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How U.S. Gender Policy for Post-Taliban Afghanistan Was Shaped

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Abstract

The United States invaded Afghanistan in 2001, shortly after the 9/11 terroristic attack by Al-Qaeda. Although the U.S. invaded to pursue the leader of Al-Qaeda, Osama Bin-Laden, women's rights and freedoms in Afghanistan under the Taliban were at the heart of the Bush administration's agenda of the "war on terror." Through analysis of existing literature and data, this study seeks to discover how U.S. gender policy for post-Taliban Afghanistan was shaped, and asks, what are its pros and cons? The study indicates that political discourses on women's rights and freedoms shaped U.S. gender policy for post-Taliban Afghanistan; however, women still suffer from inequality and conflict.

Introduction

President George W. Bush announced the plan to invade Afghanistan shortly after the 9/11 terroristic attack in the United States. President Bush wanted to chase Osama Bin-Laden and bring him to justice for attacking the United States. At that time, the Taliban, a brutal fundamentalist Islamic regime, was ruling Afghanistan and had close ties with Osama Bin-Laden, the leader of the Al-Qaeda network. The Taliban was giving Bin-Laden safe haven in Afghanistan to hide and live; thus, there was a good reason for President Bush to invade Afghanistan. The Taliban was not only providing safe haven for Al-Qaeda and other terrorist networks, but it also brutally oppressed non-Pashtun citizens, including women.

Through the study of the existing literature and data about the issue, this paper seeks to discover how the U.S. gender policy for post-Taliban Afghanistan was shaped. Furthermore, this paper includes a study of the recent events which are significantly affecting the lives of Afghan women nineteen years after the defeat of

the Taliban by the George W. Bush administration. This paper argues that political discourses on Afghan women's rights and freedoms shaped U.S. gender policy for post-Taliban Afghanistan; however, the achievements of Afghan women from implementation of this policy is entirely fragile. Therefore, nineteen years later, once again, the future and destiny of Afghan women are on the U.S.-Taliban peace negotiation table in Doha, Qatar.

Political Discourses that Shaped U.S. Gender Policy for Post-Taliban Afghanistan

In 2001, U.S. gender policy for Afghanistan was politically shaped in order to justify the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan and to attain support from Americans and funding from Congress for war. To justify invasion and war, Afghan women were framed in every possible way as silent prisoners so that Western powers saw it as their moral and political obligation to run and free them. In "Women's Rights and 'Righteous War': An Argument for Women's Autonomy in Afghanistan," Gillian Wylie claims that former U.S. president George W. Bush pushed the discourses of Afghan women's rights and freedom to benefit his agenda of invasion of Afghanistan: "In defending US policy, President George Bush never failed to mention the liberation of women as one of his moral ends. Greeting the fall of Kabul in January, he announced that the mothers and daughters of Afghanistan were now free" (217). But as Wylie's study shows, the rhetoric of Afghan women's freedom in the aftermath of U.S. invasion proved to be a delusion (217). Wylie argues that political discourses of women's rights and freedoms in 2001 was part of the Bush administration's justification of war. Wylie describes Bush's approach toward the issue thusly: "Establishing women's rights became part of the moral justification given for waging 'war on terror' by overthrowing the Taliban and ensuring regime change in Afghanistan" (217).

It is worth noticing that under Taliban regime, it was not only women who suffered. Men also were forced to engage in certain practices, including mandatory prayers, keeping beards, and wearing turbans. Focusing just on women's rights and freedom and their physical appearance has raised many questions in Afghan society as well as in the circle of scholars who follow this issue. Many scholars argue that by focusing on the oppression of women by the Taliban regime, the Bush administration sought to generate empathy and gain support for war. Deniz Kandiyoti argues in "Old Dilemmas or New Challenges? The Politics of Gender and Reconstruction in Afghanistan," for example, that "the plight of women in Afghanistan was invoked,

among other things, as a humanitarian crisis justifying military intervention” (169). Kandiyoti also argues that reversing abuses of women’s rights became an explicit item of policy, at least at the level of rhetoric (169).

The misrepresentation of Afghan women as a political instrument to justify war in Afghanistan not only was a commodity in the political circles of the Bush administration. The U.S. media too had a great role in the representation of Afghan women as oppressed objects who were begging silently for help. Armed Taliban fighters beating poor women screaming in pain under blue burqas were the favorite images of Western media, specifically U.S. media, in 2001 and after. Thus, U.S. mainstream media alongside U.S. policy makers used these miseries of Afghan women to catch attention and support from American citizens and funding from Congress for war in Afghanistan. Presentation of Afghan women in blue burqas covering them head to toe as a sign of oppression was an image that the U.S. media frequently displayed. In 2001 and afterward, one could see such images in television, in newspapers, on the front pages of popular magazines. In the words of Kevin Ayotte and Mary Husain, “the image of the Afghan woman shrouded in the burqa has played a leading role in various public arguments seeking to justify U.S. military intervention” (113). Most Afghan women practiced burqa under Taliban regime coercion but Afghan women had to wear burqa during Mujahedeen rule too, a regime the U.S. directly supported in their fight against the Soviet Union military invasion of Afghanistan. But discourses regarding the urgency of freeing them under the leadership of U.S. military force only emerged significantly when the U.S. wanted to invade Afghanistan. Those political discourses worked, and the Bush administration acquired both funding for war and the support of U.S. taxpayers.

In her study, “The Symbolic Use of Afghan Women in the War on Terror,” Kim Berry states that, “The Bush administration’s focus on the oppression of Afghan women emerged in the midst of the construction and implementation of the ‘war on terror,’ and given that public support for this on-going war is being mobilized through a strategic use of words and images” (138). Furthermore, among political discourses on women’s rights in Afghanistan, Laura Bush’s radio speech is the one which has caught the attention of many scholars who have discussed the issue. Laura Bush, the First Lady of the United States in 2001, delivered on November 17 an emotional radio speech about the situation of Afghan women and children under Taliban rule. Lila Abu-Lughod argues that such cultural framing of women has

prevented the serious exploration of the roots and nature of human suffering in this part of the world, and has cited part of Mrs. Bush's speech as follows:

...the very separate causes in Afghanistan of women's continuing malnutrition, poverty, and ill health, and their more recent exclusion under the Taliban from employment, schooling, and the joys of wearing nail polish. On the other hand, her speech reinforced chasmic divides, primarily between the 'civilized people throughout the world' whose hearts break for the women and children of Afghanistan and the Taliban-and-the-terrorists, the cultural monsters who want to, as she put it, 'impose their world on the rest of us' (784).

Abu-Lughod further argues that such political discourse has hindered experts from deeply exploring the political and historical roots of the problem and its violence. Instead of asking questions acknowledging global interconnections, "experts were being asked to give religio-cultural [responses].... we were offered [questions] that worked to artificially divide the world into ... West versus East, us versus Muslims, cultures in which First Ladies give speeches versus others where women shuffle around silently in burqas" (784).

In a study titled "Appropriating Women's Agendas," Sally Kitch and Margaret Mills argue that "Laura Bush appropriated women's issues for U.S. strategic and political purposes and was, in turn, appropriated by her husband for those same purposes" (66). However, Kitch and Mills also argue that subsequent events show that promoting women's rights and freedom was not the primary goal of Bush administration (66). And, despite significant criticism, U.S. gender policy for post-Taliban Afghanistan had received great praise in Afghanistan in the early years as it opened some windows of opportunity for a significant number of women in different parts of the country, even though fragile and short term.

Impacts of U.S. Gender Policy on Living Conditions of Afghan Women

Although U.S. gender policy opened windows of hope for some Afghan women who were craving freedom and equality in the early years, later it was proved that the gender policy of the U.S. for Afghanistan was entirely fragile and currently seems close to failure. In the early years following the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan, the utilization of gender policy there had been accompanied by flows of aid which had

opened door for a significant number of women, especially in the capital of Kabul and some big cities. Soon after the fall of the Taliban, the flow of development aid and projects provided women with job opportunities in different sectors. According to a study by Margaret Courtney Barnard conducted in 2014, "...since 2002, USAID has provided more than \$17 billion in aid to Afghanistan" (44). She explained that this aid targeted "three main programs... economic growth ... the establishment of a democratic and capable state governed by the rule of law, and lastly the provision of basic services for its people" (44). Furthermore, she claimed that since 2001, promotion of women's education, maternal health, and women's empowerment were at the top of the U.S. development aid list in Afghanistan (44). According to Barnard's findings, in the early years after the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan, the confidence of people toward international NGOs was high: "with regard to national and international NGOs, in 2011, 56% of Afghans placed 'a lot' of confidence in international NGOs, in 2012 the number dropped to 53%, and then to 51% in 2013" (36). Focus on the education of girls was another arena that caught the most attention in 2002 and afterward.

According to a 2014 study by Nandini Deo, "since 2001, donors have given almost \$2 billion towards rebuilding the overall education system [in Afghanistan], from physical reconstruction to human resources development" (17). According to this study, Afghans constantly insist on education of girls as a tool for a brighter future, and that "while some illiterate fathers may hesitate to support the education of their children, most Afghan parents see education as a key to greater opportunity and social mobility" (17). According to Deo, regardless of the positive opinion toward girls' education in Afghanistan, the interventionist policy of the West currently has created a negative sensitivity among people in different regions of the country:

Today the pressure from international donors to adopt gender equality is often met with hostility. Gender mainstreaming, which is the government's express policy for promoting gender equality, is not succeeding. 'Members of the civil service widely perceive gender mainstreaming as policy imported from outside the country, and do not generally feel they have ownership of its implementation' (Anna Larson, 2008, quoted in Deo 15).

Based on another study by Mariam Alamyar, from 2001 to 2004 the number of school enrollments in different regions of Afghanistan increased from one million students to seven million. According to this study, “overall, the number of girls enrollments increased from 839,000 to more than 2.5 million during the same period” (58). According to Alamyar, “in 2008, more than 79,000 students — twenty-six percent of them female — graduated from high school and approximately 110,000 of 160,000 were teachers provided with teacher training” (58). According to the findings of this study, in 2014 about 2,700 students were enrolled in the National Institution of Management and Administration of Kabul University and from 2003 to 2016, the U.S. embassy and USAID in Kabul sent more than 100 students to the United States to pursue masters and bachelor’s degrees each year (59).

In the case of job opportunities for women at the present time, based on the new constitution of Afghanistan, women are reserved twenty-five percent of parliament seats. Many women work in high positions in government institutions, private sectors, and international institutions that are actively operating in Afghanistan. Currently, the chair of the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission is a woman. A significant number of women work in the media industry, women are involved in trade and business, and the list goes on.

However, growing insecurity, the intensification of ongoing conflict, and the active presence of many terroristic networks such as the ISIS militias in the country (as well as the power and recognition from the United States the Taliban is getting as U.S.-Taliban negotiations are going on in Doha, Qatar), has caused extreme anxiety among the people of Afghanistan, specifically women. The opportunities and achievements that women in different parts of the country have gained as a result of the implementation of U.S. gender policy and the flow of aid in post-Taliban Afghanistan appears to be extremely fragile, unsustainable, and unmanageable. As many scholars argue, promoting gender equality from the outside in a male-dominated country with a 99.9% Muslim population is proving not to be an idea welcomed by all citizens of that country. From the very first years, even as a small group of people enjoyed the flow of aid coming simultaneously with the implementation of U.S. gender policy, the majority of the people were suspicious of the U.S. promotion of gender equality and women’s rights. Later, people openly expressed opposition to gender equality discourses and, as a result, even women

perceived to be working for foreigners or Americans who were promoting gender equality and women's rights were attacked by men, including in the capital, Kabul.

In a study titled “‘We Are Farkhunda’: Geographies of Violence, Protest, and Performance,” Jennifer Fluri and Rachel Lehr describe the brutal mob killing of a young Lady Farkhunda in Capital Kabul in March 2015. According to the study, an imam accused Farkhunda of being an American agent and burning the Quran: “an act that is considered extremely defamatory to Islam” (151). Despite Farkhunda repeatedly denying the act of burning the Quran, many angry men soon surrounded her, started beating her and dragging her by the hair, kicking her, and finally, as police lost control of the situation, Farkhunda was burned after being killed by a man driving a car on her body (152). Farkhunda's death provoked women's rights activists and civil organizations all around the country to protest violence against women, but her case still has not received justice and most of those men involved in her killing walk freely in Kabul city.

However, Farkhunda was not the only woman who was killed in a such brutal way less than two miles away from the presidential palace. On a daily basis, many women face violence and die both in government-controlled regions as well as in Taliban-controlled zones. According to a study titled “Misogyny in post-war Afghanistan: The changing frames of sexual and gender-based violence” by Ahmad Lida and Priscyll Anctil Avoine, violence against women has increased significantly after the invasion of Afghanistan by the U.S. but in a different context. He argues that:

Fourteen years after ... the situation is still unstable, complex and women have been forgotten once again with increasing forms of misogyny that are structurally legitimized by tradition, laws, the international community and the current political situation (97).

This study indicates that the changing frames of violence against women are extensively related to the political situation of the country as public and politicians' attention is turned to the peace talks between Taliban and the Afghan government (97). Many scholars argue that improvement of Afghan women's life conditions was not a priority for the Bush administration as it was expressed in women's rights discourses. These scholars say the Bush administration only pushed their political agendas for invasion of the country in different ways, one of which was the rhetoric of women's rights and freedom. In the presence of international forces under the

leadership of the U.S., with war and conflict between international forces, the Afghan military and terroristic networks continue, Afghan women still are the primary victims, and they are paying a high price in a different context. As most women are suffering, only a few elite families are enjoying the current situation, those in the top positions or those with close ties to the corrupt U.S.-installed Afghan government.

As Maliha Chishti states, while the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan has paved the way for many women to take part in social, political, government and economic activities, the lives of the vast majority of women has not improved at all. As she further states, “bad donor-driven priorities and policies, in addition to aid mismanagement and ineffective implementation, have over the past seven years offered the vast majority of Afghan women very few improvements” (266). Chishti argues that change in the lives of those Afghan women who were benefitting from partnering with the U.S.-installed government of Afghanistan was encouraged by the Bush administration to celebrate the triumph of few people for the whole country: “President Bush insisted on the liberal success over the Taliban, encouraging Americans and Afghans to celebrate the signaling in of a new era of prosperity for the entire country.” Chishti further states:

The Bush administration clearly set out to distinguish the old (Taliban-ruled) Afghanistan as a country plagued by a shortage of health facilities, disease, poverty, illiteracy, unemployment, and the public and private oppression of women. In contrast, the newly liberated Afghan nation was ostensibly emerging as a strong, changed nation (266).

However, as mentioned in the previous section, those limited improvements in the lives of a small number of women, especially in big cities, was soon followed by increased violence. Facing insecurity, systematic violence from the Taliban, and increased threats, especially in provinces where the government was losing control as the Taliban started getting power, women in most cases chose to leave their jobs and stay home, and girls gradually started postponing school for an unclear future.

U.S. Forces’ Withdrawal from Afghanistan is Posing a Real Threat to Women and their Nineteen Years of Achievements

Although the real threat and concerns regarding the failure of the gender policy of the U.S. which now belongs to those women who celebrated victory and thus concerns

about the vulnerability of women and their achievements of the past nineteen years, since the invasion of Afghanistan by the U.S. were revealed in 2014, when plans for the withdrawal of the U.S. troops from Afghanistan were announced. Additionally, concerns are growing day by day since 2019, almost two decades after the defeat of the Taliban and the invasion of Afghanistan by the U.S., as U.S.-Taliban peace talks are going on, and once again, Afghan women's future and destiny is on the U.S.-Taliban peace negotiations table in Qatar.

The U.S. announced its military withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2014 while insecurity was in progress and the Taliban had started targeting civilians as they were regaining power in many parts of Afghanistan. In the words of David Cortright, this announcement of the troop withdrawal from Afghanistan posed a specific risk to women who had used the opportunities offered through U.S. intervention: "While improving the status of women is not the reason U.S. forces intervened in Afghanistan, it has become an important concern as our military begins to withdraw" (8). Cortright's finding show that Afghan "women face renewed threats. The Taliban regained control in some communities and reactionary former warlords have increased their influence in Kabul's government" (9). According to Cortright, the U.S. invasion and its policy regarding gender equality and women's rights during the past thirteen years has proved harmful even to women who are engaged in politics and economics, women who work within the Afghan government, and those who work with international organizations (9). Cortright further argues, "Opposition to continued Western military involvement has produced a backlash against women's rights, which is seen by some Afghans as an alien imposition. Women who exercise leadership skills are often called anti-Islamic, Western agents, or prostitutes" (9).

Furthermore, studies indicate that women are concerned about their rights and freedom as U.S. representatives and the Taliban are trying to make a peace deal in Doha, Qatar. Since 2019, almost two decades after the defeat of the Taliban and the invasion of Afghanistan by the U.S., once again, Afghan women's future and destiny are on the U.S.-Taliban peace negotiations table in Doha, Qatar. In 2019, President Donald Trump's administration announced that the U.S. would start direct peace negotiation with the Taliban to end the twenty-year-long U.S. war in Afghanistan. According to a study by Ashok Behuria, Yaqoob Ul Hassan, and Sanya Saroha, the United States set the agenda of negotiations with the Taliban in September 2018 "by appointing Zalmay Khalilzad as the special representative for Afghanistan

reconciliation” (127). Currently, the talks between U.S. representative Khalilzad, the Taliban, and the representatives of the government of Afghanistan are ongoing in Doha. According to Behuria et al., as the U.S. is directly engaged in the peace talks with the Taliban, there is an indication that the Taliban now feels more powerful:

The rapidly declining security situation inside Afghanistan, ever since the US–Taliban talks began, clearly indicates that the Taliban now, more than ever before, feel morally ascendant, while forces that backed the fledgling democratic experiment in Afghanistan are showing signs of fatigue and frustration (127).

According to Behuria et al., during the peace talks, the Taliban even outlined their non-negotiable list of issues, some of which are as follows:

The U.S. would not be allowed to discuss internal affairs, the Taliban would not stop killing people supporting occupation forces; and they would only agree to uphold freedom of the press, civil societies, and political organizations ... under the framework of Islamic values (128).

According to Behuria et al., “these are red lines that should legitimately worry the U.S. negotiators” (128). Considering the Taliban’s past attitude toward women, these red lines are of great concern for all women in Afghanistan particularly for those women who are engaged in political, social, economic, and other activities out of home, as well. Currently, a great number of active women are asking the Afghan government and the U.S. representative Khalilzad Afghan that women’s rights and achievements should not be compromised during peace talks with the Taliban in Qatar.

In an article titled “Feminism, Peace, and Afghanistan,” Sima Samar argues that the Afghan women are excluded from ongoing peace talks: “peace and negotiation with opposing non-state actors have dominated the current dialogue. Afghan women continue to be excluded from the decision-making processes” (145). She argues that, historically, women have played a central role in the events and process of war and peace in Afghanistan, like the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan which in a huge part was justified in the name of freedom and the rights of women (146). She further warns about the exclusion of women in the current Qatar peace negotiation and says:

Yet, the current peace negotiation being brokered seems to have forgotten the dire human rights situation of Afghan women and has neglected the fact that their future role within the country will have a significant impact on attaining truly sustainable and long-lasting peace (146).

Throughout its history, Afghanistan has experienced the invasions of several great powers, from Great Britain to the Soviet Union to the U.S. During their stay in power in Afghanistan, every superpower has projected a different lifestyle for Afghan women. During the former Russian occupation of Afghanistan, the USSR-backed government led by Nur Mohmad Taraki for the first time politically utilized women rights: “it was within this time frame where they began utilizing women’s rights as a political tool” (Samar 147). After the defeat of the USSR-backed government of Najibullah and the victory of the mujahidin, with the help of the former U.S. government, women again were forced to stay home and away from public spheres. Succeeding the mujahidin, the Taliban Islamic fundamentalists totally ban women from work, education, and appearing in any public sphere without a “mahram” (a male companion). It was this brutality of the Taliban that helped the Bush administration to justify the war and invasion of Afghanistan.

Conclusion

The central question of this paper was how U.S. gender policy for post-Taliban Afghanistan was shaped. To answer this question, I have carefully studied existing scholarly literature and credible research papers by high-profile scholars regarding this issue. The findings of this paper indicate that U.S. gender policy for post-Taliban Afghanistan was shaped through the political discourses of Afghan women’s rights and freedoms. During the past nineteen years, the U.S. presence in Afghanistan offered some opportunities for a limited segment of Afghan women, mostly of the middle class and elite families, including opportunities such as access to education, including high-level education in the U.S. universities, job opportunities within the government of Afghanistan and with international institutions and NGOs that were engaged in different activities in Afghanistan after 2001. However, these achievements are not as sustainable as they looked at the beginning of the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan. As such, the announcement of the U.S. troop withdrawal from Afghanistan and increased insecurity obviously indicates that women’s rights,

freedoms, and achievements are at stake. As U.S.-Taliban peace negotiations are ongoing in Doha, Qatar, Afghan women's rights and freedoms are once again on the peace negotiation table. Out of concern, Afghan women are calling on the Afghan government to not compromise their rights and freedoms in peace talks with Taliban. Additionally, active Afghan women are insisting they be included in the ongoing peace talks in order to be able to negotiate and defend women's rights and their freedom that was granted in Afghanistan's Constitution in 2014.

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