 2012, 4.

<sup>13</sup> Ahmed-Ghosh, 'A History of Women in Afghanistan: Lessons Learnt for the Future or Yesterdays and Tomorrow: Women in Afghanistan', 2.

increasing the age of marriage and, under certain circumstances, giving women the rights to divorce.<sup>14</sup> His wife, the Afghan Queen Soraya set the tone for improving the position of women by not wearing a veil, taking part in politics, and teaching military exercises. Her demeanour and sense of emancipation had even inspired the Iranian king Reza Shah (r. 1894-1921) to carry out drastic reforms that were incremental to the progression of the rights of women in the neighbouring country of Iran. Furthermore, under the reign of Emir Amanullah (r. 1919-1929) in 1923, there was a policy of carrying through modernizing social and political reforms that were meant to improve the lives of all Afghans, women included. Women in Kabul were encouraged to walk the streets unveiled and men were permitted to wear westernized clothing.<sup>15</sup> A school for women was opened up in 1921 and many female students were then able to progress into becoming government ministers.<sup>16</sup> The extensive reforms that he had witnessed under his parent's reign allowed Amanullah to grow up believing that polygamy, the veil and keeping women at home instead of at school were not practices that are ingrained in the Islamic religion.<sup>17</sup> Perhaps, because he had watched his mother have such a powerful, impactful role for women in Afghan society and his father encouraging both sexes to having more progressive roles under his reign had influenced their son's uncharacteristically flexible perception of Islamic and Afghan culture.

However, wherever in the world, people generally do not appreciate major changes to their society all at once. This explains why, pushing through drastic reforms at a fast pace that were beyond the control of the population as a whole, did not make Amanullah and his father popular figures, especially because, Afghanistan had long been a stagnantly patriarchal, and a religiously rooted society. Mullahs and local leaders, who were very well respected and influential at the time, called the Afghan elite and royal family betrayers of Islamic culture which, in turn, roused a huge uproar among the local population.<sup>18</sup> As has often been the case throughout Afghanistan's history of implementing reform and progressing women's rights, this was the first of a many of times where religious leaders encouraged their male followers to protest against reforms that posed a threat to their superior role in society. Such efforts were often successful. In this particular case, by accusing the royal family of appropriating Western culture and disregarding Islamic culture, the reforms to emancipate women backfired and cost Amanullah his throne.<sup>19</sup> It would turn out to be an approach that would be used often also afterwards as a pretext to filibuster the progression of Afghan women's rights throughout the twentieth and into the twenty first century. Still, there was also a silver lining in that Amanullah's reforms opened a door setting the foundation for future Afghan women to fight for their human rights and slowly but surely gain more freedoms as the waves of progression were reinforced and curtailed throughout the decades.

Another wave of Afghan women's progression came about, starting from the nineteen fifties up to the nineteen seventies during a period when women were needed to work, to boost Afghanistan's economy. This was an untargeted side effect of an increase in the distribution of foreign aid by the Soviet Union alongside the prime minister Mohammad Daoud to modernise Afghanistan under its wing during the onset of the cold war.<sup>20</sup> As women became more involved in the economy, they started to work their way into teaching and medical careers. This development led to more attention directed towards Afghan women's rights. Thus, they received greater opportunities to join in politics and even become ministers by 1964 which was a catalyst for the creation of the Democratic Organization of Afghan Women (DOAW).<sup>21</sup> This

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<sup>14</sup> Ahmed-Ghosh, 'A History of Women in Afghanistan: Lessons Learnt for the Future or Yesterdays and Tomorrow: Women in Afghanistan', 3.

<sup>15</sup> "Afghan Women in History: The 20th Century", Canadian Women for Women in Afghanistan, accessed 1 March 2021, <http://www.cw4wafghan.ca/>, 2.

<sup>16</sup> 'Afghan Women in History: The 20th Century'.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ahmed-Ghosh, 'A History of Women in Afghanistan: Lessons Learnt for the Future or Yesterdays and Tomorrow: Women in Afghanistan', 5.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, 3.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, 6.

<sup>21</sup> Senzil Nawid, 'Democratic Organization of Afghan Women (1965)', in *Encyclopedia.Com*, accessed 1 March 2021, <https://www.encyclopedia.com/humanities/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/democratic-organization-afghan-women-1965>.

was the first of many feminist groups to help alleviate women from maltreatment in terms of forced and child marriages, in the process also encouraging them to acquire knowledge by quashing illiteracy.<sup>22</sup>

Though a very long time ago, these reforms and waves of feminist progression are especially relevant to measure how dramatically women's rights in Afghanistan have regressed since that time. This is because, only through these early developments can we delve deeper into the question concerning how all these modernizing accomplishments were utterly dismantled just two decades later. There was one key driver that brought this about: war.

## Women and War

In times of war and conflict, women are particularly susceptible to oppression. It is a time of torrent and terror for all, yet plenty of studies such as those by the UN, by Neumayer and Plümper, Pillai and Steinberg have documented the disproportionate amount of violence that women suffer, something that, more generally, is still often overlooked. The most common human rights abuses that women face are sexual violence and exploitation as well as armed violence.<sup>23</sup> Yet these abuses just scrape the surface of what women face during war that need to be addressed. Conflict, as difficult as it is to specifically define, usually occurs in countries that are stricken by poverty, lack sufficient infrastructure and occur when institutions such as governments are at their weakest.<sup>24</sup> However much a country has economically, structurally, and civically progressed, war destroys all sorts of infrastructural, fiscal, and human capital.<sup>25</sup>

In an effort to understand the underlying structure of women experiencing violence in areas of conflict Buvinic (*et.al.* 2012), created as clear and concise a chart as possible, concluding that there were two rounds of impacts that affected women in situations of conflict. As part of the first round, violent conflict can be shown to have a direct impact on: increased male mortality, widowhood, sexual and gender-based violence, migration and displacement, and income loss.<sup>26</sup> These impacts affecting women within their households include, among other things, a broken marriage, lack of a male member making them participate more in politics, enter the labour market, or work longer hours which sometimes curtailed their children's ability to further their education.<sup>27</sup>

Moreover, a second, yet indirect impact of violent conflict is on health and reproductive rights.<sup>28</sup> When the state and its economic, political, and social institutions are disrupted, this results in the disruption of access to viable health facilities too.<sup>29</sup> In war, we are all aware that human rights abuses occur left right and centre, with one of the worst being rape and exploitation of vulnerable people. By international law, couples have the right to decide when to have children without being coerced into it, and most definitely violence-free. Due to their biology, women are the most common targets in terms of having their reproductive rights abused. Especially in poorer, weaker states where the basic needs of the population are not met and therefore people revert to extreme behaviour, women are more likely to be victims of rape, forced marriage and forcing to keep their children.<sup>30</sup> Additionally, women's cycles as well as their fertility may be disrupted due to the stress of war. While male family members are usually away, either fighting, working, or dead, women are the ones left behind with their children and are forced to make a decision between risking their lives and staying or migrating to a 'safer' place, usually seeking asylum in a bordering country.<sup>31</sup> Migration also caused a higher risk of sexually transmitted diseases and little means to get themselves treated.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Nawid, 'Democratic Organization of Afghan Women (1965)'.

<sup>23</sup> UN Security Council, 'Women Suffer Disproportionately during and after War, Security Council Told during Day-Long Debate on Women, Peace and Security'.  
<https://www.un.org/press/en/2003/sc7908.doc.htm>.

<sup>24</sup> Buvinic, 'Violent Conflict and Gender Inequality: An Overview', 2.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> Vijayan Pillai, Ya-Chien Wang, and Arati Maleku, 'Women, War, and Reproductive Health in Developing Countries', *Social Work in Health Care* 56, no. 1 (2 January 2017): 28.

<sup>30</sup> Plümper and Neumayer, 'The Unequal Burden of War', 725.

<sup>31</sup> Pillai, Wang, and Maleku, 'Women, War, and Reproductive Health in Developing Countries', 30.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

All in all, there are plenty of factors that contribute to women's suffering disproportionately during war. The aforementioned factors correlate with monetary, reproductive, and social inequalities. Yet there are also major cultural practices and beliefs that women have to cope with resulting in them experiencing violence within their family circle or end up getting disowned by their families in communities where honour stands above everything.<sup>33</sup> This is why addressing women's rights is so important as these issues are highly relevant in countries of conflict like Afghanistan where women that were raped, or refused to be married off were easily shunned or even killed by their family members to uphold their honour which is intrinsic to Islam.<sup>34</sup>

## The War on Afghan Women

Afghan women faced almost all of the universal struggles in conflict stated by Buvinic (*et.al.* 2012). Loss of a male relative, widowhood, rape, and displacement were all prevalent during the Afghan Civil War. The bombings of educational facilities and hospitals also cut off Afghan children's rights to go to school and women's reproductive rights.<sup>35</sup> During the war, women's main concerns lay with their family and their battle with lack of health and security services.<sup>36</sup> This was because: women still had their cycles, they still had their children and they still became pregnant, yet they lacked the services or means of transport to be provided help according to the research of professors Pillai (*et.al.*, 2002). Moreover, usually, the end of a war would be imagined entailing a concise military victory, thought to be met with a gradual decrease in violence as the country and society tries to get itself back on its feet. Nasreen Ghufuran elucidated that the end of wars, since the nineteen-forties have resulted in more conflict and less security for the population.<sup>37</sup> This outcome is mostly due to the result of lack of compromises, politics, and the unwillingness to share power.<sup>38</sup> Violence, especially against women, had also increased after the end of the Afghan Civil War (1992-1996).

No less importantly, as, Ghufuran has pointed out, the roots of this particular civil war and the events that unfolded after were quite different to that of standard civil wars.<sup>39</sup> This is because it went from a revolution, which did not provide the outcome that many Afghans envisaged, to a civil war dominated by warlords, to the Taliban take over, an event that ended up causing even more of a diaspora within Afghan society.<sup>40</sup> Ghufuran argues that this concatenation of events was caused by Afghanistan's geography, cultural diversity and hostile neighbours who used the country for their own political needs.<sup>41</sup> She finds that the rise of this violence on Afghan women correlated with the stronger, more conservative practices of the Islamic religion which had catalysed during and after the Afghan civil war.<sup>42</sup> The civil war can therefore be said to have set in to motion what was to be a very long and relentless movement of the subordination and treatment of women as second class "silent" citizens.

Once under Taliban rule, Shari'ah law was set in place and instead of peace, the population was faced with a myriad of puritan-fashioned orders and punishments if the laws were not adhered to. Starting with the seemingly innocent name change of the country to public beheadings and punishments as well as mutilation and murder by Taliban members if the more sinful acts were committed such as stealing and adultery.<sup>43</sup> Females were eventually not able to speak unless spoken to, were severely beaten if they did not wear a

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid, 32.

<sup>34</sup> Dr. Minakshi Das, 'Taliban's War on Women: Live Experiences of Afghan Women in Transit on Ethnicity and Their Identity' (London, London School of Economics and Political Science, 2003), Asia Research Centre,

<sup>35</sup> Pillai, Wang, and Maleku, 'Women, War, and Reproductive Health in Developing Countries', 29.

<sup>36</sup> Ahmed-Ghosh, 'A History of Women in Afghanistan: Lessons Learnt for the Future or Yesterdays and Tomorrow: Women in Afghanistan', 8.

<sup>37</sup> Nasreen Ghufuran, 'The Taliban and the Civil War Entanglement in Afghanistan', *University of California Press*, Asian Survey, 41, no. 3 (June 2001), 464.

<sup>38</sup> Ghufuran, 'The Taliban and the Civil War Entanglement in Afghanistan', 462.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid, 463.

<sup>41</sup> Ghufuran, 'The Taliban and the Civil War Entanglement in Afghanistan', 462.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid, 464.

<sup>43</sup> 'Taliban Decrees', Women Aid International, 2000, <http://www.womenaid.org/humanrights/shadows/talibandecrees.htm>.

full burqa, had their hands chopped off if they wore nail varnish, were prohibited from going to school and were killed if they were found guilty of cheating on their husband.<sup>44</sup>

Infidelity was considered the most heinous crime a woman could commit under the Taliban regime.<sup>45</sup> A respectful and honourable family community was essential within the realms of Islam and cheating on one's husband was to sabotage this respect and honour.<sup>46</sup> These acts would be met with husbands often beating their wives if they were caught or thought to be adulterous under the pretence that that was encouraged in the Quran and that they were acting under the Islamic faith.<sup>47</sup> Yet, such acts have little to do with what was written in the Quran, according to Rabha Al-Zeera. By dissecting the different interpretations of verse 4:34 of infidelity, Al-Zeera states that the Quran refutes such violence against women unless it was the very last possible option to save the marriage.<sup>48</sup> She concluded that physically hurting a woman was absolutely discouraged yet the verse has been so distorted that it was vastly believed that men were allowed to act violently because they understood the verse to mean they were superior and therefore had control over women to be obedient.<sup>49</sup> These distorted views that continue to suppress Afghan women and their rights to this day, were established under the Taliban regime as they allowed illiteracy rates to exponentially increase by penetrating the education system and forcing the almost sole teachings of Islam over all other subjects.<sup>50</sup>

## Conclusion

While earlier on in the twentieth century, there were concerted efforts to develop and guarantee women's rights in Afghanistan, there were also forces at work that prevented such rights from coming to full bloom. As a result of several wars that plagued Afghanistan in the late twentieth century, things took a turn for the worse. In particular the decrees set under the Taliban regime, severely suppressed women's rights in all aspects of their life. Although these decrees, or rather punishments, were promulgated under the name of Islam, the situation was decidedly more complex than that, as Ahmed-Ghosh has pointed out. For example, instead of criticizing Islam, Afghan women who accepted fundamentalist values, rather blamed toxic patriarchy, and corrupt governing for their oppressive treatment and subordinate way of life.<sup>51</sup> Moreover, Islam may have even been a positive force that enabled them to work on dismantling these aforementioned factors of oppression.<sup>52</sup> Nevertheless, the effect that the Taliban's radicalisation of Islam has had on women's rights in Afghanistan should not be downplayed. Their presence has caused a severe obstacle to the rise of women's rights in Afghanistan in the early and mid-nineteen-hundreds. Afghan women who grew up since the nineteen-seventies are still fighting for their lost freedoms due to this dark period of misogyny and violence. More generally, in this chapter I have sought to illustrate that there are plenty of factors that contribute to the inefficacy of preserving women's rights in countries riddled by conflict. It is troubling to realise how ineffectively the rights of women are being preserved in Afghanistan, considering that much international effort has been poured into defining and guaranteeing women's rights globally. For that reason, the next chapter will have a look at what effects international declarations discussing women's rights had on a global level and then reflect these effects on women's rights in Afghanistan.

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<sup>44</sup> *ibid*

<sup>45</sup> Rabha Isa Al-Zeera, 'Violence against Women in Quran 4 :3 4: A Sacred Ordinance?', n.d., 15, 217.

<sup>46</sup> Ahmed-Ghosh, 'A History of Women in Afghanistan: Lessons Learnt for the Future or Yesterdays and Tomorrow: Women in Afghanistan', 8.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid*.8.

<sup>48</sup> Al-Zeera, 'Violence against Women in Quran 4 :3 4: A Sacred Ordinance?', 228.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid*, 229.

<sup>50</sup> 'I Have a Right to; Article 26: Right to Education', BBC World Service, accessed 22 February 2021, [https://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/people/features/ihavearightto/four\\_b/casestudy\\_art26.shtml](https://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/people/features/ihavearightto/four_b/casestudy_art26.shtml).

<sup>51</sup> Ahmed-Ghosh, 'A History of Women in Afghanistan: Lessons Learnt for the Future or Yesterdays and Tomorrow: Women in Afghanistan', 9.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid*.

## Chapter Two

*To what extent have the aims of the international declarations discussing the human rights of women drafted in 1993-2000 been successfully executed by international organisations and how did this impact Afghan women?*

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Since the mid twentieth century four World Women's Conferences have been held internationally, building up the foundations to how to define women's rights, and discussing how the abuses against women's rights should be tackled. Yet, how far have these international meetings trying to define and impose a legal framework for the human rights of women gotten? How effective were they? To answer the sub-question, this chapter will address the aims of international decrees composed between 1993 and 2000. In doing so, I will be taking into account the findings of scholars such as Elizabeth Willmott-Harrop, and M. Chandra-Mouli and collaborators (2015), who discuss both the positive impacts as well as the failures of these decrees. This chapter specifically focuses on the aims and effects of the 1993 Vienna declaration, the 1994 International Conference of Population and development, the 1995 Beijing declaration, and, in particular the Millennium Development Goals. This is because they were drafted during the last World Women's Conference which is long ago enough to be able to critically review the effects these declarations had.

### Women's rights in Black and White

The issue of the equal rights of women has been addressed alongside men's since the 1945 United Nations Charter and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948.<sup>53</sup> For decades now, these rights have been discussed in conferences among member states and international organisations, all with the intention to improve and focus on the needs of women where they are most required. The time and effort that have been put into considering how women's rights should be defined, guaranteed, and operationalized by member states and universal organisations, has undoubtedly left a positive and growing foundation that will continue to improve and help tackle the issue of women's rights. Even so, as we read through key declarations like that of Vienna, the Beijing declaration, the International Conference on Population and Development, and the Millennium Development Goals one realizes soon enough that while neatly written on paper, they do not provide any clues as to how to guarantee such rights in practice.<sup>54</sup> By analysing these acts, I am going to weigh out the positive outcomes but also discuss where the goals have fallen short of realization. This analysis will serve as a point of departure to study how these aims were operationalized in Afghanistan and to determine success or failure there. This analysis also serves to lay a foundation that should enable us to answer the sub-question in chapter three which focusses on which factors determine why women's rights are still not adopted in especially deeply patriarchal societies such as Afghanistan and how these factors should be approached.

### Religious Violence and Cultural Prejudices

#### *The Vienna and the Beijing Declaration:*

The Vienna Declaration and programme of action drafted during the World Conference in 1993, was the first conference to incentivise the preservation and attention on women's human rights.<sup>55</sup> This programme also catalysed the arrangement of a Global Tribunal on Violations of Women's Human Rights.<sup>56</sup> This tribunal allowed women to document their experiences with discrimination and violence, be it religious,

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<sup>53</sup> Elizabeth Willmott-Harrop, 'Has International Human Rights Law Failed Women?', Liberty & Humanity, May 2002, <https://libertyandhumanity.com/themes/womens-rights/has-international-human-rights-law-failed-women/>.

<sup>54</sup> Académie de droit international humanitaire et de droits humains à Genève, *The Situation of Women's Rights 20 Years after the Vienna World Conference on Human Rights.*, 2014, 11.

<sup>55</sup> Académie de droit international humanitaire et de droits humains à Genève, *The Situation of Women's Rights 20 Years after the Vienna World Conference on Human Rights*, 11.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid, 6.

political, or sexual and portrayed the struggles women face throughout their lives all around the world. More importantly, as Professor Charlotte Bunch argues, due to this tribunal women were empowered to represent themselves as not only victims, but activists, enabling them to address and fight for their human rights by standing on the world stage.<sup>57</sup> This allowed other women to speak up about their discriminatory experiences as well. Yet why is speaking up about abuse still such a taboo in most parts of the world and across societies even after the successes of the Vienna and Beijing declarations?

Part of the answer to this question lies in some of the statements of the declarations itself. The main statement I will be focussing on here is that the member states of the conference aimed at “the eradication of any conflicts which may arise between the rights of women and the harmful effects of certain traditional or customary practices, cultural prejudices and religious extremism”.<sup>58</sup> Certain examples of these traditional practices would be child marriage, female circumcision, and honour killings. Valentine Moghadam and Manilee Bagheritari express how difficult it is to decide whether a certain cultural tradition should be preserved if it abuses women’s human rights or if it should be eradicated merely because different societies hold to different moral values.<sup>59</sup> In cases such as these we have a clear example of where the Vienna Declaration and programme of action clashes with UNESCO’s Universal Declaration of Cultural Diversity, which tries to preserve cultural traditions all around the world. Even though these declarations contradict each other both the declaration of Cultural Diversity and the Vienna and Beijing declarations on women’s rights are equally connected to the Universal Declarations of Human rights.<sup>60</sup>

Similarly, the Beijing Declaration which was drafted during the Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995, denounces “discriminatory legislation” and “harmful traditional customary practices”.<sup>61</sup> As stated in point five of this declaration, member states recognized the inequalities women face in terms of cultural discrimination, especially in the developing world. They also emphasized the urgent need of these cultural and traditional customs detrimental to women to be addressed.<sup>62</sup> However, there continues to be a problematic, even irresolvable- overlap between people’s right to “take part in cultural life” while at the same time it is agreed upon that “no one may invoke cultural diversity to infringe upon human rights”.<sup>63</sup> This is because what is considered to be a Human Right’s abuse in one culture is a completely normal, generation old tradition in another. The debate on this seemingly irreconcilable difficulty is addressed by plenty of scholars. Among these is Tom O’Connor who points out that it is mainly non-Western cultural traditions that clash with human rights. Others agree arguing that this is because the “Universal Human Rights Declaration is a western-biased document”. This argument is grounded in the idea that the UHRD not only imposes western values on the rest of the world but disregards other culture’s values.<sup>64</sup> However, O’Connor points out that the argument is more complicated and nuanced than that by pointing at the fact that this declaration was drafted and attended by states all around the world and that its ultimate goal was to emphasize the rights of the individual with the aim of transcending cultural bias.<sup>65</sup>

Be that as it may, the situation on the ground remains as complicated as ever. One major drawback here, as professors Moghadam and Bagheritari rightly stress, is that, the Declaration of Cultural Diversity does not mention women’s equality, participation, or rights.<sup>66</sup> They believe this lack actually reinforces the

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<sup>57</sup> Charlotte Bunch, *Legacy of Vienna: Feminism and Human Rights, International Expert Conference on Vienna + 20*, Vienna, 27 June 2013, p. 2.

<sup>58</sup> OHCHR, ‘Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action’ (United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, 25 June 1993), <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/vienna.aspx>.

<sup>59</sup> Valentine Moghadam and Manilee Bagheritari, ‘Cultures, Conventions, and the Human Rights of Women: Examining the Convention for Safeguarding Intangible Cultural Heritage, and the Declaration on Cultural Diversity’, *Museum International* 59, no. 4 (December 2007): 9.

<sup>60</sup> Susan Moller Okin, ‘Feminism, Women’s Human Rights, and Cultural Differences’, *Hypatia* 13, no. 2 (1998): 33.

<sup>61</sup> OHCHR, ‘Women’s Rights Are Human Rights’, 14.

<sup>62</sup> ‘Report of the Fourth World Conference on Women: Beijing, 4 - 15 September 1995’ (New York, 1996), 2.

<sup>63</sup> Moghadam and Bagheritari, ‘Cultures, Conventions, and the Human Rights of Women’, 15.

<sup>64</sup> Tom O’Connor, ‘Debating Human Rights – Universal or Relative to Culture?’, *DevelopmentEducation.Ie* (blog), 11 February 2014, <https://developmenteducation.ie/blog/2014/02/debating-human-rights-universal-or-relative-to-culture/>.

<sup>65</sup> O’Connor, ‘Debating Human Rights – Universal or Relative to Culture?’

<sup>66</sup> Moghadam and Bagheritari, ‘Cultures, Conventions, and the Human Rights of Women’, 15.

proliferation of cultural traditions that encourage gendered violence and abuse the human rights of women.<sup>67</sup> One example of unequal roles between men and women in certain societies due to traditional cultural practices would be discouraging girls from going to school, therefore robbing them of opportunities to grow intellectually, to build a career and be independent. Nor are such cases few and far between. Even in the case of countries that generally support, advocate for and promote women's rights avidly, many such states still justify the infringement of women's rights (such as denying girls' access to education) by stating that their roles as mothers and wives is more important within their own cultural community, arguing that therefore such women do not need schooling if they will not enter the workforce.<sup>68</sup> The member states of international organisations, drafting declarations like that of Vienna and Beijing in an effort to improve women's rights, are unlikely to be successful when it comes to putting them into practice if they also back up the abuses of said rights under certain cultural circumstances. To be successful in approaching women's rights in a culturally sensitive way, member states should instead "challenge discriminatory and oppressive aspects of culture while retaining its positive aspects" because compromising women's rights is not an option.<sup>69</sup>

### *Political and cultural discrimination against Afghan women*

As stated in the previous chapter, Afghan women became increasingly more marginalized from the rest of society during the rule of the Taliban, as most of their rights were gradually stripped off of them to the point where they were not even able to leave the house without a man or wearing a burqa. During this process, cultural practices, especially those who were harmful towards women, became normalized within Afghan society. Marriage became a transaction marked by cultural traditions where girls had little option but to follow their patriarch's orders.<sup>70</sup> For a telling example of the consequences produced by discriminatory customs one may refer to the evocative portrayal of this in *To Kill a Sparrow*, a documentary hosted by Zohreh Soleimani, an Iranian photojournalist. She specifically touches upon the vicious cycle of discriminatory cultural and tribal traditions. In the documentary, Soleimani comes across a woman named Soheila who is sitting in prison with her baby boy after committing a so-called "moral crime". Long story short, Soheila's brother stole a wife of a seventy-year-old man, and in exchange, Soheila's father betrothed her to the old man when she was five. This is a practice also known as "Baad" where patriarchs attempt to solve a dispute between families by giving away a female family member to the victim in order to protect their honour. By the time she was of age, Soheila ran off and had a child with the man she loved, Niaz Mohammad, thus betraying her family's honour. The inevitable result: she was brought to prison by her own father the moment she was found.<sup>71</sup> Unfortunately this situation mirrors the stories of thousands of other Afghan women facing domestic abuse imposed upon them by their fathers, and brothers who justify their deeds by claiming their position of superiority is written out for them in the Koran.<sup>72</sup> Yet, what is particularly salient about this documentary is that it was made between 2011 and 2013, that is over a decade after the Taliban regime ceased to be a factor of detrimental political importance. What this indicates is that although Afghan Civil law by 2004 allowed women to legally have the freedom to choose whom they could marry, and various acts of violence against women were subsequently banned by President Hamid Karzai in 2009, the violent customary practices prevalent during the Taliban rule continued to hamper the lives of Afghan women and to haunt the country.<sup>73</sup>

Due to the fact that the violent, misogynistic cultural practices that the Taliban have instilled onto the Afghan population are still very prevalent in parts of Afghanistan today, it has made the West believe that

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> OHCHR, 'Women's Rights Are Human Rights', 28; Ani Sarkissian, 'Why (Some) States Use Religion to Justify Violence', *Washington Post*, accessed 26 March 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2015/01/20/why-some-states-use-religion-to-justify-violence/>.

<sup>69</sup> OHCHR, 'Women's Rights Are Human Rights', 28.

<sup>70</sup> Olga Shalygin, *Afghanistan: Cut From Different Cloth - Burqas and Beliefs* (RedDoor Video Productions, 2005), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iLOApVOSFuk>.

<sup>71</sup> Soleimani, *Thousands Of Afghan Women Jailed For 'Moral Crimes'*.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> 'The Eye-Watering Truth About the Taliban's War on Women' (Journeyman TV, 17 September 2013), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iSV7vPN99w4>.

child marriage and honour killings have always been a big part of Islamic culture. Therefore, some people in the West argue that it would not be right to ban or denounce these acts just because they do not adhere to western values.<sup>74</sup> This is a major misconception of Islam and the Middle East according to *Global Connections Middle East* by the Public Broadcasting Service. Professor Fatemah AlBader expressed that we should learn to recognise that, in Afghanistan, oppressive acts towards women such as honour killings are only practiced in a small number of regions by particular tribes. It is not a widely popular custom among Muslim Afghans of which the majority find these practices unacceptable.<sup>75</sup> Culture, customs, and traditions institutionalising the normalisation of the oppression of women are not a distinct part of the religion of Islam.

Shukria Khaliqi, a legal advisor heading the gender-based violence department for the NGO Women for Afghan Women in Kabul debunks the western misconception and confusion between Afghan cultures and the Islamic religion. She stated that although Ba'ad is a very common practice, "it is not based on Afghan Law or Shariah Law". Therefore, backing up oppressive aspects of cultural traditions undermines Afghan civil law. According to women's lawyer, Gul Ghutai, Afghan civil law allows Afghan women older than sixteen years to marry whomever they want, without their parent's permission- it is only that cultures and traditions have been allowed to overpower civil law.<sup>76</sup> Understanding the misconceptions and stereotypes on what oppressive, cultural, and religious traditions are, is significant because it means they are too complex to brand onto a whole country. It furthermore supports the UN's idea to challenge the oppressive aspects of cultures while retaining the positive aspects.<sup>77</sup> Consequently, the argument towards preserving certain cultures and traditions that actively oppress women with the knowledge that only small groups in certain provinces practice this, is counterproductive. It distorts the values, cultures and traditions that are practiced by the majority of the Afghan Muslim population. Debunking the misconceptions of Afghan culture, religion and politics will be further elaborated in the following chapter.

## Gender Equality and Reproductive Rights

### *International Conference on Population Development and the Millennium Development Goals*

Set up in 1994 in Cairo with participating delegates from a plethora of governments, UN agencies and NGOs, this conference, though not primarily concerned with the rights of women, was of major significance toward recognising women's rights as inalienable. With the sole focus on women, its Programme of Action sought to advance gender equality by means of improving the socioeconomic status of poor women in developed and developing countries.<sup>78</sup> This is because poor women, especially in developing countries usually have a lower status and are more likely to be treated unequally. The Conference suggested that this issue can be addressed by providing easier access to education and designing the curriculum in a way that strengthens the respect for human rights and freedoms as well as particularly focusing on establishing equitable access to education on the part of women and the girl child as stated in Principle Ten of the declaration.<sup>79</sup> Alongside education, the Conference recognised that the elimination of sexual violence against women and preserving their reproductive rights, was a high priority in order to improve the development of the population.<sup>80</sup> Yet have these aspirations been successful?

Certain aspirations by the International Conference on Population Development have been met with successes when it came to providing better access to education for girls as well as taking better action towards addressing women's reproductive rights. One successful goal that was reached concerned sexual

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<sup>74</sup> Global Connections: The Middle East, 'What Are Some Typical Misperceptions and Stereotypes Westerners Hold about Islam and the Middle East, and Vice Versa?', PBS, accessed 4 April 2021, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/globalconnections/mideast/questions/types/index.html>.

<sup>75</sup> Fatemah AlBader, 'Cultural Oppression Disguised as Religious Obligation: A Fatal Misrepresentation to the Advancement of Muslim Women's Rights in the Context of the So-Called Honor Killings' 24 (2020): 1.

<sup>76</sup> Soleimani, *Thousands Of Afghan Women Jailed For 'Moral Crimes'*.

<sup>77</sup> Global Connections: The Middle East, 'What Are Some Typical Misperceptions and Stereotypes Westerners Hold about Islam and the Middle East, and Vice Versa?'

<sup>78</sup> 'Report of the International Conference on Population and Development: Cairo, 5-13 September 1994' (International Conference on Population and Development, New York: United Nations, 1995), 18

<sup>79</sup> 'Report of the International Conference on Population and Development', 13.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid, 12.

violence. The article by Chandra-Mouli (*et.al*) suggested that teaching respect between boys and girls by means of promoting gender-equitability within a community, and not tolerating violence at school were effective approaches to prevent gender-based violence, especially concerning violence between intimate partners.<sup>81</sup> Furthermore, there was a decrease in births by young adolescents since sexual and health education has become more prominent in the education system. This decrease also lowered mortality rates during birth as younger adolescents within the ages of nineteen and younger, are more likely to die during childbirth or experience a still birth.<sup>82</sup> Moreover, this Conference, initiated more programmes to build up an increased number of supportive health services that are specialised to the needs of younger women.<sup>83</sup>

Similar successes concerning women's educational and reproductive rights can be witnessed by the Millennium Development Goals (MDG). The MDG was hosted by 189 countries in 2000, composed a variety of goals to improve reproductive and educational rights for women. It aimed to eradicate extreme poverty, improve maternal and fertility rights, and combat sexually transmitted diseases such as AIDS.<sup>84</sup> More specifically, MGD looked towards working up to equality, and empowerment of women through education as well as incentivising their focus on maternal safety.<sup>85</sup> Goal number 5 states that participants to the Conference wanted to achieve universal access to reproductive health in 2015 as well as lower maternal mortality rates by three quarters between 1990 and 2015.<sup>86</sup> In this, the MDG has been successful in that since it was drafted the rates of women dying due to childbirth had decreased globally by forty-five percent according to *Maternity Worldwide*. Statistically, these numbers seem to show that we are on the right track towards women's empowerment, equality, and maternal safety.

Despite these seemingly substantial successes brought about by both the International Conference in Cairo and the Millennium Development Goals, there are several major drawbacks that accompany those achievements. For one, the Programme of Action on Population and Development only has its successes attributed to the developed world. The goals reached by the MDG meet a similar pattern, as while maternal survival substantially improved, a great percentage of the fifty-one per cent of countries that have data on maternal cause of death are developed countries.<sup>87</sup> Additionally, especially women in rural areas of developing countries are less likely to receive or seek professional medical assistance during birth, due to poverty, religion or lack of means for transportation.<sup>88</sup> Essentially, when these international decrees are reviewed, more focus seems to be placed on presenting huge statistical successes at the cost of placing attention and discussions toward why developing countries fail to reach the goals of these declarations targeting the improvement of women's rights.

Because of this stigma to provide break throughs and present milestones as soon as possible the developing world is still flailing behind first world countries, in terms of improving the employment of women's rights in spite of the efforts made during international gatherings of hundreds of heads of states and NGOs, to discuss how these rights should be addressed. It almost seems like more emphasis is placed on publishing the successes on the date they are due rather than working up to achieving their goals on women's equality, equity, reproductive rights, and educational rights at a pace that is more gradual and therefore more achievable. NATO's former Resident Senior Civilian Representative of Kabul, Maurits Jochems has reiterated that the deadlines given to such goals is often realistically too short of a time period to be successfully reached.<sup>89</sup> Therefore, providing longer timeframes, especially in developing countries, to reach aims set in declarations such as the MDG may provide better successes in the long run as well as benefit

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid, 55.

<sup>82</sup> Venkatraman Chandra-Mouli et al., 'Twenty Years After International Conference on Population and Development: Where Are We with Adolescent Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights?', *Journal of Adolescent Health*, International Conference on Population and Development, 56, no. 1, Supplement (1 January 2015): 4.

<sup>83</sup> Chandra-Mouli et al., 'Twenty Years After International Conference on Population and Development', 5.

<sup>84</sup> 'Millennium Development Goal 5 - Results', *Maternity Worldwide*, accessed 22 March 2021, <https://www.maternityworldwide.org/the-issues/achieving-mdg-5-the-facts/>.

<sup>85</sup> OHCHR, 'Women's Rights Are Human Rights', 15.

<sup>86</sup> 'Millennium Development Goal 5 - Results'.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

<sup>89</sup> Jochems, Insight into the NATO Senior Civilian Representative's experiences in Afghanistan.

the targeted population. In the end of the day, although developed countries deserve the acknowledgement on the improvements in their employment of women's rights, this should not compromise or push back how women's rights are developing in third world countries or countries of conflict. These days, NGOs and member states have started to recognise that achieving their aims on eradicating women's rights abuses take more time, however, we will have to examine in what follows, the effects of how these approaches on improving educational and reproductive rights have affected Afghanistan.

### *Reproductive and Educational Rights in Afghanistan*

After decades of conflict and instability, raging poverty, and the dreading spread of fundamentalism, Afghanistan is a prime example of a developing state and a good test case for us to examine whether the international goals aimed at improving educational and reproductive rights for women have made a difference. Over the years, international organisations have tried to arrange for better access to educational facilities, by making them free and available for children, especially girls, of all economic and tribal backgrounds, and they have been relatively successful. Overall, literacy rates for girls, seem to have risen in Afghanistan since 1979. More specifically the UNESCO Institute of statistics provides a clear overview of the development of literacy rates for three groups; men and women that are 15 years and older, men and women between the years 15 and 24, and men and women 65 years and older. All show that between the years 1979 and 2018 literacy rates have risen for all, most prominently the younger generation of women between the ages of 15 and 24 who in 1979 only had a literacy rate of eleven per cent. This increased to fifty-six per cent by 2018.<sup>90</sup> The staggering rise in literacy rates for Afghan women could be interpreted as a success for the MDG and International Conference of Population and Development. Even so, things are not as rosy as they seem, as there are still at least twelve million Afghans who are completely uneducated, women are still significantly less literate than men, and the number of illiterates has also risen as the population grew over the past decades.<sup>91</sup> Moreover, while attacks by the Taliban on school facilities and assassinations of teachers have gradually decreased after 2011, according to Barnett Rubin and Clancy Rudeforth, the Taliban are still very reluctant to allow the girls to go to school in their areas even if they had announced that they were more accepting.<sup>92</sup> The available figures have shown that, although attendance of girls in schools has been notably higher, 3.7 million children are still out of school and sixty per cent of them are girls.<sup>93</sup> While educational rights for girls have been improving in Afghanistan, it is most certainly going to take a long time for the number of educated women to increase after such a tumultuous few decades.

A similar observation can be made in terms of the development of reproductive rights for Afghan women. The number of maternal deaths have, according to the statistics published by the Maternal Mortality Estimation Inter-Agency Group, decreased by fifty-one per cent between the years 2000 and 2017.<sup>94</sup> This number would suggest that reproductive rights are improving. Yet, according to the World Health Organisation there is barely any data available on the national level of Maternal mortality.<sup>95</sup> Moreover, the United Nations had stated that at least one region in Afghanistan had, in 2009, one of the highest maternal death rates in the world.<sup>96</sup> Mohammad H. Rasooly and collaborators (2015) explained that women's rights in reproductive and maternal care will continue to be limited because of the continuous destruction of health care facilities and as long as education is inadequate and poverty remains prevalent.<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> UNESCO Institute of Statistics, 'Statistics on Education in Afghanistan', 27 November 2016, <http://uis.unesco.org/country/AF>.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

<sup>92</sup> Barnett Rubin and Clancy Rudeforth, 'Enhancing Access to Education: Challenges and Opportunities in Afghanistan', *Centre on International Cooperation*, May 2016, 9.

<sup>93</sup> 'Education: Providing Quality Education for All', UNICEF, 2016, <https://www.unicef.org/afghanistan/education>.

<sup>94</sup> Maternal Mortality Estimation Inter-Agency Group, 'Afghanistan: Maternal Mortality in 2000-2017' (WHO, 2019), [https://www.who.int/gho/maternal\\_health/countries/afg.pdf](https://www.who.int/gho/maternal_health/countries/afg.pdf).

<sup>95</sup> Maternal Mortality Estimation Inter-Agency Group, 'Afghanistan: Maternal Mortality in 2000-2017'.

<sup>96</sup> 'Afghanistan: Using Religious Values to Advance Women's Rights', *UN in Action* (United Nations Television, 2 July 2009), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=spLMMpzA22E>.

<sup>97</sup> Mohammad H Rasooly et al., 'Uptake and Predictors of Contraceptive Use in Afghan Women', *BMC Women's Health* 15, no. 1 (December 2015): 9.

The majority of the Afghans live in rural areas and it is the rural areas where education is low and fundamentalist ideals are high. Women generally do not have a say in decision making and have little to zero authority in most conservative and poverty-stricken households.<sup>98</sup>

## Conclusion

All in all, while these declarations create a good foundation for improving women's rights, the Afghan example shows that their impact remains limited in those cases where no further measures are taken, or if too little time is given to implement them properly. International conferences, and aid from member states, are crucial for helping shattered countries like Afghanistan, yet whether they succeed in improving women's rights in the country have often been determined by statistics such as how many hospitals and educational facilities have been built instead of the quality of health care and education for women and children. Additionally, in the case of Afghanistan specifically, the growth of reproductive and educational rights has been stunted due to the recurring influence of fundamentalists such as the Taliban. Lastly, cultural violence against women has also become a dilemma between what international organisations and member states believe accounts for cultural norms that should be preserved and what customs should be denounced as human rights abuses. Confronting this dilemma is extremely important so that the situation for women in Afghanistan can be improved.

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<sup>98</sup> Rasooly et al., 'Uptake and Predictors of Contraceptive Use in Afghan Women'.

## Chapter Three

### *“Which factors currently affect the employment of Afghan women’s rights and what approach needs to be taken to improve Afghanistan’s adoption of these rights?”*

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In many ways through the acknowledgement of women’s rights written in the declarations stated above, the UN has been somewhat successful in helping improve the situation of women and their rights in Afghanistan. Just by looking at sheer numbers, there has been an increase in the representation of Afghan women in government, law firms, hospitals, and schools. Additionally, there is an acknowledgment that violence against women is a crime by Afghan civil law. Yet, Afghanistan is still deemed the most dangerous country for women in the world. Would a more localised approach towards how we understand and project women in Afghanistan be the next step to improving the employment of their rights? In this chapter I will address the national and then international factors that have hampered women’s rights in Afghanistan and discuss what should be tackled to turn these problems into solutions towards improving the adoption of these rights.

### National Factors Impeding Afghan Women’s Rights

#### Failure of the Government to implement Afghan Civil Law

As we have seen in chapter two, certain women’s rights abuses, be they through cultural traditions, educational or reproductive means, have been classified as human rights violations and recognised universally, yet the execution of human rights has proven to be flawed and the desired outcomes have not been achieved in many of the targeted countries. The Bonn Agreement states that the UN promised to preserve and further women’s rights in Afghanistan while the provisional government was still in the process of drafting its official constitution.<sup>99</sup> In 2008, Professor Mohammad Hashim Kamali stated that, for violations against women to be taken more seriously, the new Afghan constitution would have to more thoroughly elaborate on the concept of women’s rights for them to be better understood as well as the government would have to make significant reforms on existing laws and gender equality clauses to be implemented properly.<sup>100</sup> In Afghanistan in 2009, Hamid Karzai passed the law on the Elimination of Violence Against Women (EVAW) which was supposed to criminalize abuse against women at the hands of cultural traditions. Today, eighty-seven per cent of Afghan women still experience cultural and domestic abuse on a daily basis and the laws are barely ever instigated.<sup>101</sup> One of the reasons why this law is ineffective lies in the weakness of the government. A clear example of this weakness can be presented in the shape of Karzai’s other policies made in 2009, not long after the EVAW was passed. In that same year, Karzai also passed a law that accepted Shia women to be treated as second class citizens, only allowing them certain freedoms under the authority of the men in their household.<sup>102</sup> He did this for electoral gain and support of more fundamentalist groups according to the *Human Rights Watch*. This shows that, almost a decade after the defeat of the Taliban, ambivalence was still raging, thus stagnating the employment of women’s rights.<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> UN Security Council, ‘Agreement on Provisional Arrangements in Afghanistan Pending the Re-Establishment of Permanent Government Institutions.’ (Afghanistan Centre at Kabul University, 2002), 5. [https://doi.org/10.29171/azu\\_acku\\_pamphlet\\_hv555\\_a3\\_a444\\_2002](https://doi.org/10.29171/azu_acku_pamphlet_hv555_a3_a444_2002).

<sup>100</sup> Mohammad Hashim Kamali, ‘References to Islam and Women in the Afghan Constitution’, *Arab Law Quarterly* 22, no. 3 (2008):

<sup>101</sup> “‘Violence Starts at Home’: The Afghan Women Tackling Domestic Abuse at Its Source”, *The Guardian*, 29 January 2021, sec. Global development, <http://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2021/jan/29/violence-starts-at-home-the-afghan-women-tackling-domestic-abuse-at-its-source>.

<sup>102</sup> Human Rights Watch, ‘Afghanistan: Law Curbing Women’s Rights Takes Effect’, *Reuters*, 13 August 2009, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2009/08/13/afghanistan-law-curbing-womens-rights-takes-effect>.

<sup>103</sup> Human Rights Watch, ‘Afghanistan’.

Moreover, as we have seen in chapter one, Afghanistan has a history of not doing well with ambitious changes or laws set by heads of state, especially if foreign influences or actors are involved.<sup>104</sup> One crucial reason why many Afghans find it challenging to adhere to Afghan civil law, especially when it concerns the progression of women's rights is precisely because they affiliate it with foreign, secular notions of what civil rights and laws should be. As pointed out in the first chapter, many Afghans preferred to follow their religious leaders, revolting against the progressive reforms that the Afghan monarchy tried to enforce over the course of the twentieth century. Because they deemed the king's reforms un-Islamic, the ulema, being a still very powerful and influential group in Afghanistan today, believed that the new government and constitution was ineffective as well as un-Islamic. This is partially due to the president's lenience with letting foreign international forces stay in their country.<sup>105</sup> Kamali as well as professors Mohammad Hasham Mohmond and Don Hill emphasised the significance of the Ulema Council which host parliamentary assemblies called the *Loya Jirga*. To this day, the ulema follow and make decisions according to the ancient, unwritten tribal, cultural, and traditional laws known as the *Pashtunwali*. Because Afghanistan experienced one weak, violent, unstable, and corrupt government after the other as well as an everlasting war on terror, they preferred finding security and stability under the concept of the tribal council in their local communities.

While women's rights are acknowledged in Afghan Civil Law, the *Pashtunwali* often contradict or overrule some of these laws, especially if restoring honour is involved.<sup>106</sup> Honour is a predominant concept in these tribal laws. It is all about gaining respect by building up strong relationships within and with other families. There are times where honour needs to be restored in order to guarantee a person's reputation is good and respectful among the local community. Oftentimes this restoring of honour involves a woman of the family becoming the victim either by her being forcefully married off regardless of her age or killed in the name of honour if she refuses to marry. This is a tradition also known as *Ba'ad*.<sup>107</sup> Soheila, whose story has been presented in the previous chapter, explained that, if found by her father, she would be killed for tainting her families' honour because she attempted to divorce the man she was forced to marry and ran off with her lover.<sup>108</sup> Even though murdering to restore honour would go against civil law, Soheila explained that her father, just like numerous other Afghans, prefers to respect and follow tribal law rather than adhere to the civil constitution- something that is further compounded by the fact that they all know that they would unlikely face federal consequences.<sup>109</sup> Unfortunately, with a weak government who lets women get abused, murdered and jailed for "moral crimes" while leaving the perpetrators unscathed, the tribal system of law would continue to overrule and devalue the constitutional laws. Women's human rights will continue to be abused.

## Madrasas and their impact on women's rights

Alongside the corruption and distrust towards the government, there is yet another major factor, that contributes to the continuation of misogynistic and harmful tribal codes such as *Ba'ad* within Afghan society. That factor is education. Even though the enrolment of girls in schools is now higher than ever before, thanks to the help of foreign aid, as indicated by Mallory Walton's statistical research on this, she has to admit that much of progress still needs to be made.<sup>110</sup> One serious problem here, that often goes unnoticed, is that most schools in Afghanistan are community based, localised and sometimes unofficial madrasas. Madrasas are schools that teach a traditional, Islamic form of education.<sup>111</sup> Because madrasas have been a part of Afghan society since the tenth century, many Afghans trust bringing their children into those schools rather than educational facilities built and controlled under foreign influence. While

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<sup>104</sup> Nafay Choudhury, 'The Localised Madrasas of Afghanistan: Their Political and Governance Entanglements', *Religion, State and Society* 45, no. 2 (3 April 2017): 120.

<sup>105</sup> Nawabi, Zaman, and Wardak, 'The Role and Functions of Religious Civil Society in Afghanistan', 19.

<sup>106</sup> Hamid M Khan, 'Islamic Law, Customary Law, and Afghan Informal Justice', *United States Institute of Peace*, Special Report, March 2015, 7.

<sup>107</sup> Khan, 'Islamic Law, Customary Law, and Afghan Informal Justice', 3.

<sup>108</sup> Soleimani, *Thousands Of Afghan Women Jailed For 'Moral Crimes'*.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid.

<sup>110</sup> Mallory Walton, 'Analyzing Girl's Access to Education in Afghanistan: A Tale of Gender Disparity', *Small Wars Journal*, 12 March 2018.

<sup>111</sup> Choudhury, 'The Localised Madrasas of Afghanistan'.122.

indeed more girls have enrolled in schools, their quality of education still remains low. This is because they usually only learn how to recite Qur'anic verses and are orally taught all other Islamically based subjects.<sup>112</sup> They are therefore unable to read or write, let alone think or question their teachings critically. This is a problem for a variety of reasons. For one, in Northern Afghanistan, the Taliban have used their power over teachers and schools in the rural areas they occupy to instil fundamentalist ideals, thus continuing the cycle of normalising the subordination of girls and women with the justification that it is “written in the Qur'an”.<sup>113</sup>

Outside of Taliban occupied regions, Islamic education also has its drawbacks. As female Afghan activist and university Professor Nasrine Gross, has pointed out, a very small minority of Afghans has ever read the Qur'an, which is originally written in Arabic, a language most Afghans have not mastered.<sup>114</sup> Therefore the majority of Afghans have never actually read the words of God and are easily swayed by mullahs and the ulema who teach and preach to them in mosques and madrasas. In reality, numerous religious leaders know just as little about the actual words of God.<sup>115</sup> Because religious leaders are much respected, undereducated Afghans do not typically question them when such leaders maintain that the Qur'an states that God made men superior to women. Therefore, they believe that men are justifiably allowed to be violent against women if they are being disobedient, or, alternatively, when such leaders claim that marriage is just a contract between men of two households in which the woman has no say at all. Professor Hamid M. Khan has suggested that an effective way to overcome this cycle of justifying women's abuse in the name of Islam would be a) educate the religious leaders about Islamic law and b) involve them as independent figures within the Afghan justice system. Because the Afghan population trusts and respects religious leaders more than the government to place civil laws and teach morals, it would be vital to enlist them if one is to carry out new, more progressive reforms.<sup>116</sup>

Importantly, we know of examples where a policy that aims at involving religious authorities can bring about societal change. This happened when the educated mullahs were enlisted for the purposes of teaching men and boys to protect the health and rights of their women. Their aim was to reverse the legacy of conflict and poverty that had traumatized and influenced Afghans so much.<sup>117</sup> They do this by emphasizing the positive aspects of Afghan culture. One of the most important ones, is maintaining a strong, and happy family. The key is a healthy mother, because the matriarch is known to be an important figure in the private life of the household.<sup>118</sup> They do this by discussing the harm that can be caused to women if they have to go through child marriage, domestic violence and are denied care. Through religious teachings, they stress how the Qur'an denounces such abuse against women.<sup>119</sup> Moreover, to tackle violence at home these mullahs taught their community anger management skills and how to resolve family conflicts peacefully.<sup>120</sup> Incentives like this have already proven to be effective on a local scale. As soon as such initiatives would be encouraged and aided to spread across the country, it stands to reason that this would vastly improve the treatment of women and their rights as well as quash, or at least challenge fundamentalist teachings. However, it is also up to the western media to adjust their portrayal of Afghanistan, and especially Afghan women, as well as it is important for international organisations such as the UN to reform their approach towards women's rights, to help improve their implementation in developing countries like Afghanistan.

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<sup>112</sup> Ibid.

<sup>113</sup> Ella O'Neill, 'The Rise Of Fundamentalist Madrassas In Northern Afghanistan', Culture Trip, accessed 25 April 2021, <https://theculturetrip.com/asia/afghanistan/articles/the-rise-of-fundamentalist-madrassas-in-northern-afghanistan/>.

<sup>114</sup> Al Jazeera English, *The War On Afghan Women 101 East*, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0kVjzhy93o>.

<sup>115</sup> Al Jazeera English, *The War On Afghan Women 101 East*.

<sup>116</sup> Khan, 'Islamic Law, Customary Law, and Afghan Informal Justice', 11.

<sup>117</sup> United Nations, *Afghanistan: Using Religious Values to Advance Women's Rights*, 2009, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=spLMMpzA22E>.

<sup>118</sup> Karoline Tørhølen Kristensen, 'Gender and Security: Afghan Rural Women's Participation in Local Conflict Resolution' (Norwegian University of Life Sciences, 2016), 45.

<sup>119</sup> 'Afghanistan: Using Religious Values to Advance Women's Rights', *UN in Action* (United Nations Television, 2 July 2009), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=spLMMpzA22E>.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid.

## International (mis)representation of Afghan women

### Western Media

Western media has a huge impact in moulding the perception of Afghanistan and its community on an international scale. Yet, little is done to portray the struggles of Afghan women and their rights in a correct light which has also been damaging to the progression of women's rights in the country, contends Professor Saumava Mitra. There is one particular way the mainstream media in the West has distorted and damaged the image of Afghanistan and its women. Namely by using women only as symbols of oppression, misrepresenting their actual struggles and needs through cultural insensitivity and lack of historical knowledge.<sup>121</sup> While not so many women have a say over how they want to lead their life within Afghanistan, they have just as little control over how they want their issues and abuse to be addressed by western influences. When did this misrepresentation first appear and how does the western approach need to change in order to aid Afghan women in their mission to be able to safely exercise their human rights?

This misperception first appeared when the West became more involved with Afghanistan's power and politics ever since the end of the Taliban regime and the War on Terror was initiated by the Bush administration. The US, has justified their deployment of troops onto Afghanistan's terrain by explaining that they were there to 'liberate' Afghan women.<sup>122</sup> Professor Mitra explains that the visual representations of these Afghan women had a big part on how it shaped Western audiences' perception of these women and the country as a whole.<sup>123</sup> The most prominent image concerned the veiling or 'unveiling' of the Afghan woman signifying their liberation.<sup>124</sup> Consequentially, this image has caused western audiences to uniformly perceive Afghan women as the victims oppressed by the tide of Islam. This perception distorts the reality of female Afghan suppression according to both Mitra and Kim Berry. In accordance with Berry, who also discusses the "lifting of the veil" depiction by *Time* magazine, this diverts people from the focus of the root problem, origins and causes of the conflict.<sup>125</sup> These misrepresentations have often misinformed the public about the status of Afghan women, triggering an emotional response by the public against Islam, while neglecting the actual origins of certain gender-oppressive traditions. The West has often approached the issues in Afghanistan by imposing their own values. This stems from the belief that imposing western values is the only way for women's rights to progress, when they should have tailored their approach according to the local population.

The situation is made worse by the fact that there is a general lack of knowledge in the Western world about Afghan history and culture. Professor Sonali Kolhatkar argues how much the historical background as well as lifestyles of Afghans differ from that of the West.<sup>126</sup> Taking education as an example, the western media have often associated all madrasas with fundamentalism, while if researched properly, we learn that they hold an important place in Afghan society and are certainly not all fundamentalist just because they are taught under the realms of Islam.<sup>127</sup> Spreading such misinformation continues to disillusion Afghans from the West and their values, which will make it more difficult for them to want to cooperate with western influences especially in terms of improving women's rights if they continue to be culturally insensitive.<sup>128</sup> A better approach by the western media towards improving Afghan women's rights is to let them speak up for themselves. While most of the attention so far has been directed towards symbolising Afghan women as oppressed and helpless victims, little recognition has been given to the growing number of educated female activists, lawyers, and politicians who used their cultural and historical knowledge that enabled them to express exactly what their country needs and how Afghanistan should change to improve the employment of their rights.

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<sup>121</sup> Sonali Kolhatkar, 'Afghan Women: Enduring American "Freedom"', Institute for Policy Studies, 1 November 2002, [https://ips-dc.org/afghan\\_women\\_enduring\\_american\\_freedom/](https://ips-dc.org/afghan_women_enduring_american_freedom/).

<sup>122</sup> Saumava Mitra, "Picturing Afghan Women" for Western Audiences: The Afghan Perspective', *Journalism* 21, no. 6 (1 June 2020): 801.

<sup>123</sup> Mitra, "Picturing Afghan Women" for Western Audiences', 802.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid.

<sup>125</sup> Kim Berry, 'The Symbolic Use of Afghan Women in the War on Terror', *Humboldt Journal of Social Relations* 27, no. 2 (2003): 155.

<sup>126</sup> Kolhatkar, 'Afghan Women'.

<sup>127</sup> Choudhury, 'The Localised Madrasas of Afghanistan', 120.

<sup>128</sup> Kolhatkar, 'Afghan Women'.

## Afghan Activists, the United Nations and Women in Leadership Roles

Among other international organisations, the UN has argued that it is essentially up to the Afghans, especially leaders, to work with each other and help implement women's human, political, economic, reproductive, and educational rights. Yet, there have been many Afghan women in leadership positions who have achieved milestones in progressing women's rights, which they were never even able to conceive of, under the Taliban regime. Fawzia Koofi for example has been in politics as an MP since 2005 and even ran for president. She continues to build up a society where women are treated equally.<sup>129</sup> Moreover, various Afghan men and women have set up impressive local NGOs such as Women for Afghan Women to help create a safer environment for women to exercise their rights. WAW helped female Afghan activists, such as Najia Sadiq, manage law firms providing women safer and fairer divorce procedures as well as set up secret shelters to take mothers and children away from their abusive environment.<sup>130</sup> Many more Afghan women have taken to social media running hashtags like #whereismyname which addresses the many women who are banned by their patriarchs from sharing their names in public, even in emergency situations, and #myredline, promoting awareness towards the basic human rights that Afghan women are still struggling to obtain.<sup>131</sup> In spite of such progresses, women taking on leading roles in their professions and initiating change in countries that are ravaged by perpetual conflict do not have that much power to be heard nor do they receive the respect they need from their people to progress.<sup>132</sup> Afghan women actively participating in women's rights face a lot of backlash from their communities, especially death threats and a fair share of assassination attempts by fundamentalists and more radical Afghans who are not willing to change their customs or the way they handle women. This violent abuse, be it sexual, psychological, or physical has discouraged most women from taking action to defend their rights. This only helps the media feed into their portrayal as helpless victims. Therefore, in order for Afghan female activists and leaders to successfully improve the employment of their human rights, they seek financial aid and security from international organisations, in particular the UN.

The UN has promised to make sure women's rights are upheld through resolution 1325, thus, it is also their responsibility to help Afghan women to keep and gain leading positions so that they can further protect their rights.<sup>133</sup> Targeting countries of conflict, resolution 1325, which was drafted in 2000, aimed to tackle gender inequality in politics, ensured that women were given enough security as well as justice if they were physically or sexually abused.<sup>134</sup> Unfortunately, just like the declarations mentioned in the previous chapter, major components of this resolution have failed to be put into practice. While, like the MDG it has been successful in numbers, as can be seen within Afghanistan's parliaments which held up to 69 female MPs, these women hold little influence in decision-making, therefore "gender equality in political leadership" is still not reached.<sup>135</sup> Professor Donald Steinberg contends that the cause of its mismanagement may be a combination of underfunding of the project and lack of coordination between the three different offices in charge. A larger problem is the absence of women in the highest leading roles within the UN.<sup>136</sup> This is a shame, as scholars such as Dr. Louann Brizendine have shown how placing skilled women in leading positions constitutes to alternative, more emotional and inclusive approaches toward solving problems.<sup>137</sup> Having more women as senior leaders in charge of maintaining women's rights will constitute to increased targeted action taken to tend to the needs of these women in countries of conflict as they are more likely to better understand and address the specific issues revolving around

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<sup>129</sup> Al Jazeera English, *The War On Afghan Women 101 East*, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0kVjzhy93o>.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid.

<sup>131</sup> Mahjooba Nowrouzi, 'WhereIsMyName: Afghan Women Campaign for the Right to Reveal Their Names', *BBC News*, 24 July 2020, sec. Asia, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-53436335>.

<sup>132</sup> Pillai, Wang, and Maleku, 'Women, War, and Reproductive Health in Developing Countries', 39.

<sup>133</sup> UN Security Council, 'Women's Rights Must Not Be Sacrificed during Political Deal-Making in Afghanistan, Civil Society Expert Warns Security Council amid Calls to End Bloodshed', 2019, <https://www.un.org/press/en/2019/sc13900.doc.htm>.

<sup>134</sup> UN Security Council, 'Women Suffer Disproportionately during and after War, Security Council Told during Day-Long Debate on Women, Peace and Security'.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid.

<sup>136</sup> Steinberg, 'Protection and Participation'.

<sup>137</sup> Louann Brizendine, 'How Men and Women Lead Differently' (Barbara Annis and Associated Inc.), 1.

gender inequality.<sup>138</sup> In Afghanistan, a more inclusive approach would entail giving leading female figures more influence by letting them speak out on an international level about how cultural factors stifle their movements towards progressing women's rights in their country and how they believe these issues can be tackled. On that basis, a more culturally sensitive and targeted approach can be taken on by international organisations supporting the funding of educational, health, and political facilities and safehouses in Afghanistan.

## Conclusion

So far, international, and local organisations working to establish Afghan women's rights still face plenty of backlash and lack of cooperation by the general Afghan population. In this chapter I set out to analyse why exactly hostility toward Afghan women's rights still exists and which approaches should be taken to lessen this hostility. Most importantly, I have tried to show that it is vital we step away from western notions of democracy and women's rights to instead pay closer attention to how Afghan society functions. This is because western ideals cannot be placed on a country like Afghanistan, a country which is built up on an entirely different history, religion, and cultural customs. Instead, it has caused growing resentment toward foreign influences and their foreign ideas of building up the country. Therefore, it is necessary to focus on finding a more local, culturally sensitive approach in order to establish women's rights in Afghanistan more successfully. This is why it is so important to empower female Afghan activists by inviting them on to the world stage. They have the most valuable hands-on experience and knowledge on the misogynistic, harmful, cultural aspects of Afghan society. Thus, they can provide more insight into how women's rights can be improved in a way that does not undermine or threaten all of their culture. For example, many educated activists emphasized the cultural significance of madrasas and religious education in their country and have explained that ending the vicious cycle of harmful, oppressive treatment toward women starts with improving religious education in madrasas. Moreover, placing Afghans in control of improving their own country would cause less backlash from the community than having international forces in control. That being said, funding, security, and encouragement from international organizations such as the UN are and remain of paramount importance, so that Afghan women can feel safer and more empowered to work towards gaining a stronger foothold toward exercising their rights.

## Concluding Chapter

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Because Afghanistan's history and, particularly, the history of women's rights in that country is so complex, I have opted to deal with the main research question of this thesis in a series of successive chapters and subchapters. Because Afghanistan has been one of the most dangerous countries in the world, for men and, particularly for women for a long period of time, it was important to apply the provenance of the development of Afghan women's rights up to the Taliban rule in chapter one. By analysing the historical background of women's rights in the twentieth century I have been able to vindicate that there was a time where women were encouraged and eventually free to exercise their human rights. In this chapter, I documented how; these freedoms were met with backlash and reluctance by Afghan men who felt that their cultural and religious traditions were being erased and replaced by foreign, secular influences. The approach taken towards improving women's rights was taken too fast. More than likely, it was one of the main drives that pushed many Afghans toward supporting the local Taliban who presented themselves as fighting for the preservation of Afghan Islamic values. Eventually, their form of rule rapidly developed into heavily misogynistic, authoritarian, and fundamentalist practices which ended up being traumatic rather than peaceful for Afghan civilians.

In chapter two, I look into how various international conferences have made much progress in defining women's rights yet have made little to no measurable impact on the rights of women in Afghanistan. I chose to critically analyse the declarations drafted around the most recent World Women's Conference since they were written long enough ago to critically review the positive and negative outcomes of their aims on addressing women's rights. I then reflected on the successes and failures aimed towards the most

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<sup>138</sup> Brizendine, 'How Men and Women Lead Differently', 4.

relevant factors that affect women's rights in Afghanistan, namely culture, politics, education, and health. What has come out of this chapter is that even though women exercise significant rights on paper, Afghanistan is still dragging behind when it comes to effectively putting these rights into practice. This is why I presented alternative approaches that would help progress Afghan women's rights on a more localised level, in chapter three.

By reviewing Afghan history of women's rights and recognising why a developing country like Afghanistan has not proven to be as successful in reaching the aims set by international organisations such as the UN, I was able to discuss which factors hampered the practice of Afghan women's rights in chapter three. One essential step forward would be for the West to let go of solely focusing on how to implement western notions of democracy on a country built on a history and culture that is so different to that of the Western world. Instead, supra-national organisations should respect and understand how Afghanistan's deeply conservative society functions. I have tried to point out that if such organizations are to make any progress on this at all, it is vital for them to enlist the help of influential female Afghans, as incorporating such local female actors into their plans will help improve the employment of women's rights in the country.

Addressing how we should proceed with employing women's rights is becoming an increasingly pressing matter. The day is nearing when all NATO and US troops will have departed from the unfinished war that the latter started in Afghanistan twenty years ago. This will leave a void ready to be filled by neighbouring foreign influences, or even worse, the Taliban. Another Taliban insurgency would mean that all the rights that Afghan women had fought for and gained since 2001 could be reversed and the institutions that they have established, be it judicial, health, protective or educational could be quashed. This situation would negatively affect the morale of thousands of Afghan men and women who have worked for decades on improving the rights of women and creating a better future for their children in their country. Moreover, judging on their past with foreign influences, Afghans will probably turn their backs on America who, among other member states, promised to fight for peace- not create a foundation for another reign of terror.

In my thesis, I have analysed why the current approach toward progressing women's rights in Afghanistan is not good enough. This is because international organisations have taken a western approach toward improving women's rights. At the same time, they have disregarded Afghan culture, traditions, and history, which are all significant factors towards why women are still treated so poorly. My research suggests that we will find more successful results if the local population is encouraged to be involved. Their culture and their way of religious education should be understood and implemented to improve the rights of Afghan women. As for now, international organisations such as the UN have the capability to empower these women and help them gain more agency to tackle the abuse they are facing. More research will of course have to be done, such as looking into what the future entails for women in Afghanistan. We should continue to keep a close eye on what the Taliban and other foreign influences will do in the country once NATO and US troops have departed completely. This is because if the Taliban do manage to take full control again, Afghan women will lose all of the rights they had fought for, they will face even more hardship than they are doing now, and this in a time where such an outcome could be prevented.

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