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# Liberation at Gunpoint: Deconstructing Politicized Representations of Afghan Women

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LIBERATION AT GUNPOINT: DECONSTRUCTING POLITICIZED REPRESENTATIONS  
OF AFGHAN WOMEN

by

Lina S. Khodor

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for graduation with Honors in the International Studies

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Aniruddha Dutta  
Thesis Mentor

Spring 2018

All requirements for graduation with Honors in the  
International Studies have been completed.

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DECONSTRUCTING POLITICIZED REPRESENTATIONS OF AFGHAN WOMEN

by

Lina S. Khodor

Aniruddha Dutta, Faculty Mentor

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for a  
Degree in Bachelor in Arts  
with Honors in International Studies

University of Iowa  
Iowa City, Iowa  
May 2018

*To my mother, my first feminist icon.*

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## ABSTRACT

Following the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, the United States waged its longest-running war on Afghanistan. Military intervention was justified through representations of oppressed Afghan women to frame the “War on Terror” as a war for women. The Bush administration's war propaganda exploited the plight of Afghan women by co-opting a feminism-as-humanitarianism framework. This approach, cloaked in universalist language, was uncritically accepted by the Feminist Majority Foundation's (FMF) campaign to stop gender apartheid. Through careful consideration of the Bush administration and the Feminist Majority Foundation's Taliban-centered rhetoric, this thesis offers a critical analysis of the ahistorical and imperialist backdrop in which representations of Afghan women are embedded. Emphasizing the underlying geopolitical and economic motives of US military intervention in Afghanistan, I argue that the Feminist Majority Foundation is shaped by the discourse of modern US imperialism and appropriates a feminism-as-humanitarianism framework, which contradicts their mission. These contradictions reinforce the East versus West binary and are best articulated through images of the ubiquitous blue burqa. The Feminist Majority Foundation and the Bush administration's rhetoric go beyond recycling the imagery and mentality of the “clash of civilizations.” The destructive consequences of US foreign policy and imperialism are justified by ideological constructions of the West versus the Islamic “Other.” This thesis raises relevant concerns of the role of feminist NGOs in 21<sup>st</sup> century imperial political projects. My findings insist that feminist solidarity should be based on geographically and culturally specific histories of struggle and understood through Muslim women's interpretation of their identity and freedom, amidst and beyond the “War on Terror.”

*Keywords:* Afghanistan, women, transnational feminism, humanitarianism, War on Terror, US imperialism, Clash of Civilizations

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## **INTRODUCTION**

At the center of the ideological “War on Terror,” was the image of the burqa-clad Afghan woman. Her face was hidden; her body shapeless under a thick, cornflower-blue veil. Yet her mere existence simultaneously elicited outrage, pity, and shock throughout American audiences. It rallied a nation, regardless of partisanship, in support of the United States’ longest-running military presence in Afghanistan on the premise that Afghan women needed saving, and the United States was their savior. Lila Abu-Lughod inspired the topic of this thesis with a question: “do Muslim women need saving?” Her book of the same title highlighted the individual stories of Muslim women she met and interviewed throughout her thirty years of anthropological fieldwork (2013). While this thesis supports Abu-Lughod’s emphasis on Muslim women’s self-perceived identity, my research is primarily concerned with the politics of representation.

In an attempt to discern why Afghan women have played a central role within American political debate, it explores US-propagated representations of Afghan women, the context in which they were produced, and how they have constructed and reconstructed systems of power in relation to US militarism and imperialism. Through careful analysis of representations of Afghan women, my thesis documents the ways mainstream feminist rhetoric has been co-opted by the Bush administration and uncritically joined by the Feminist Majority Foundation’s (FMF) Campaign to Stop Gender Apartheid following the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001. I argue that the FMF, shaped by the discourse of modern US imperialism, contradicts its own feminist mission. It aligns itself with the feminism-as-humanitarianism framework appropriated by the Bush administration, which obscures the geopolitical and economic motives of US military intervention in Afghanistan. These contradictions reinforce the binary construction of the ‘clash of civilizations’ and are best articulated through images of the ubiquitous blue burqa.

## **METHODOLOGY**

My thesis draws from press releases, radio and public addresses, online articles, congressional testimonies and images across global, national, and local capacities to discern trends and disparities found in Taliban-centered rhetoric. Specifically, it refers to the Feminist Majority Foundation, former First Lady Laura Bush, the Office of Global Women’s Issues under the US



Department of State, the U.S.-Afghan Women's Council, the Revolutionary Association of Women of Afghanistan, and Time Magazine as primary sources.

It structures its findings as follows: First, it examines the rise of transnational feminist alliances within human rights advocacy to contextualize the politics of feminist intervention, arguing that the universalizing discourses of feminism have separated the global and the local, effectively obscuring the geopolitical interconnections between the two and reinforcing the moral superiority of the former. It must be understood here that I refer to “feminism” as it is used by the FMF and in war propaganda— based exclusively on Western feminist principles which have been universalized across cultural contexts. It then outlines the history of Afghanistan, exposing the imperial powers, policies, and interventions which have contributed to its failure as a modern nation-state and the rise of Islamic extremist groups. After establishing FMF's link with the Bush administration, as well as its dissimilarities, it delves into the political work of the Revolutionary Association of Women of Afghanistan, who opposed both US imperialism and Islamic fundamentalism, and their role in local representations of Afghan women within human rights advocacy.

Organized thematically, my research proceeds to analyze specific US representations of Afghan women, distinguishing four trends: (1) American nationalism and idealized notions of citizenship are defined in association to a feminist rescue in Afghanistan, which I refer to as gendered nationalism, (2) gendered nationalism embedded in free-market capitalism and defines freedom as the freedom to consume, (3) the rise of the Taliban is constructed as an overnight phenomenon, and (4) references to Afghanistan during its so-called “Golden Age” is described as a period of women's empowerment and freedom. An analysis of the social, political, and cultural implications of representations concludes with the manifestation of the “clash of civilization” in selective imagery of Afghan women.

## **HUMAN RIGHTS ADVOCACY AND TRANSNATIONAL FEMINISM**

Following the tragic attacks on 9/11 and in the spirit of combating global terrorism, Laura Bush called on Americans to unite across partisanship to rescue Afghan women. She framed the “War on Terror” as a war for the “rights and dignity of women” (L. Bush 2001). The State collaborated with the Feminist Majority Foundation (FMF), a US-based transnational feminist

organization, in an effort to publicize the plight of Afghan women at the expense of collapsing their oppression to the burqa, assuming their complete lack of autonomy, and obscuring the complicit role US foreign policy has played in Afghan women's current misfortune. As a means to contextualize the sudden popularity of 'waging war for women' evident in several sources cited below, I will examine the spectrum of representation across State-sponsored and explicitly feminist discourse.

Transnational feminist debates on intervention in Afghanistan tends to thread a fine line between two tropes: "women rights as human rights" and "feminism-as-imperialism." The Bush administration's sudden feminist imperative has been disparaged for its poorly-veiled intentions by several feminists and scholars who lean towards the latter.<sup>1</sup> Conversely, it was supported by Western-based feminist organizations who lean towards the former. I focus on the former, specifically on the Feminist Majority Foundation (FMF), for two reasons. First, FMF is one of the first and most effective US-based feminist organizations to respond to the plight of Afghan women. Its campaign to "Stop Gender Apartheid" was initiated in 1996 and is perhaps the most wide-reaching, well-known campaign geared towards Afghan women and girls. In a congressional testimony, Eleanor Smeal, the president of FMF, states that the campaign's objective is "to raise public awareness about the treatment of women and girls in Afghanistan and to urge the U.S. and the U.N. to do all in their power to restore the rights of women and to address this humanitarian disaster" (Feminist Daily Newswire 2001a). The second reason is its influence and allegiance within the U.S. government's foreign policy. Smeal prides FMF's success in influencing US policymakers and government officials. After the attacks on 9/11, FMF served as the major feminist source for former President Bush, mainstream media, and charitable foundations (Lerner 2001). FMF's sudden momentum is attributed to the moral mainstreaming of "women's rights as humans rights" and the international human rights community's focus on Third World women.

Towards the end of the 1980s, and throughout the 1990s, a heightened awareness and interest in women's rights around the globe has led to major developments in the international human rights field. In "Claiming Afghan Women," Amy Farrell and Patrice McDermott attribute this phenomenon to the conservative backlash in the U.S. during the 1970s, which worked to stagnate the previous progress accomplished by US feminists and advocates of equitable

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<sup>1</sup> Such feminist scholars include Sonali Kolhatkar, Lila Abu-Lughod, and Ann Russo.

education, employment, sexual rights, and affirmative action (45). Feminism at this time was also facing critique for its lack of racial intersectionality within an American context. Focus turned from domestic issues and policies to look beyond the border at the global atrocities suffered by culturally and geographically distant women. These atrocities— female genital mutilation, honor crimes, and mandatory veiling, among a myriad of other issues, were considered antithetical to Western liberalism, therefore easier to condemn, broadcast, and mobilize. A mainstream shift was a “strategic diversion from a fragmented domestic politics,” Farrell and McDermott insist, that found oppressive practices in the East were more politically neutral and thus easier for American audiences to swallow (47).

The horrific accounts of sexual violence amidst the Bosnia and Kosovo conflict shocked the international community and helped legitimize violence against women as its own category entitled to international human rights protection. Feminists took advantage of the attention amassed by the conflict to pressure international and state institutions to commit to providing gender-specific aid. Several established intergovernmental organizations, including but not limited to the United Nations, the European Community, and the Organization on Security and Cooperation, altered future projects and resolutions in coordination with local actors to accommodate to the specific needs of women (Mertus 22). Feminist transnational alliances have since rested on a reformed human rights advocacy divided between the local and the global.

By nature, modern human rights advocacy and transnational feminism are rooted in moral abstractions, separated by geopolitics into the local and global, and given shape by the documentation of abused victims. The local constitutes women and organizations in Third World contexts, and the global is collectively defined by Western-led activism (Farrell & McDermott 38-42) . Theoretically, human rights and transnational feminist advocacy are a collaboration between the local and the global, who both share relatively similar degrees of influence. These negotiations are an exchange, intended to be symbiotic. The victims are given the platform and authority to amplify their experiences on a local level as a call for help, and the international community can credibly place pressure on the perpetrators or intervene by virtue of universal human rights. Farrell and McDermott contend that this is rarely the case; in feminist alliances, the local is excluded from sharing legitimate power possessed by global actors, and their authority to represent authentic experience is limited (35). Victims can express the details and scope of their suffering as it is framed within narratives constructed by more powerful entities

such as U.S. transnational organizations like the Feminist Majority Foundation or the U.S. State Department.

The commonly heard phrase, “women’s rights are human rights” has since been echoed across feminist speeches, political campaigns, and advocacy on all levels. At its center, is a claim to universal values. Appealing to universals is a powerful tool because it conveys a neutral inclusivity devoid of politics and culture. Under such an all-encompassing phrase, there seems to be a community open to everyone. Its legitimacy seems unassailable when human rights and women’s rights language “now has tremendous currency” (Abu-Lughod 81). A universal moral discourse, shaped by human rights language and largely fixated on women’s rights, serves as the measure of humanity which favors Western nations as moral authorities obligated to rescue Third World women. Its appeal is rooted in its optimism; if universal human rights standards are consistently pressured onto a society, or if a third party intervenes, it will inevitably lead to progression and liberation. Narratives of this nature should not necessarily be critiqued for their optimism; my thesis does not admonish the hope, if assumed genuine, the US government and FMF have for Afghan women’s future. It considers the ways in which representations can alienate and demoralize the cultures of the women they aim to help, potentially hindering widespread acceptance of cultural difference.

This is not to suggest that violence against women, regardless of where it transpires, should not be amplified, researched, and reprehended throughout the international community. There are several positive factors of universalist discourse on women’s rights: it has gained effective institutional enforcement apparatuses and legitimacy in the public sphere. Violence against women committed in private is now considered a major public concern deserving of just punishment (Keck & Sikkink 1-38). “Naming and shaming” as a tactic to raise awareness of injustices around the world can encourage legal reform and provide preventative measures, trainings, and relief efforts. Grassroots and international feminist activists have leveraged this tactic to help elevate the rights and lives of women. However, the conversation on universal human right abuses is led by the very countries that violate them. The international community put tremendous pressure on the Taliban for their treatment of women after 9/11, admonishing them as the single biggest threat towards Afghan women, yet it would be hypocritical to condemn abuses without acknowledging how they have contributed to them.

Exploring the long history of internal political strife among the various ethnic groups in the region as well as the complex interconnections between Afghanistan and outside nation-states is key in establishing the necessary correlation between the US and Afghanistan in particular, and Afghanistan and Western imperialism in general. Mapping the very real social and political effects of war, external influence, and constant internal instability can begin to challenge representations of Afghan women which attribute their suffering solely to the Taliban.

## **IMPERIALISM AND A GEOPOLITICAL HISTORY OF AFGHANISTAN**

A geopolitical history embedded in contentious state-society relations, radical reforms, and hastily crafted modernization policies has splintered Afghan society along ethnic and tribal fault lines, plunging the people into violence and simultaneously inhibiting it from developing into a functioning modern nation-state. Since its inception as a modern nation following an agreement between the Russians and the British after the second Anglo-Afghan War in the 19th century, Afghanistan has been considered a “rentier state...heavily reliant on revenue accrued from abroad,” granting it limited state capacity and accountability towards its polity (Rubin, 78). Push towards modernization have ensued a pull back to traditionalism over the course of modern Afghan history. This sort of ideological back and forth, Rubin contends, offers a partial explanation for Afghan’s overwhelming resistance to reform, with Afghanistan’s long-standing role as a rentier state accounting for the rest (79). In Maxine Molyneux and Shahra Razavi's "Gender Justice, Development, and Rights," their argument relies on the assertion that the "central instrument for the protection of rights has been, and must remain, the state" (24). Assessing Afghanistan's collapse as a nation-state in relation to its history as a rentier state bears relevance to Molyneux and Razavi's statement and the eventual rise of the Taliban.

Situated between the British and Russian Empire, the two major competing imperial powers in the 17th and 18th century, Afghanistan became a natural buffer zone vulnerable to invasion and manipulation by each empire’s respective imperial agendas. In their quest towards monopolizing opium production in South and Central Asia, the British expanded their drug production and trade to Afghanistan. From then on, Kandiyoti outlines the British deployed military troops, dethroned of local authority, and imposed their own leaders and policies to protect their drug trade and maintain an advantage over Russia (172). After successively

invading Afghanistan in 1878, the British sought to assume control over all economic and foreign policy related matters by hand-picking monarchs that enforced modernization policies aiming to consolidate central power, generate inter-ethnic conflict, and deter Russian expansion in the interest of British empire-building. Afghanistan's geographical location is not suited for plentiful domestic production of goods and services. Only 12 percent of Afghanistan's land is arable, half of which is actually cultivated due to water scarcity. Its indigenous agricultural and pastoral economy cannot adequately sustain its population nor does it feasibly support the formation of a centralized state. The consolidation of power was only feasible if foreign aid was provided. As such, modernization policies may have been directly instituted by an Afghan's ruling elite, but British-funded arms and subsidies from 1880-1919 gave them the coercive means to be enforced (Rostami-Povey 9-11). Though Afghanistan was never directly colonized by the British, key political decisions and policies affecting the nation as a whole to this day have been crafted under their influence.

Afghanistan's diversity must be acknowledged to understand its history of ethnic conflicts, which must be discussed sequentially to understand how Afghanistan fits within a broader agenda of Western empire-building and the "War on Terror." Afghanistan's social and political capital has traditionally been decentralized among dispersed heterogeneous tribes. Afghanistan is home to over 14 major ethnolinguistic populations and 8 major languages, and it has long been considered a cultural hodgepodge. The Pashtuns, constituting 42% of the overall population and residing in the east and south of Afghanistan, are largely Sunni Muslims, speak Pashto, and adhere to a code of ethics called Pashtunwali. Pashtunwali itself is practiced in varied degrees across individuals and communities. Several other minority ethnic groups of varying linguistic and cultural identities constitute the rich demographic fabric of Afghanistan. Its natural geography, characterized by its vast and extensive mountain ranges, and its poor road system have contributed to these communities' isolation from one another and limited interaction over the course of history. Through time, identities have been constructed and reconstructed within a broader context of inter-ethnic rivalries, local wars, and colonial intervention as well as interethnic relations, bilingualism, and instances of social cohesion and cooperation. Under British influence, Afghanistan's fragmented tribal society, and the local autonomy they each possessed, was forcibly amalgamated under a unified Pashtun authority to form larger modern state institutions. For the Afghan elite and their respective ethnic group, the consolidation of

tribal power provided them access to concentrated sources of wealth and political influence, which was subsequently redistributed in their favor at the expense of other ethnic groups. The establishment of Afghanistan as a centralized modern state is in part a product of indirect colonial rule as much as it is a calculated consequence of the Pashtun policies that gave rise to internal colonization (Shahrani, 1998). Internal conflict among ethnic populations should be approached as the result of strategic political moves manipulated by leaders and the elite through a series of failed modernization policies, not as a natural outcome of a heterogeneous tribal society.

Failed modernization policies, which are essentially flimsy copies of Western models of development, enveloped Afghanistan deeper into its role as a rentier state and exclusively benefited a small privileged demographic. A political pattern began to materialize through the 20th century: Western-influenced monarchs pushed reforms on land, trade, education, healthcare, and women's rights with the support of foreign aid, yet these institutions failed to evenly distribute resources and alleviate rural poverty, which led to assassinations and dethroning by the mass. To appease the mass and the widespread distrust they harbored towards foreign interferers, a new monarch would step in to reverse their predecessors' policies, omitting women's rights from public reforms and reverting back to religious conservatism. Backlash from modernization policies and its disastrous effects on individual ethnic groups can be traced back to Abdur Rahman Khan's reign from 1881-1901. Several of his successors have similarly repressed long-established tribal autonomies existing in the region and enacted borders which benefited imperial powers, but went against the needs of the Afghan people (Rostami-Povey 9). A tremendous lack of self-determination thwarted any attempts by centralized authority to retain collective control, enforce widespread taxation, and establish a shared sense of statehood over its own citizenry and tribal societies. This crippling, albeit predictable, pattern cannot be broken if Afghanistan remains a rentier state.

Kandiyoti summarizes the history of women's rights in Afghanistan as "a tug-of-war between centralizing elites, Islamic ulama resisting the encroachments of the state into their rightful territory, and a rural and tribal periphery intent on safeguarding its autonomy" (173). Zahir Shah, who ruled during Afghanistan's "Golden Age," was celebrated by Western democracies for his secularism and advancement of women's rights. Images taken in the 1970s, critiqued in later sections, during the last decade of Afghanistan's "Golden Era" are to this day

widely circulated and accompanied by blurbs on the thriving conditions which allowed Afghanistan to prosper at the time. His policies on women's rights defined in accordance to Western liberalism, emanated from male elites and exclusively benefitted upper and middle class women in Kabul, turning Kabul into what Shams aptly calls a "bubble of prosperity" (2017). Unsurprisingly, his policies were tremendously unpopular among rural and working class women. Interpreting women's rights through rigid secularism did not resonate with the vast rural population of women. It was enforced at the expense of their community's autonomy and local identity, nor was it well-received by rural communities in general. As Edwards stresses, "When those in power overstep the bounds of their legitimate authority, it is often narrativized in terms of violation and emasculation. That is one reason why female education and veiling have perennially been such powerful and explosive issues in Afghanistan" (172-3).

Stripped of the local resources they once had and forced to compete for foreign aid, inter-ethnic rivalries and violence exponentially grew to unprecedented levels. Beyond a brutal struggle for survival, the depletion of resources and threats to local autonomy endured by politically excluded ethnic groups planted deep-rooted apprehension towards the state and built resentment towards other ethnic enclaves (Shahrani 718). The possession of local autonomy, especially over women's rights, is highly valued by and tied to tribal codes of honor and integrity. State measures determining critical social issues in public spheres of life brutally clashed with tribal communities concerned with safeguarding their local autonomy. Buildup after years of ethnic violence and rivalries orchestrated by foreign invaders and corrupted Afghan elites led to an a series of bloody uprisings and assassinations.

By 1978, the People's Democratic Republic of Afghanistan (PDRA), a communist and militant group supported by the Soviet Union, had overthrown the previous government and continued to push for increased female public participation and literacy. The Soviet occupation from 1979-1989 only increased Afghanistan's dependence on external revenue and eradicated indigenous cash-producing activities after its counterinsurgency tactics decimated Afghanistan's rural economy. Rural populations were forcibly displaced and relocated in refugee camps in Pakistan and Iran or Afghan cities. PDPA's regime swiftly ended with a series of rural rebellions. Categorizing the rebellions as conservative backlash against women's advancement and modernization does a great injustice to the lived realities that Afghan rural communities suffered under the PDRA in particular, and the state in general. PDRA's ignorance towards



Afghanistan's complexities, its disbursement of wealth among an elite group of Afghan males, and its apparent ties with the Soviet Union fueled the rebellions and consequently sparked the Soviet–Afghan War (Rostami-Povey 11). Moreover, the rebellions were a culmination of a long string of failed reforms, including reforms affecting women, enacted by an urban based political elite seeking to centralize a fractious periphery. The absence of enforcing apparatuses and state institutions coupled with a heavy reliance on external aid, aid which did not reach the large majority, foiled any attempts to enforce long-term reforms.

Distrusted as inherently corrupt and antagonistic, the state was seen as an “external and predatory...as a coercive apparatus that oppresses local communities through its corrupt bureaucracy” (Kandiyoti 158). The resistance was a response to Soviet invasion, but according to Rubin, it was outside countries which funded, armed, and supported certain religious extremist subsets within the Afghan resistance movement that created its radical Islamism elements (96). These subsets became known as the Mujaheddin.

#### *Mujaheddin Rule: The New War Economy*

Since World War II, the United States emerged as the new global power, with the Soviet Union serving as their rival. Afghanistan was a critical buffer state receiving aid from opposing imperialistic entities. Throughout the 80s, the Soviet Union funneled \$45 billions dollars in aid to the Afghan state, while the United States CIA, in coordination with Saudi Arabia, Pakistan's Interservices Intelligence (ISI), and a number of other European countries, invested \$5 billion into the Mujaheddin. It was revealed in 1998 that the CIA provided secret aid to the Mujaheddin. Osama bin-Laden, a Saudi elite, was a major provider to the Mujaheddin, both materially and ideologically. He worked with the CIA to provide arms, allied with the Pashtun Mujaheddin to alienate non-Pashtun and Shi'a peoples, and sponsored radical Islamist camps across several countries (Rostami-Povey 22).

Because of the Mujaheddin's donors and allies, they defeated the Soviet Union and secured control. Once in power, they stripped nearly all assets, privatized public services and goods, and pummeled the economy, drastically lowering standards of living. In urban areas, the majority of the population were employed by the state and spiraled into poverty once the Mujaheddin's economic policies took effect. Rural areas were similarly devastated by the

destruction of Afghanistan's agricultural and pastoral economy. The majority of the country was left to find alternative sources of incomes. Opium production presented opportunities for income generation, credit and cash advances, and debt accumulation. Cramer and Goodhand define the state of Afghanistan's economy, created by war and displacement and sustained by opium production and arms smuggling, as a "regionalized" economy broken off from the national market (895). The emergence of a new economy disrupted long-standing social hierarchies. The ulama's political influence expanded and much of the power possessed by khans, or landowners, was absorbed by Islamist groups and local commanders (Fielden & Goodhand 8). They constituted a new social strata which yielded unregulated control over profit from smuggling activities and abused women with impunity. Violent and overlapping power struggles between the country's many regional warlords plagued Afghanistan for years with factional murder, violence against women, and pillaging. Thousands of poor families were indebted to warlords and defenseless to their ridiculous demands and subsequent punishments.

Violence against women was not a symptom of rising conservatism as much it was rooted in the "corrosive interactions between poverty, insecurity, and loss of autonomy" (Kandiyoti 194). The Mujaheddin's reign led to a brutal civil war from 1992-1996 and finalized the complete collapse of Afghan state institutions. This period saw the most heinous atrocities committed against women in modern Afghan history.<sup>2</sup> With the Soviet no longer involved, America's complicity in the horrific developments were obvious, yet there was little mention of Afghanistan from the governments which helped cultivate these conditions (Donini 66).

US support of fundamentalist insurgent groups was strategic in ensuring Afghanistan's failure as a nation-state. US foreign policy during the Cold War was primarily concerned with subverting Soviet power at all costs. The defeat of the Soviet empire was at the expense of Afghanistan's nationhood. 1.5 million deaths, a refugee crisis displacing 7 million people, rampant rape and thievery, the alienation of the Afghan public, and a complete economic collapse exacerbated the already tumultuous inner-ethnic relations and poor living conditions, encouraged militant activities, and fostered puritanical interpretations of Islam among the people. The US failed to craft a plan to rebuild Afghanistan's infrastructure and ensure the peace and democracy they had promised for Afghanistan's women and future (Rubin 96). It essentially

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<sup>2</sup> Refer to RAWA, Amnesty International, and the Human Rights Watch human rights reports.

created the ideal breeding ground for the Taliban, a group which claimed it would restore order and moral unrighteousness through Islam.

### *The Rise of the Taliban*

Several ethnic groups in rural peripheries were discontented with the Mujaheddin's failed leadership and licentiousness. Young male students from madrassas, most of who were refugees and orphans of war who had lived their whole lives in male-segregated refugee camps in Pakistan, sought to dismantle the Mujaheddin and cleanse Afghan society from un-Islamic behavior by strictly enforcing Sharia law, disarming the population, and bringing peace to the people (Maley 14). They called themselves the "Taliban," which is literally translated as "the students." Indoctrinated by madrassas, a relatively modern political and fundamentalist interpretation of Sunni Islam, outside of Afghanistan, these young men had never known their native country at peace, nor were they attuned to its many ethnic complexities. Largely from poor, illiterate, and conservative Pashtun regions, they only knew war and the Madrassa system, a system which gave meaning to their lives (Rashid 128). These emotional backstories bear relevance to Taliban ideology and its treatment of women. Their idealized notions on how women should behave developed from Madrassas propagated an ideology shaped by historically specific and recent political events, not by Sharia law itself. Ravaged by years of war and starvation, the people happily and readily welcomed the Taliban, a group which established itself as the moral and conservative counterpart to the Mujaheddin's sinful excesses. Backed by Pakistan and through the Ministry for the Enforcement of Islamic Virtue and the Prevention of Vice, the Taliban policed gender policies which mandated the veil, seclusion, and unemployment for women on the basis of religion.

Throughout the 1990s, Afghanistan was known as "rogue state," hopeless and outside the concern of the international community. Kolhatkar argues that this title is inappropriate and masks US sponsorship of terrorist activities, suggesting Afghanistan rather be considered a "destroyed state" to hold outside influence accountable (38). Attention on Afghanistan increased once the US government made plans to build a Unocal oil and gas pipeline running through the country to leverage control over the world's oil supply. The US and Taliban relationship has since been inconsistent. US foreign policy favored Taliban rule to help facilitate and stabilize the

pipeline deal, and the Taliban in turn would profit millions off the pipeline. The Taliban went from being of little concern to the US government to a priority. Towards the end of the 90s, the Taliban was grabbing headlines for being “the players most capable of achieving peace in Afghanistan at this moment in history” (Wall Street Journal 1997). Wall Street Journal published the article: “Afghani Rebels Win Gains Global Notice—Nation Attracts Formal Recognition, Oil Firms' Interest” (1997). American concern for human rights was complicated by potential economic profit through collaboration with the Taliban.

### *The Northern Alliance*

The narrative shifted after the 1998 U.S. Embassy bombings and once the Taliban proved to be uncooperative with Unocal and US authority. The Taliban’s human rights abuses, which had existed during the pipeline negotiations, suddenly became non-negotiable. Before this point, the condition of women in Afghanistan and the injustices of Islamic dictatorship had not been of concern to the United States. Following the 9/11 attacks, the US launched Operation Enduring Freedom, the official name under which America wages its ‘war on terrorism.’ They unleashed an onslaught of military airstrikes and allied with the fundamentalist armies of the Mujaheddin era, collectively known as the Northern Alliance, to overthrow their shared enemy, the Taliban (Kolhatkar 7). Shortly after the Taliban’s fall, members of the Northern Alliance were offered high-ranking government positions by the US, and within months, they resumed their criminal acts, repressive policies, and violence against women. Anti-Taliban rhetoric was conflated with women’s rights as a means to justify war and the US alliance with warlord extremists, further degrading the status of women. The Taliban is the focal point—the physical manifestation of evil and barbarism—in American women’s rights discourse. Yet, local warlords were undeniably extremists in their own right. Under their rule, Afghans, especially women, were subjected to demoralizing violent antics. This leaves a glaring question—why did violence against women in Afghanistan only receive attention once it came from one group of extremists over another?

Wars and foreign meddling in Afghanistan as displaced, killed, impoverished and intimately affected its citizen, exacerbating economic inopportunities, environmental devastation, infrastructural collapse, deep-seated political corruption, criminal drug, arms, oil trade, and drone warfare. The purpose of mapping the rise and fall of political regimes in modern Afghan history

lies in puncturing the illusion that the advent of the Taliban is isolated from US government motives. The Taliban is engineered as the sole reason for women's current suffering, and their rise to power as an overnight phenomenon unrelated to U.S. involvement in the region's history. Indeed, the Taliban rose swiftly and suddenly. After years of political instability, external influence, and internal conflicts, it did not rise unpredictably.

A geopolitical overview cannot grant readers a direct understanding of the constantly evolving gender dynamics embedded in Afghanistan's everyday social relationships. Providing context on state policies and past events as the sole means to understand gender relations in Afghanistan is a fruitless exercise, given that the modern state's governance apparatuses had limited access and contact to the majority of its women. Scholarship on Afghanistan's war economy and its social transformative properties is well developed in the field of political science, especially when compared to scholarship on Afghan gender relations, which ironically have been profoundly shaped by Afghanistan's well-studied war economy.<sup>3</sup> Limited fieldwork in and proximity to real women in Afghan communities has seen minimal developments in research which covers the effects of war on gender hierarchies within households and communities.

The Taliban's oppression of women is indisputable and abominable, yet accepting it as a reflection of gender relations in Afghanistan portrays a lack of understanding on how gender dynamics operate. I do not fill this gap, but rather document how gender politics has been approached against a static cultural backdrop. The moral mainstreaming of women's rights and its relation to depictions of Afghan women reveal how former First Lady Laura Bush, the Office of Global Women's Issues, the U.S.-Afghan Women's Council, and FMF, among others, have softened US's critical role in their suffering and reinforced the unbridgeable chasms between "them" versus "us," with "us" enjoying a higher position on the moral ladder.

## **THE FEMINIST MAJORITY**

FMF took advantage of the globalization of women's rights by organizing their constituencies, drawing in prolific members, and choosing a celebrity endorsement. Global feminist solidarity and displays of Afghan women's oppression were essential in keeping their campaign alive.

Following the launch of Operation Enduring Freedom, Smeal accepted it as a necessary means to

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<sup>3</sup> Refer to the research of Michael Bhatia, Christopher Cramer, Jonathan Goodhand, Adam Pain, and Jo Grace as examples of scholarship on Afghanistan's war economy.

bolster women's rights. She conflates FMF and the Bush Administration's goals and intentions under a collective "we" as she announces, "Now, as we seek to remove this terrorist regime that has wreaked havoc, we must return women to their rightful place in society. We must establish a broad-based constitutional democracy that restores women's suffrage and insists that women be leaders and participants in that government" (Feminist Daily Newswire 2001b). Smeal delivered a congressional testimony shortly after 9/11, stating that FMF has seen an outpouring of support from Americans outraged at the Taliban's brutal treatment of women and refers several times to their recorded public humiliation. "With the nation's focus on Afghanistan," she notes, there is "increased visibility about the plight of Afghan women." Smeal finishes with a strong statement: "Afghan women must be freed," and it is up to America to restore their rights (Feminist Daily Newswire 2001a). Specifically, it is up to the Administration, which could "salvage the future of Afghanistan, the rights of Afghan women, and its own scorecard grade" (Feminist Daily Newswire 2003). This implies that without American attention, Afghan women cannot be freed. Without America, Afghan women have no hope. The effort, autonomy, and risks taken by Afghan women and Afghan-based organizations and movements are effectively ignored and belittled under the all-consuming gaze of the US. Regardless of well-meaning intentions. FMF defined the feminist struggle through unchallenged binary constructions of Afghan women as victims and American women as their only hope, with the Taliban being their shared, single enemy.

The Taliban is mentioned in almost every single "Feminist Newswire" article on FMF's blog. Its purpose is to enforce the "lowest imaginable standard of living for the Afghan people" and to destroy "the advances we hope the world will invest in" (Feminist Daily Newswire 2012). While FMF has briefly acknowledged US foreign policy during the Cold War as a "tragic mistake" and certainly provides more transparency in the region's history, it still underscores the extent of damage women have disproportionately suffered at the hand of external influences and US-backed entities outside of the Taliban (Feminist Daily Newswire 2001a). FMF continued their support of the US government under the Obama administration, assuring the people that they support "President Obama's decision to delay the drawdown of U.S. troops from Afghanistan." Smeal contends that "the U.S., NATO, and the world have a moral obligation to stand with [Afghan] women," yet does not expand beyond an obligation to provide "an opportunity for Afghan security forces to strengthen their ability to defeat the Taliban" (Feminist

Daily Newswire 2015). Perhaps the mention of “moral obligation” would hold if it did not refer to an abstract, general obligation based on universal human rights, but were tied to specific political occurrences of American economic exploitations and direct contribution to rampant warlordism in Afghanistan. Smeal stated in an FMF press release that, “once the Taliban forbade women from working and going outside their homes, the country’s medical and educational systems collapsed” (Feminist Daily Newswire 2001b). As explained in previous sections, the eventual collapse of state institutions in Afghanistan were set in motion long before the Taliban due to a long history of foreign subsidies, orchestrated ethnic division, and warlordism.

The core principle of feminism is the protection of the women’s rights. FMF’s mission is to “advance women's equality, non-violence, economic development, and, most importantly, empowerment of women and girls in all sectors of society.”<sup>4</sup> Non-violence directly contradicts with its support of US war propaganda and military intervention. Its vision of advancing women’s equality and empowerment is complicated by its re-affirmation of US’s role in implementing women’s liberation in Afghanistan and the universal feminist framework it advocates within. It uncritically accepts US imperial motives and Western feminist hegemonic interests at the expense of its feminist principles. In critiquing FMF’s Campaign to end gender apartheid, my thesis determines the ways in which it is embedded in the very politics it was formed to challenge. My aim is not to downplay the instances in which it has stood against real perpetrators of Afghan women’s suffering or held its own government accountable, nor to suggest that transnational feminist intervention is inherently problematic. FMF played an essential role in stopping the construction of the US-backed UNOCAL oil and gas pipeline, a pipeline which would have in dubiously funneled millions of dollars in profit to the Taliban (Feminist Daily Newswire 2001a). Its past efforts makes its support of NATO and contradictory politics even more regrettable. Rather than standing against both the Taliban and the Northern Alliance, both of which are interconnected and detrimental to women’s empowerment, FMF aligns itself with the US and commends its humanitarian aid— even though it is the very entity which has uprooted infrastructure and bombed civilians (Feminist Daily Newswire 2001a; 2001b).

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<sup>4</sup> The campaign’s mission and published work can be accessed on their website: <http://www.feminist.org/afghan/index.asp>

Afghan women have been a concern for FMF long before 9/11, however it was not until the terrorist attacks that the Bush administration started working closely with them to, as Mrs. Bush famously put it, “kick off a world-wide effort to focus on the brutality against women and children by....the Taliban” (2001). By perpetuating a simplified story of the abuse of women by the Taliban, with the burqa serving as its most public symbol, FMF joined the US government in projecting one route for liberation: topple the Taliban and abolish mandatory veiling, then women would be free. A brutal war which killed, starved, and displaced thousands of women indeed toppled the Taliban regime and their laws on veiling, yet the current situation in Afghanistan is far from the liberation the US promised.<sup>5</sup>

My thesis does not claim that FMF rhetoric neatly coincides with US foreign policy. It is important to recognize that FMF and the Bush administration's rhetoric do not always match, and in certain instances, directly conflict. FMF continues to address the grave inequalities women suffer long after the US invasion, yet in as early as 2002, former President Bush stated, “The last time we met in this chamber, the mothers and daughters of Afghanistan were captives in their own homes, forbidden from working or going to school. Today women are free” (2002). After Laura Bush’s visit to Kabul in 2005, she commended Afghanistan for the “power of freedom...on display” and the work of US soldiers: “thanks to you, millions of little girls are going to school in this country” (2004). Bush’s six hour visit to Kabul excludes the vast majority of rural women’s experience following the fall of the Taliban and exclusively credits the US military for all of Afghanistan’s supposed progress. Paula Dobriansky UAWC’s co-chair, similarly reiterates the newfound freedom of women (in Kabul) after the Taliban in “Ask the White House” segment, despite rampant warlordism, especially in communities outside of Kabul, showing otherwise (2005). FMF does speak on Afghanistan’s progress, but does not fabricate the same rosy image of women freed by US soldiers.

### *The Revolutionary Association of Women in Afghanistan*

FMF will be compared to its adversary, the Revolutionary Association of Women in Afghanistan (RAWA), which leans much further toward the “feminism-as-imperialism” end of the discourse

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<sup>5</sup> Refer to Marc Herold’s “A dossier on civilian victims of United States' aerial bombing of Afghanistan” for statistics on US bombs and their effects on civilian livelihood.



on transnational feminism. I use the term adversary to refer to RAWA's consistent and adamant denunciation of the Northern Alliance's imperialist motives and FMF's political alignments. RAWA is not FMF's adverse in the sense that the two are unaffiliated. FMF responded to local documentation of Afghan women by RAWA long before the 9/11 attacks and largely built its campaign off it. Formed in 1977 by Meena Keshwar Kamal, RAWA developed out of modern, urban and secular settings and largely centered their work on women in refugee camps in Pakistan, RAWA's authority is complicated by the intersecting levels of class, education, ethnic and tribal linkages, and a rural and urban dichotomy within Afghanistan. These combined factors affect how fundamentalist rule is perceived by women and RAWA's reach to more rural communities. RAWA mobilized and worked with rebellion groups who constituted the Mujaheddin to combat Soviet occupation forces. The unprecedented levels of self-determination, political resistance, and civic engagement Afghan women yielded at this time, however, was largely ignored by the outside world and threatened by the US-funded, male-dominated extremism of the Mujaheddin (Farrell & McDermott 40). Awareness of an active political and social movement led by women for women did not coincide with Western narratives of victimization. Their efforts, though laudable, were appropriated by a broader, political agenda. Unfortunately, this was the case in the wake of 9/11 as well.

Though RAWA has been consistent in its efforts to maintain autonomy from global actors, its need for large-scale funding and political influence to build and maintain localized structures, particularly in gender-segregated refugee camps, lead them to collaborate with global institutions, NGOs, and feminists. As mentioned, transnational feminist alliances have become popular forms of human rights advocacy, and spread across the scalar levels of the global and local. RAWA's strategically organized within these human rights conventions by documenting and publicizing local abuses as an appeal to Western audiences. RAWA's representations directly disseminated through popular media as a means of generating international outrage which draws support and resources from state donors, human rights advocate organizations, and transnational feminists for RAWA's cause. Their strategy is contradictory in nature as it challenges yet functions within a modern framework of transnational human rights advocacy.

RAWA has been self-aware of how their activism affects different audiences. The documentation geared towards external audiences which victimizes women and highlights the atrocities they endure is drastically different than their domestic activism. Payam-e Zan, a

quarterly magazine published in Dari and Pashtu since 1981, for example, is intended for Afghan women themselves, not the international community. It displays themes of self-empowerment, self-interpretation, and inspiration through poetry, local projects, and accounts of progression (Brodsky 80-81). Despite its presence in the global sphere, RAWA's legitimacy and impact rests on its credibility to function as an autonomous, local authority authentically representing Afghan women's realities.

Compelling and horrific evidence of violence committed against women indeed garnered widespread support and funding by US-based entities, but only after 9/11. FMF often cites the footage, without citing RAWA by name, as evidence of women's suffering under the Taliban's decrees "banning women from employment, from attending school, from leaving their homes without a close male relative and without wearing the head-to-toe burqa shroud" (Feminist Daily Newswire 2001a). Women's subjection to rape, forced marriages, mandatory veiling, and cruel and unusual punishment was documented by RAWA long before the Taliban came to power. RAWA and UN reports show that Mujaheddin's rule was among the most violent, repressive periods of time for women, yet it received little attention and aid both from the US government and transnational feminist organizations (Farrell & McDermott 40). It is RAWA's condemnation of the Taliban and raw footage of abuses suffered by women at their hands which was exploited as a just reason for war. As Farrell and McDermott note, RAWA's "legitimizing power of the authenticating representations....are available to service a myriad of interventions...by the interests of the subject population" (35).

Despite RAWA's sudden popularity, it maintained its strong stance against both the Taliban and the Northern Alliance, and emphasized long-term solutions for gender equity. To mold RAWA's credible representations into a watered-down dichotomy complementary to US interests, RAWA's criticism of the Northern Alliance was overlooked by mass media and the Administration and their activism drowned out by transnational organizations such as FMF, leaving the Taliban as the sole enemy.

Both FMF and RAWA, thus, have operated within the conventions of human rights advocacy and feminist discourses, with the former serving as the authentic local agent and the latter serving as the largely Western "rescuing" entity. In order for the international community to amplify the abuses of women, FMF relied on local agents like RAWA to produce authentic evidence of their victimization. Yet, aside from an invitation to a 2000 conference, FMF has

rarely supported or given mention to RAWA. This is important to note because FMF often prides itself on being the “first to sound the alarm... on the horrific treatment of women under the Taliban” (Feminist Daily Newswire 2001b). Several of its articles carry a self-congratulatory tone which leaves little space to acknowledge the local activism and movements led by Afghan women risking their lives for their rights. In response to FMF-owned Ms. Magazine’s article called “A Coalition of Hope,” a scathing open letter was published critiquing FMF for suggesting they have “single-handedly freed the women of Afghanistan from an oppression that started and ended with the Taliban,” simultaneously excluding independent Afghan activists and organizations as legitimate humanitarian and political influencers. The letter goes on to note FMF’s failure to mention the violence against women before the Taliban under the US-backed Mujaheddin and public leaders. The chief point I would like to draw on does not come until later in the article when the author exposes the hegemonic, Western feminism of FMF which assumes ownership of feminism and excludes Third World women: “in carving out their version of reality they not only fail to give any credit to RAWA and others but they also claim to represent some sort of feminist majority” (Miller 2002).

The problematic nature of the representations of women of color by White feminists has been challenged. The notion of “global feminism” inspires visions of solidarity and implies a sharing of power, yet is highly susceptible to consuming independent local feminisms and overriding their autonomy. Once representations transcend borders and are interpolated into the international feminist arena, they are coincidentally entangled in a web of global power systems, foreign policies, and imperial agendas. Thus, the representations of Afghan women, even representations with feminist origins, must be critiqued as a potential extension of state interests because it is all too often that the “work of advocacy...[is] never ‘just’ advocacy, neither in the sense of ‘just’ as simple nor in the sense of ‘just’ as fair” (Farrell & McDermott 36). The hegemony of feminist groups such as FMF, Inderpal Grewal contends “affects women’s lives and women’s groups worldwide by their interests and their policies” (518). My arguments critique representations of oppressed Afghan women which undermine their autonomy, misconstrue their identities, and are co-opted by Western war propaganda. It does not generalize all representations of oppressed Afghan women as wholly problematic. Authentic representations of victims of abuse have the potential to bring voice to oppressed groups, raise awareness, solicit funding from influential global actors, and result in positive change. It is critical these

representations (1) come from the victims themselves and (2) their circulation maintains a transparent, feminist intention which does not belittle individual autonomy. RAWA depictions of Afghan women meet these criteria, yet FMF's circulation of its depictions does not. Both, however, have been manipulated to legitimate the interests of US foreign policy which undermine and contradict their own feminist politics. Regardless of their feminist imperative and authenticity, representations circulated by organizations such as FMF function within political and economically-driven global systems of domination supportive of military intervention, economic exploitation, and a homogenous, "majority" feminism monitored and owned by the West.

### **CONSTRUCTING AFGHAN IDENTITY THROUGH WESTERN EYES**

On March 28, 2002, April W. Palmerlee, former Senior Coordinator for the Office of International Women's Issues, delivered a speech titled "The Situation of Women in Afghanistan." The Office of International Women's Issues, the main body for coordinating U.S. foreign policy on issues of concern to women, functions to "help implement practical steps to improve the status of women" (2002). The findings drawn from Palmerlee's address are an appropriate starting point reflective of the common trends seen across depictions of Afghan women. I found four main concerns with Palmerlee's speech worth addressing: (1) it defines American nationalism and idealized citizenship in association to rescuing Afghan women from their conditions, (2) it equates freedom and liberation to trivial Western consumer products such as miniskirts and high heels, (3) its references to pre-Taliban Afghanistan idealizes the past and misrepresents the realities of most Afghan women, (4) and it presents the Taliban as the sole reason for women's current suffering and the rise of Taliban as an overnight phenomenon, which erases U.S. involvement in the region's history. I hone in on the combination of these factors for two reasons: (1) they neatly construct a sort of American-led rescue mission—an attractive, convincing emotional and ethical appeal for continued military intervention in Afghanistan, and (2) I found them to be prevalent trends in several sources I have examined across global and national capacities. Therefore, I will structure my arguments thematically and incorporate a number of external sources where deemed relevant.

## *Gendered Nationalism*

Palmerlee's appearance was sponsored by the League of Women Voters, an organization, founded in feminist ideals, which encourages civic engagement and activism. Thus, this particular speech is tailored to and largely consumed by American women voters concerned with the status of women. This is evident in Palmerlee's feminist framing of American national identity. Her speech premises with an appeal to everyday American women on the basis of their womanhood and national identity. She defines what it means to be an American woman and the duties it entails. One of the most important roles of an American woman is being a "responsible citizen," someone who takes an active interest in the "wellbeing of her community, her society, her family, and her government." Showing concern with those less fortunate "half a world away," Palmerlee stresses, indicates that individual contribution towards the advancement of your own nation and government. Before proceeding to speak on the situation of women in Afghanistan, she first characterizes the average American woman's moral obligations to less privileged women in distant lands; a characterization which is attached to nationalistic sentiment and idealized citizenship. Directing attention towards the atrocities faced by Afghan women was not simply the moral thing to do after 9/11, it was the American thing to do. Fulfilling gendered notions of ideal citizenship depends on their continued support of US military intervention. Outrageous military spending and recorded civilian casualties lose their meaning when buried under ideological pandering brimming with romanticized sentiments of patriotism and liberation.

I will refer to this as "gendered nationalism," a concept that is prevalent in discourses that link military intervention to feminist solidarity. Gendered nationalism effectively unites women across political ideologies and feminist identity under the umbrella of universal human rights and frames the situation of Afghan women as a feminist rescue mission. The Bush administration has found success in collaborating with well-established feminist organizations to rally widespread support of US military intervention in Afghanistan in the name of women's rights. Namely, it has worked with the aforementioned FMF's rhetoric certainly overlaps with Palmerlee and the US government. Appeals to citizenship are evident in a 2002 article on their website, which

condemns a lack of US funding to Afghanistan and urges several Western women's organizations to protest. Smeal asks her audience, "where has the American spirit gone?" (Feminist Daily NewsWire 2002). In a congressional testimony, she echoes similar sentiments: "we as Americans do feel a moral obligation to Afghanistan...we can be the greatest generation today... [if we] strive for the dream of democracy and human rights for all...we cannot forget the women" (Feminist Daily NewsWire 2001a). Similar to Palmerlee, Smeal feeds the same gendered nationalist emotional appeals, all under the premise of universal human rights as women's rights, to a largely female audience. To be the "greatest generation," to exhibit the very essence of being an American, means to be supportive of increased involvement in Afghanistan. Embedded in free-market capitalism, gendered nationalism approaches Afghan women's liberation not by freedom, but by the freedom to consume.

### *The Freedom to Consume*

Before mentioning education or healthcare, Palmerlee devotes a paragraph to listing trivial markers of Western femininity and lifestyle which Afghan women lack: "makeup, nail polish, or jewelry...colorful or stylish clothing, sheer stockings...or high heels." That is not to say that she ignored the very real issues faced by Afghan women, such as illiteracy and inaccessibility to healthcare. Yet, these issues are discussed later as a preface to how the United States' defeat of the Taliban and the millions of dollars in aid has improved these conditions and established the US as the "most generous contributors to humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan." Once again, Palmerlee draws on gendered nationalism by highlighting Western cultural identifiers, which are simultaneously identifiers of capitalism, and America's alleged humanitarianism.

It is worth noting that each item listed refers to the physical appearance of women. Miniskirts, or more generally, popular Western clothing which abide by specific cultural beauty standards, are equated to freedom. Conversely, burqas, and Islamic standards of feminine modesty and respectability, are equated to a lack thereof. At their core, both of these standards essentially measure the status of women in accordance to their clothing and physical appearance. Women across geographical locations and cultures are disproportionately burdened to abide by a socially acceptable dress code. Of course, though Western women may be socially sanctioned for breaking this code, their dress code is not regulated by law in the way that Afghan women's were

under the Taliban. It still stands that measuring how liberated a society is by how covered or exposed its women are is dependent on cultural interpretation and has no credibility in the actual social, political, and economic agency women exercise within their respective communities.

Even more important to note is that nail polish, miniskirts, high heels and the like are all consumer products readily accessible to those who can afford them. Within the United States itself, many women of lower class status cannot easily indulge in “stylish clothing” and jewelry. Are they, along with Afghan women, lacking freedom? To be transparent, freedom in this context suggests the freedom to be a consumer in a market-driven society. It is tailored to Western economic values and does not organically fit within the communal structure of Afghan society, nor does it advocate for access to public utilities.

Palmerlee is joined by fellow high-ranking government official Karen Hughes, a close advisor to former President Bush, in the State’s publicity tour on the liberation of Afghan women. Once the Taliban was successfully defeated, the U.S.-Afghan Women’s Council (UAWC), headed by former Under Secretary of State for Democracy and Global Affairs, Paula Dobriansky, and Afghan Minister of Women’s Affairs, Habiba Sarabi, was formed to “promote private/public partnerships between U.S. and Afghan institutions and mobilize private resources to ensure Afghan women gain the skills and education deprived them under years of Taliban misrule” (G. Bush & Karzai 2002).

UAWC limited itself to discussing overt, non-controversial issues including low literacy rates, poor healthcare, and mandatory veiling—all under the Taliban’s tyrannical thumb. It does not mention how rampant, US-propagated warlordism created these conditions. It does, however, attribute women’s issues to their non-contribution to the market economy. In a highly publicized affair, UAWC received a \$2.5 million grant from the State Department to build “Women’s Resource Centers,” which is measly in comparison to the costs of war fighting and military infrastructure. UAWC’s external funding is framed as a means for women’s economic and social advancement, with the Centers being advertised as a “one-stop shopping” market (Ponticelli 2004).

Former Senior Coordinator for International Women's Issues at the U.S. Department of State, Charlotte Ponticelli, prescribed a “free-market capitalist approach to assisting Afghan women“ in a 2004 interview with World Vision Radio: “Connie Duckworth [is]...a very powerful woman in business...she visited Afghanistan...and she saw what the women were

capable of doing. For example weaving rugs—she said: ‘You know—there’d be a tremendous market for this in the U.S.’” At the expense of Afghan women interpreting their freedoms through local social frameworks, i.e. their tribal identities, faith, and familial structures which are deeply-embedded in their day-to-day lives, their freedom is constructed as attainable if they manage to function and consume within the U.S.-led global market economy. The economic politics of the GOP in particular favor neoliberalism and privatization. It is not off brand, then, for the Bush administration to construe freedom according to material possession and the individual ability to contribute to consumerism.

UAWC’s factsheet, “U.S. Commitment to Afghan Women: The U.S.-Afghan Women’s Council,” published in 2004, provides information on their budget and philanthropic work. The numbers, minuscule in comparison to US military spending in Afghanistan, are deficient considering the damage after years of war and US bombing and do not sustain direct assistance nor the long-term change UAWC promises. Its purpose lies in its marketability. An “effective public relations tool for the U.S. government’s ‘liberation’ of women,” UAWC’s feminist veneer and rhetoric showcases the State’s commitment to women’s rights (Kolhatkar 178).

### *The ‘Overnight’ Enemy*

In her 2002 address, Palmerlee asks her audience to imagine a world which took that away from Americans in an attempt to try to explain the effects of the Taliban on women’s freedom, insinuating that Western culture can be defined by “wearing makeup, nail polish...high heels.” Similarly, photos of Afghan women before the Taliban adorned in miniskirts and high heels have dominated political debate on the status of women, and were later viewed by President Trump as a cause for continued American troops in Afghanistan. Photos of this nature reveal that before the Taliban, Afghan women once enjoyed freedom. Women’s liberation is measured by the length of their skirts. The varying miniskirts of the past, a drastic difference from the floor-length burqas of today, seem to confirm a downward trajectory of women’s consumer rights that neatly coincides with American capitalist interpretations of women’s rights. It is a persuasive, albeit irresponsible, tactic to attribute Afghan women’s lack of freedom to a lack of miniskirts on the streets of Kabul. Afghan women, so culturally unfamiliar and alien, become a source of pity, less so because of the years of war, hunger, and family death they have endured and more so because



they cannot wear “makeup, nail polish, or jewelry.” Focusing on the cultural over the historical obscures the development of repressive regimes and Western interference in the region, in turn obscuring the core issues and nature of women's suffering in Afghanistan.

The Taliban itself is constructed as isolated from history. “The Taliban,” Palmerlee ensures “changed everything.” She appeals to her American audience by quoting a journalist who stated “imagine waking up and discovering that overnight Congress had outlawed television, movies, videogames....cigarettes and alcohol...” In addition to referencing capitalistic markers of Western lifestyle a second time, she suggests that the Taliban is the sole enemy to blame for women’s current misfortune and their rise to power was an overnight phenomenon. The same day Laura Bush delivered her address, Hughes launched a publicity tour on behalf of Afghan women by exploiting their plight to “highlight the cruel nature of the people [the Taliban] we were up against” and ultimately justify war (Goodman 2004). The US Department of State released “The Taliban’s War Against Women,” which began in the same fashion as Palmerlee’s speech: “Prior to the rise of the Taliban, women in Afghanistan were protected under law and increasingly afforded rights in Afghan society” (2001). Prior to the Taliban, Afghanistan was fighting a civil war and suffering through a different extremist group, the Mujaheddin. It was not until twenty years before which Afghan women had more freedom, albeit their freedom was limited by their class, social status, and geographical location. Presenting the plight of Afghan women as “half a world away” disconnects their suffering from the US, hiding the ways in which it has benefitted from its involvement in Afghanistan. Afghan women suffer under Taliban’s regime and their law-enforced dress code, but not exclusively. The US-backed Mujaheddin, coupled with Soviet warfare, has revealed that women’s suffering existed before and beyond the Taliban.

### *Afghanistan’s “Golden Age:” The Mini Skirt Phenomenon*

Palmerlee glorifies Afghanistan pre-Taliban early on in her speech, stating that women used to be “active participants in society” who were doctors, lawyers, engineers, and integral to the success of Afghanistan’s economy during the long years of war. As I sifted through various public texts and images from 2001 to present day, I found a common trend in which several government officials, feminists and public leaders reminisced on Afghanistan’s past,

representing pre-Taliban Afghanistan as a liberated nation which granted women free movement within their communities. FMF's Smeal similarly spoke on women's "history of public service leadership...in Kabul, before the Taliban took over" since the 1950s (Feminist Daily Newswire 2001a). References to Afghanistan's so-called "Golden Age" (1930s-1979) necessitates a close analysis due to its pervasiveness in official government discourse and the ways in which it has been rhetorically utilized to emotionally manipulate targeted audiences.

There are several factors I would like to mention in regards to American portrayal of Afghanistan's "Golden Age," its intention, and its effects. First, I note the importance of reminding audiences that oppression is not an innate, nor static cultural identifier of Afghan women. Moreover, I do not disagree with Palmerlee and Smeal's assertion that there were Afghan women who held respectable employment positions before the Taliban. However, the implication that Afghan women as a whole were highly educated and economically dependent misrepresents the overall state of Afghanistan at this time. In reality, only a small, urban elite of middle class women in Kabul in favor of King Shah's politics could relate to these representations. The rest of the country was struggling and impoverished. The 1978 Revolution and the coup in 1979 effectively ended Afghanistan's "Golden Age," and revealed that its prosperity did not reach an overwhelming majority of citizens, especially rural communities which comprised about 85% of the population in 1979. 82% percent of the population was illiterate, the average life expectancy was slightly above 40, and college education were not attainable to the average Afghan woman (The World Bank 2014). When Afghanistan's supposed past success is considered a valid reason for American intervention, it is crucial to ask how success is defined and who it refers to. Whether Afghanistan was on route to democracy or not does not negate from the fact that before the 1979 coup, it was largely plagued by poverty and most women did not have the freedom that Palmerlee and Smeal suggest.

The language and rhetorical devices utilized by the Bush administration, and uncritically accepted by the FMF to illustrate Afghan women in need of liberations by militarism has been widely critiqued in scholarship on the "War on Terror." However given shift

The nature of these photos is dependent on which sources are circulating it. To Afghan citizens, these photos may be a hopeful reminder of a time when their nation was not plagued by constant war and tremendous political instability. It may be a source of pride and optimism for what they want their country to be in the future. Mohammad Qayoumi refers to these

photographs as a reminder that “disorder, terrorism, and violence against schools that educate girls are not inevitable” (2010). More than a nostalgic trip down memory lane, these photographs symbolize that Afghanistan can move on from the ravages of war; violence is not an inevitable constant. My focus is on the circulation of these photos by Western sources and how it has largely been interpreted by American audiences.

Adorned in miniskirts as they strut in high heels with manicured nails and makeup outlining their eyes, these women could easily pass as American women.<sup>6</sup> The women protagonists at the center of the image symbolize not just what Afghanistan was, but what it could be again. My previous analysis of the capitalistic framework which the US functions within their advocacy for Afghan women bears relevance given the women’s stylish miniskirts and heels, female-g geared consumer products tied to the Western-led global fashion market. The black-and-white photo, evidence of its age, has the words “Antes do Taliban,” which translates to “before the Taliban,” displayed next to the women. In its presentation to Americans, these photos show that Afghanistan was on the path towards democracy and Westernization. It shows that Afghanistan is capable of civilization.

Women’s rights discourse in war rhetoric was mainstream, arguable over-saturated, in the years following 9/11. The Trump administration was meant, at least in the public eye, to signify a shift away from US military-backed nation-building and women advancement in foreign, war-torn countries. Idealizing the past and asserting the need to return to its apparent glory successfully rallied a large group of Americans to support and rationalize Trump’s platform and ideology during his 2016 presidential campaign. “Make America Great Again” is a sentiment that Trump’s team was able to mobilize around, as it created a fantastical version of the past that distracted from the systemic causes of today’s issues. It is not unpredictable, therefore, that Trump employs a similar logic to reason a prolonged military presence in Afghanistan, nor is unpredictable that this logic does so well to emotionally appeal to American audiences.

Shams aptly calls this the “weaponization of nostalgia” in his article critiquing Trump’s ill-informed decision, and notes its common use across geographical location and time (2017). Indeed, utilizing photos of women from the past, particularly women in miniskirts, to muster support for American wars is not limited to Afghanistan and has become a predictable method of

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<sup>6</sup> For reference, the photograph can be viewed through this link: <https://ajamc.com/2017/09/06/weaponization-nostalgia-afghan-miniskirts/>

showing what Islamic countries could have been had it not been for religious extremism. Photographs of Iranian women wearing miniskirts prior to the Islamic Revolution next to pictures of women donning the chador, a veil especially popular in Iran which covers everything but the face, were widely circulated after the Revolution to show what freedom looks like next to captivity. The former pictures were taken in 1979, at a time when less than 1% of Iranian women had access to higher education compared to the 55% attending university today. The glamour of miniskirts and clubs might have been the reality for a small elite in Tehran, but the vast rural communities could not relate. In Iraq, popular photographs of women from the 70s, before the Hussein regime, Persian-Gulf wars, economic sanctions, and US invasion, walking in their miniskirts on the streets of a thriving Baghdad distort history of a country largely comprised of rural communities under the control of the Ba'ath regime, a party known for its brutal repression of Iraq's majority religion, Shi'a Muslims (Shams 2017). The glamour of miniskirts masks sobering statistics on women's education, employment, and access to healthcare during this time. Pitting these images side-by-side, in a before-and-after fashion, figuratively and literally illustrates a clashing tension.

Constructing an imaginary "Golden Age" Afghanistan while simultaneously simplifying the various lived experiences of Afghan women before the Taliban suggests that Afghanistan's return to its alleged previous state will be judged by the clothing of its women. This has not been harmless. An infatuation with the mini skirt versus the burqa erasing the historical, complex web of tangible and social inequalities experienced by Afghan women, making it difficult to understand how and why the present inequalities exist. Behind the glamorized shield of morality the US government, regardless of administration, has wielded in their warmongering campaigns, bares the entangled threads of systemic resource extortion, ideological manipulation, and the centuries-old tactic of creating the threatening, yet pitied "Other."

## **THE POLITICS OF THE BURQA**

The discussed images and Palmerlee's press release gave legitimacy to the notion that burqa-free Afghanistan was the liberated Afghanistan, and it is possible to return to it once the taint of the Taliban has been extinguished. The burqa is associated with the Taliban's oppressive ideology, yet women did not shed their burqas for miniskirts once the Taliban was overthrown.

Widespread among communities long before the Taliban, the burqa is one of several cultural forms of veiling in the region and varies according to social status and class. A regional conservative tradition especially predominate in rural areas, it ensures women's modesty, security, and respectability.<sup>7</sup> Long after the Taliban, women continue to wear the burqa for many of the same reasons. Taking of the veil could indeed be a liberating act for Afghan women; it could also be an act which negatively affects their modesty, safety, and sense of self in relation to their communal environment. Within the constraints of my thesis, I focus rather on US-led depictions of the burqa.

As part of its self-awareness campaign, FMF sold swatches of mesh cloth, similar to the cloth covering burqa-clad women's eyes, accompanied with a postcard saying, "wear a symbol of remembrance for Afghan women." The purpose of the cloth is to represent "the obstructed view of the world for an entire nation of women who were once free" (Feminist Daily Newswire 1998). Interestingly, 50% of all the proceeds went towards further promoting FMF. FMF sensationalized the abuse women suffered by exploiting the burqa's shock value and using mesh eyepieces as props in their publicity campaign. The postcard itself raises several questions. Why should people wear a "symbol of remembrance" for Afghan women? "Remembrance" implies that they are suddenly gone, as if they are paying tribute to the dead. Donning a burqa is equated with a lack of being. It is contrasted with a time when women were once bare-faced and free, which idealizes pre-Taliban Afghanistan and assumes freedom and the burqa are mutually exclusive. Framing the burqa, a traditional garb, as an extension of Taliban ideology reduces its dynamic nature, origin, and cultural meaning into a symbol of women's oppression. Everything that is backwards and oppressive in Afghanistan, regardless of its complexity, is collapsed into a "visual object of horror-filled fascination" (Kolhatkar 178).

## **THE "CLASH OF CIVILIZATIONS" THROUGH SELECTIVE IMAGERY**

The "clash of civilizations," a term popularized in the 1990s by Samuel Huntington, refers to the notion that the West is perpetually in conflict with the East as the "Other," with the "Other" formed in negation to the self (1996). What civilization, progression, and superiority is to the West, barbarism, regression, and inferiority is to the East. The "clash of civilizations" sentiment

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<sup>7</sup> Refer to Hanna Papanek anthropological description of the veil as "portable seclusion."

was seen consistently throughout colonial history and has been used to justify colonial occupation. Yet, understanding this term as an outdated sentiment erases the ways it has been reshaped in modern war contexts, particular in US imperial rhetoric. In the Afghanistan, veiled women are the focal symbol of the Muslim world's cultural alienness and the most common reference in Western political and media discourse.

Pro-war rhetoric, characterized by the Western feminism-as-humanitarian idea of going to war for women and the “clash of civilizations,” is best reflected in the image of the burqa-clad Afghan woman. Imagery has effectively amplified verbal political discourse representing the situation of Afghan women in the early 2000s amidst the US invasion of Afghanistan and after the 9/11 terrorist attacks. My analysis dissects imagery across sources of varying capacities and functions in accordance to the concept of metonymy: “the reduction of complex situations into simpler visual abstractions” (Cloud 289). Ideological manipulation in politicized imagery construct paradigmatic oppositions by forging tension between the viewer's sense of self and a disidentification with the “Other.” American identity formation is shaped by its foil. Images heavily circulated amidst the “War on Terror” are manipulated to strengthen US identity by victimizing Afghan women. Imagery, subject to appropriation by powerful agents, is well suited for war rhetoric and overriding critical and rational response to state action.

In the wake of 9/11, images of Muslims, particularly Afghan women shrouded in the burqa, proliferated in academia, literature, mass-market commercial publishing, television, and printed and digital media. FMF's website shows a sea of colored burqas and a man beating a burqa-clad woman in front of a young boy under the “The Taliban & Women” tab, while pictures of women showing their faces in a protest under the “about the Campaign tab.” Due to the campaign's efforts, the burqa is linked to abuse, misogyny, and the Taliban. Removing it is likened to increased female political engagement.

The infatuation with women tearing off their burqas feed into liberal fantasies of unveiling and has manifested itself into imagery seen across both popular and academic published work. Several images of Afghan women are accompanied by a variation of the word “veil.” Its paradox— “unveil,” is used perhaps even more frequently. The US-funded documentary chose the title, “Afghanistan Unveiled” to depict the aftermath of the 2001 US invasion; Time magazine published a photo series called “Kabul Unveiled” and featured a bare-faced woman in their 2001 issue next to the bolded words: “Lifting the Veil: The Shocking Story

of How the Taliban Brutalized the Women of Afghanistan.”<sup>8</sup> Beyond a play on words, the notion of unveiling a woman becomes a symbolic act of individual liberation and a “well-choreographed ceremony,” encapsulated into a single image (Abu-Lughod 33).

A particular strategy of metonymy relevant to images of Afghan men is the “individuated aggregate ... a trope whereby the population as a whole is represented solely by specific individuals” (Lucaites & Hariman 38). Images of helpless Afghan women cannot serve their purpose without a foil: Afghan men. Snapshots of Arab and Afghan men, used interchangeably, carrying weapons and staring menacingly into the audience’s gaze entraps them into the terrorist persona.

Depictions of Afghan women as obedient prisoners are constructed in the shadow of Afghan men as their brutal capturers. Aggression and violence is frozen onto their faces and expressed through their body posture; yet, these images cannot encapsulate the years of war, ethnic division, failed reforms, poverty, and isolation which have caused men to take up arms. Nor can it reveal the global superpowers, which includes the US, who funded their weapons. Time Magazine’s “In the Taliban Heartland,” features a series of pictures taken in Afghanistan, several of which feature young boys with guns.<sup>9</sup> The fourth picture is of a child in uniform, carrying a gun with a poster of Osama bin-Laden, the token Islamist terrorist, behind him. Underneath the child’s face it reads “NEXT GENERATION JIHADI.” His face is partially covered by a large gun, showing half child, half militant. In “FOREIGN FIGHTERS,” a local boy looks up at the figure of an “Afghan Arab fighter,” whose face is cropped out of the frame. His large gun, however, is in full view and is angled towards the boy. The child draws his gaze upward towards the faceless man, with a look of curiosity, implying that the man is looking down towards him as well. There is an identification between the two, as if the child is looking towards his future. Male children are both demonized and victimized in the photo series; a juxtaposition of a child’s innocence and the evil that will corrupt him. The audience watches as bystanders and the solution seems clear: the young soldiers must be saved from themselves and their grown counterparts. Intervention is the moral solution.

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<sup>8</sup> <http://content.time.com/time/covers/0,16641,20011203,00.html>

<sup>9</sup> [http://content.time.com/time/photogallery/0,29307,2052441\\_2244414,00.html](http://content.time.com/time/photogallery/0,29307,2052441_2244414,00.html)

The arrangement of images in “Kabul Unveiled” similarly betrays a problematic narrative.<sup>10</sup> It begins with an image of a lone woman walking through “the ruined urban sections of Kabul,” with her burqa billowing behind her; but as viewers click through pictures, the visual process of unveiling becomes apparent. Bare-faced women, identified as “feminists,” sit between their burqa-clad counterparts. Their alleged liberation and modernity is magnified when it is wedged between the tell-tale blue cloth of oppression. Pictures of women in burqas begging, with their hands extended to center of the frame as if they are begging directly to the audience, are interrupted by the final images of bare-faced nurses and professors in public spaces. The order of photos connote a before-and-after effect. Before US intervention, women were begging on streets and wandering aimlessly in a war-torn country incapable of rebuilding itself. Afterwards, they gained visibility and freedom from the burqa. One image shows women in blue burqas shopping for clothes in a market only selling blue burqas. The image of a salesman showing a woman her options amidst a homogeneous sea of the same shade of blue cloth elicits a sense of pity, and perhaps an ironic humor, for Afghan women’s lack of consumer freedom and individual expression. Afghan women are judged by Western modern conceptions of freedom as an individual choice in a market capitalist society. Cloud contends that, “taken together, these images encourage viewers to lament the status of Afghan women and support U.S. intervention” (294).

## CONCLUSION

A critique of the Feminist Majority Foundation and the Bush administration raises a relevant concern of feminist NGOs role in imperial political projects affecting the Third World. Underlying motives for economic gain and geopolitical control are not simply defining characteristics of imperialism, they unequivocally define the essence of imperialism. Representations collapse women’s oppression into the Taliban and the burqa and conflate liberation with consumerism and Western feminism. Combined, these factors work together to hide US complicities in the current situation of women in Afghanistan and contradict the Feminist Majority’s own feminist politics. FMF and the Bush administration’s rhetoric go beyond mimicking a colonial understanding of the “clash of civilizations.” It reproduces the

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<sup>10</sup> [http://content.time.com/time/photogallery/0,29307,1947784\\_2013079,00.html](http://content.time.com/time/photogallery/0,29307,1947784_2013079,00.html)



binary of “them” versus “us” within the context of the real motives and consequences of the “War on Terror.”

Images can both figuratively and literally illustrate the clash of civilizations when deliberately situated alongside each other. Symbolic dramatization claiming women are “rejoicing” at their liberation shifts attention from the “historical and political to the cultural, from critical analysis to moral outrage” (L. Bush 2001; Russo 561). Herein lies the dangers of manipulating culture, an abstract entity, to a concrete thing. Histories of struggles, geopolitical motives and cultural abstracts cannot be neatly condensed into one visual frame. Moral outrage framed through a universal, feminism-as-humanitarianism framework assumes Western superiority, benevolence, and reinforces the East versus West binary. These narratives give just cause to unjust wars. Wars based on ideology and justified by vague concepts of universal morality are difficult to assess objectively and define, making them seem undefinable. In the context of Afghanistan and American relations, narratives centered on universal truths of morality and delusional interpretations of Afghanistan’s history undermine the root causes of the issues. Narratives can, and have, effectively justified military intervention.

My thesis intends to demystify the ways in which popular depictions of Muslim women have functioned within 21st century political projects, yet it is not limited by its critical stance. Critiquing Western perceptions and narratives initiates an ongoing conversation which must include real Afghan women speaking on their own experiences and amplifying their voices. Debates on the status of Afghan women must be re-centered by asking broader questions which highlight structural and holistic issues facing Afghanistan. Rather than simply asking why women on the streets of Kabul must cover themselves in burqas, we must also ask why the streets of Kabul are crumbling under U.S. bombs and have yet to be rebuilt since 2003. My findings insist that feminist solidarity should be based on cultural and geography-specific histories of struggle and understood through the ways by which Afghan women navigate and engage these struggles daily. RAWA has given several Afghan women the platform to advocate on their own behalf in their respective communities. It is my sincere hope that Western popular and feminist narratives are similarly driven by Muslim women’s interpretation of their identity and freedom, amidst and beyond the “War on Terror.”

## NOTES

1. I refer to Sonali Kolhatkar, Lila Abu-Lughod, and Ann Russo among the several feminists who have critiqued the Bush administration's appropriation of feminism.
2. Reports of violence against women in Afghanistan under the Mujaheddin are extensively recorded by RAWA, Amnesty International, and the Human Rights Watch.
3. The research of Michael Bhatia, Christopher Cramer, Jonathan Goodhand, Adam Pain, and Jo Grace among others have contributed to the developed scholarship on Afghanistan's war economy.
4. The Feminist Majority's mission, campaigns, published and archived work, and blog is accessible on their website.
5. Marc Herold's provides statistics on civilian casualties and deaths suffered by US bombs in "A dossier on civilian victims of United States' aerial bombing of Afghanistan.
6. For reference, the picture of Afghan women in miniskirts is titled "Kabul, Before the Taliban" and can be viewed through the link provided.
7. In 1982, anthropologist Hanna Papanek described the veil as "portable seclusion" which grants women the freedom of movement within male-dominated public spheres without compromising their moral obligations and sense of community belonging.
8. In its December issue in 2001, Time published a cover of a bare-faced Afghan woman with the caption: Lifting the Veil: The Shocking Story of How the Taliban Brutalized the Women of Afghanistan.
9. Time published a series of photographs titled "In the Taliban Heartland."
10. Time published a series of photographs titled "Kabul Unveiled."

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