

Gender and the Development Battlefield in Afghanistan: Nation Builders versus Nation Betrayers

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The end of the Bonn Agreement (2001–5) was followed by an exhausting pitch made by President Hamid Karzai to try and reinvigorate international confidence and support for the new Afghanistan Compact, the central document outlining national goals and strategies for development, security, and governance. Very little critical attention has been paid to the ideological underpinnings of the compact that is ostensibly guiding the recovery of Afghanistan into a market-centered democracy, nor is there adequate scholarly focus on the kind of impact this internationally financed reconstruction agenda will have on the lives and living conditions of Afghan women. In the years following the U.S.-led invasion, Afghanistan remains one of the world's poorest countries, and Afghan women continue to suffer in disproportionate numbers from weak social, economic, and health factors, exacerbated by widespread insecurity and violence.¹ The expectations among many in the Western world for a timely, foreign-facilitated "rescue" of Afghan women following the end of Taliban rule has evanesced amid the bombs, attacks, and ambushes that continue to destabilize many parts of the country. Much attention and concern has been directed at the increasingly risky and dangerous environment for national and international aid projects, particularly in the southern and eastern provinces. Over the past few years threats, intimidations, and the targeted killing of national and expatriate aid workers have greatly diminished operating space for humanitarian and development interventions, forcing some international agencies to shut down their projects altogether or retreat into more peaceful regions.²

The merging of aid with the larger foreign politico-military apparatus, characterized by civil-military units or provincial reconstruction teams (PTRs), has added to the confusion, danger, and often complex terrain of aid work in many parts of the country. Traditional demarcations between military and humanitarian operations are now blurred as foreign soldiers are fighting the insurgency as well as delivering food aid and implementing development

1. There are numerous reports that describe the conditions of Afghan women; see, e.g., Chr. Michelsen Institute (CMI), "Afghanistan: Findings on Education, Environment, Gender, Health, Livelihood, and Water and Sanitation," 2005, hdl.handle.net/10202/119; Government of Afghanistan, "Afghanistan's Millennium Development Goals," 2005, www.ands.gov.af/mdgs-groups.asp; and United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF), "Humanitarian Action Report, 2007," www.unicef.org/har07/files/HAR_FULLREPORT2006.pdf.

2. For example, the international aid organization Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) pulled out of Afghanistan after twenty-four years in response to the killing of five staff members in the Badghis Province of Afghanistan, as well as its frustrations with the U.S.-led coalition and Afghan government. See Antoine Blua, "Afghanistan: Doctors Without Borders Pulls out of War-Torn Country," *Radio Free Europe, Radio Liberty*, 29 July 2004, www.rferl.org/content/article/1054081.html.

projects within many rural communities.³ Aid is entangled in a counterinsurgency strategy, and this trend in the militarization and co-optation of aid for political objectives has posed a new set of problems for aid actors, many of whom have publicly expressed their discomfort with the now muddled claim to aid neutrality and independence in Afghanistan. Disentangling aid from the foreign military apparatus, however, is not likely to happen anytime soon given the merger between security and development aid in the institutional “mind-sets” of most Western donor governments.⁴ Given this trend, it appears that creating autonomous and safer spaces for aid activities will be a far more difficult and complicated process and, in the context of Afghanistan, might not even be a realistic possibility.

Indeed the task is now to unmask the new sets of foreign and national militarized and masculine hierarchies, which have encroached on the design and operation of even the most basic aid interventions carried out in Afghanistan. In this article, I argue that far more attention must be paid to how the continuity of the war on terror and a protracted U.S.-led political and military presence in Afghanistan intrude on postconflict peace building and development aid operations, particularly in those regions well known to have a strong insurgent presence. Afghanistan (alongside Iraq) is center stage in the global war on terror as a key yardstick to measure whether the United States is winning the war to weed out terrorism or is losing the global fight, bit by bit, to insurgent factions including the Taliban, Hezbi-Islami, local tribes, foreign fighters, and criminal groups.

The “aid battlefield,” as defined here, refers to those aid interventions deeply entangled in active insurgent or counterinsurgent politics that use and manipulate aid settings to wage

ideological, cultural, and political campaigns over Afghans in efforts to demonstrate victory. I argue that in many parts of Afghanistan, aid efforts are, on the one hand, easily co-opted to serve and advance foreign-led strategies intended to win the “hearts and minds” of ordinary Afghans and to try and convince the people of Afghanistan that a new era of “progress” has been ushered in through Western liberal reforms. On the other hand, undoubtedly many Afghans perceived to be benefiting from or actively participating in postconflict interventions are simultaneously reprimanded by political insurgents and chastised for advancing and legitimizing foreign rule and the “puppet” Afghan government.

My aim here is to specifically highlight the varied impact of this proposed aid battlefield on Afghan women. It is important to clarify that there are many Western governments engaged in either combat operations or nation-building efforts, or both, in Afghanistan, such as Canada and Denmark. Aid policies and political approaches to Afghanistan may certainly vary; however, my focus here is on the former Bush administration, precisely because of its central role in the global war on terror and in co-opting women’s rights to make its case to go to war in Afghanistan. I argue that Afghan women are widely celebrated as “newly liberated” women by the U.S. administration, constructed as “nation builders” through their leadership and public participation in Afghan society. Achievements made by Afghan women are used by the U.S. administration to prove Western ideological triumph over the Taliban and to confirm to Afghans as well as to the global community that a new era of externally facilitated democratization and modernization is successfully unfolding, even if the lives and livelihoods of the vast majority of Afghan women have barely

3. There are more than twenty PRTs in Afghanistan operated by a number of different U.S. coalition partners, with the United States leading with twelve PRTs in different parts of the country. The first PRTs were created in 2002 with the objective of helping extend the authority and presence of the Afghan government across the country. Over the years the mandates of PRTs have expanded to include supporting local governance and implementing community development. All PRTs in Afghanistan are under the operational command of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), but their structure and man-

dates vary by country. In this sense PRTs have been criticized for undermining the credibility and reputation of aid agencies as neutral actors. On the PRTs’ link to implementing development projects as well as intelligence gathering, see, e.g., Sonali Kolhatkar and James Ingalls, *Bleeding Afghanistan: Washington, Warlords, and the Propaganda of Silence* (New York: Seven Stories, 2006).

4. Many Western governments have merged their national security and development policy objectives, premised on an understanding that poverty and under-

development in “failed” states will threaten global security by increasing the likelihood of conflict and terrorism. For a detailed discussion, see Jessica Stern, “Preparing for a War on Terrorism,” *Current History: Journal of Contemporary World Affairs* 100 (2001): 355–57, www.currenthistory.com/Article.php?ID=255; and Susan Rice, “Global Poverty, Weak States, and Insecurity,” www.brookings.edu/papers/2006/08/globaleconomics_rice.aspx (accessed 14 September 2008).

improved. Consequently, Afghan women and girls are simultaneously projected as “nation betrayers” by the Taliban insurgency, which reprimands women, often violently, for being “propagandized” by outsiders through their activism and participation in foreign-facilitated reforms. In many parts of the country Afghan women who are participating in aid programs and are perceived to be benefiting from and helping to consolidate the expansion of the Afghan government are subject to threats and intimidations or have even been killed. Constructing women’s public participation as betrayal to Afghan culture and traditions is an insurgent strategy used to delegitimize and derail the authority and expansion of the Afghan government and its foreign supporters. For Afghan women, being positioned in this rigid binary is an extension of the ways in which the war on terror has broadly and transnationally maneuvered Muslim women’s bodies and identities to fuel imperialist and fundamentalist motivation. As Jasmin Zine observes, “In the war on terror, Muslim women operate as pawns manipulated to corroborate the moral righteousness of the political and economic goals of U.S. imperial intervention in Muslim societies executed on their behalf as a campaign delivering their ‘liberation.’ On the other hand, they also operate as the guardians of faith and honor in Islamic fundamentalist conceptions that must be safeguarded from the seduction and encroachment of Western moral corruptions.”⁵

With this proposed nation builders versus nation betrayers framework, I am not aiming to reduce the complexity of Afghan women’s lives and their multiple and competing experiences and locations to a simplistic binary, nor am I inferring that women are exclusively “acted upon” and therefore helpless and credulous to these campaigns. Afghan women have a formidable history of resistance, resilience, and organizing for change against foreign occupiers as well as fighting local and national political, social, and

cultural violence.⁶ My aim, rather, is to tease out some of the ways foreign and national militarized masculinities are using gendered ideological constructions to co-opt postconflict space to win the war in Afghanistan. It is a war that appears to be intertwined with a formidable battle of ideals and values—waged at least partially on Afghan women’s bodies and identities as they have become foils of so-called Western notions of modernity, progress, and liberation, in addition to fundamentalist ideas of piety and “authentic” Afghan tradition and cultural values.

Imperialist Nation Building and the Western Ideological Fantasy

The U.S.-led invasion of Afghanistan was fueled by the war on terror’s campaign to root out terrorism and to specifically oust the Taliban government from power for sheltering al-Qaeda operations in the country. Without doubt this military campaign was the defining and primary mission in Afghanistan, establishing the foundation for all subsequent U.S. and foreign involvement in the country.⁷ The U.S.-led Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) is a relentless antiterrorist military campaign that operates alongside an internationally funded rebuilding effort in the country intending to promote long-lasting peace. This brazen contradiction of making war while simultaneously building peace is emblematic of the kind of nation building currently pursued in both Afghanistan and Iraq. Arguably, it rests on the tenuous assumption that forced regime change and the continuity of military operations can somehow be the stimulus for establishing democracy and promoting human rights and widespread social and economic development.

In Afghanistan, nation building is being carried out by the short-term aid commitments of the United States and the international community, which are keen on facilitating a quick and cheap strategy for state recovery.⁸ The intention appears to be to “modernize” this largely rural-

5. Jasmin Zine, “Between Orientalism and Fundamentalism: The Politics of Muslim Women’s Feminist Engagement,” in *(En)Gendering the War on Terror: War Stories and Camouflaged Politics*, ed. Krista Hunt and Kim and Rygiel (New York: Ashgate, 2006), 11.

6. Elaheh Rostami-Povey, *Afghan Women: Identity and Invasion* (London: Zed Books, 2007).

7. Cheryl Benard, “The Next Afghanistan,” in *Afghanistan: State and Society, Great Power Politics, and the Way Ahead; Findings from an International Conference, Copenhagen, Denmark, 2007*, ed. Cheryl Benard, Ole Kvaerno, Peter Dahl Thruelsen, and Kristen Cordell (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2008), 47–53.

8. See Barnett Rubin and Humayun Hamidzada, “From Bonn to London: Governance Challenges and the Future of Statebuilding in Afghanistan,” *International Peacekeeping* 14 (2007): 8–25.

based traditional society in the least amount of time, using the least amount of financial resources, and without shouldering any responsibility or accountability for the inevitable gaps, shortcomings, contradictions, and failures that are often associated with such a massive undertaking. The coercive reordering of states like Afghanistan, pejoratively labeled as “belligerent” or “failed,” into market-based democracies is what most clearly identifies imperialist nation building in its latest formation. As such, states that are typically on the fringes of global capitalism are “disciplined” by political and economic liberalization policies to facilitate their integration into the global economy. It appears that U.S. leadership is quite widely expected to be at the helm of these nation-building pursuits with the pervasive resurgence of terms like *empire* and *imperialism*, promoted as desirable, acceptable, and even necessary endeavors in the post-9/11 world.⁹ Michael Ignatieff’s reference to “empire lite,” for example, identifies post-conflict nation building as a distinct new form of imperialism, one that must be welcomed because it consolidates U.S. hegemony and maintains regional stability for the United States and its allies.¹⁰ According to Mark T. Berger, within various influential circles in the Western world, the United States is urged to take up the “imperial mantle,” that is, to pursue nation building in order to rein in the alarming number of “failed” and “disorderly” states like Afghanistan and Iraq that are constructed as major threats to global peace and security.¹¹

Certainly, the quietism among many U.S. feminist scholars and organizations to overtly identify the United States as an imperialist power is disturbing, as is the willingness among some to propel the Bush doctrine and sanction civilizing and disciplining missions abroad. The Bush administration’s co-optation of Afghan

women’s rights to justify forced regime change in Afghanistan is, as Zillah Eisenstein initially declared, *unforgivable*.¹² As Michaela L. Ferguson and Lori Jo Marso reveal in their book, this cynical use of women’s rights has centrally shaped a *new* politics of gender that is at risk for permanence in future U.S. foreign policy.¹³ In appropriating women’s struggles to justify the war, the Bush administration relied heavily on ideologically driven gender reforms aimed at confirming the “rescue” and “liberation” of Afghan women in the postconflict context. This has meant focusing on efforts that *most* prove Western liberal victory over the Taliban, rather than *actually* improving the lives of Afghan women. President George W. Bush unequivocally declared on more than one occasion that the war is very much an ideological struggle between liberal and nonliberal values. Bush remarked, “The war we fight today is more than a military conflict; it is the decisive ideological struggle of the 21st century.”¹⁴ Success, therefore, has relied not just on military victory, but it is cemented in a *perception* (one that does not necessarily have to be fully realized) of a “newly liberated” Afghanistan, thriving on the principles of liberty, freedom, democracy, and the free market. In the first few years after removing the Taliban from power, sweeping reforms were under way to catapult Afghanistan into a new modernizing society and these “new” freedoms for Afghan women were paraded to convince the Taliban and the rest of the world that the U.S.-led invasion was indeed achieving success. The U.S. government was particularly self-congratulatory on certain widely publicized accomplishments, mainly constitutional changes for gender equality, the establishment of the Ministry of Women’s Affairs, the return of girls to schools, and the active formal political participation of women, as voters and parliamentari-

9. For a detailed discussion, see, e.g., Shampa Biswas, “Patriotism in the U.S. Peace Movement: The Limits of Nationalist Resistance to Global Imperialism,” in *Interrogating Imperialism: Conversations on Gender, Race, and War*, ed. Robin L. Riley and Naeem Inayatullah (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 63–99; Sebastian Mallaby, “The Reluctant Imperialist: Terrorism, Failed States, and the Case for American Empire,” *Foreign Affairs* 81, no. 2 (2002): 2–7; and David R. Francis, “The New Imperialism,” *Christian Science Monitor*, 28 April 2005, www.csmonitor.com/2005/0428/p17501-cogn.html.

10. Michael Ignatieff, *Empire Lite: Nation-Building in Bosnia, Kosovo, Afghanistan* (London: Vintage, 2003).

11. Mark T. Berger, “From Nation-Building to State-Building: The Geopolitics of Development, the Nation-State System, and the Changing Global Order,” *Third World Quarterly* 27 (2006): 10.

12. Zillah Eisenstein, “Feminisms in the Aftermath of September 11,” *Social Text* 20, no. 3 (2002): 84.

13. Michaela L. Ferguson and Lori Jo Marso, eds., *W Stands for Women: How the George W. Bush Presidency Shaped a New Politics of Gender* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 7.

14. George W. Bush, “President George Bush Addresses American Legion National Convention,” Office of the Press Secretary, 31 August 2006, www.whitehouse.gov/ (accessed 12 November 2008).

ans. Visibly demonstrating and declaring the inroads made by many Afghan women as a result of the U.S.-led invasion emblematically justified the war, the triumph of Western liberal values, and the continuity of the U.S. military presence in the country. Nancy Jabbara, in her analysis of U.S. media images, reveals that the wearing of the hijab is equated with illiteracy and the lack of civil rights, and soon after the Taliban was defeated she noted that newspapers ran headlines such as “One Afghan Woman’s Determination Can’t Be Veiled” and “Bare Faced Resistance.”¹⁵ As I have insisted elsewhere, there was a need to convey to the world that “a *new* kind of activism for women’s rights was forming in the country, inspired by a *new* climate of freedom, liberty and hope.”¹⁶

For many Western donor governments, gender programming in Afghanistan is largely aimed at facilitating the “reentry” of women into public space as active participants in civil society and within the country’s reforming governance structures. The intent is to “undo” and simultaneously challenge local (not international or imported) patriarchy, especially the Taliban’s residual hold in society, by encouraging and supporting Afghan women to take full advantage of the range of new freedoms and opportunities opening up for them.¹⁷ According to the Bush administration, Afghanistan has turned a new page, one that was celebrated by Laura Bush in her national radio address on 17 November 2001.¹⁸ A few years later, while visiting women’s organizations and U.S.-funded gender programs in Afghanistan, Laura Bush further applauded the progress made by women, stating, “I have especially watched with great pride as courageous women across your country have taken on leadership roles as teachers, students, doctors,

judges, business and community leaders, and politicians. . . . The United States Government is wholeheartedly committed to the full participation of women in all aspects of Afghan society, not just in Kabul, but in every province.”¹⁹ Without doubt many Afghan women are active in society, working outside the home, studying and making contributions in many fields, such as law, media, medicine, and government. However, the vast majority of Afghan women’s lives have not improved, and their very real and urgent humanitarian, development, and social concerns are simply not sufficiently prioritized. In the immediate aftermath of the U.S.-led invasion, one Western-based women’s organization, for example, with close ties to women’s groups across Afghanistan, immediately conducted a participatory needs assessment to identify the challenges and priorities of Afghan women.²⁰ The results of the assessment unequivocally revealed health and nutrition as primary concerns, and subsequently a project proposal was developed to respond to these identified needs. In turn, the government aid agency approached to fund the project requested the revision of the proposal into a training and capacity-building project on women’s leadership and human rights education. In the example of this particular women’s organization, the ideologically driven donor agenda to usher in a new language of rights and freedoms for Afghan women was deemed a higher priority than implementing a project identified as urgent by Afghan women. As Elaheh Rostami-Povey illustrates from her interviews with Afghan women, there is frustration about a perceived overemphasis on issues of culture, human rights, and political rights, instead of food security, employment, and health.²¹

15. Nancy Jabbara, “Women, Words, and War: Explaining 9/11 and Justifying U.S. Military Action in Afghanistan and Iraq,” *Journal of International Women’s Studies* 8, no. 1 (2006): 245; Paul Watson, “One Afghan Woman’s Determination Can’t Be Veiled,” *Los Angeles Times*, 9 June 2002; Natasha Walter, “Bare Faced Resistance,” *Guardian* (Manchester, UK), 20 July 2002.

16. Maliha Chishti, “Post-conflict Afghanistan: Exposing Masculine-Imperial Peace” (paper presented at the Canadian regional conference of the Association of Muslim Social Scientists, Ontario Institute for the Studies in Education, University of Toronto, Toronto, 1 November 2008).

17. See, e.g., the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) “Women in Development: Afghanistan” initiatives, particularly the *Gender Advocacy in Afghanistan* newsletters, www.usaid.gov/our_work/cross-cutting_programs/wid/resources/Afghanistan.html.

18. Laura Bush, “Radio Address by Mrs. Bush,” Office of the First Lady, 17 November 2001, www.whitehouse.gov/ (accessed 10 November 2008).

19. Laura Bush, “Mrs. Bush Highlights Women’s Achievements in Afghanistan,” Office of the First Lady, press release, 30 March 2005, www.whitehouse.gov/ (accessed 10 November 2008).

20. Anonymous, interview by the author, Toronto, 16 November 2008.

21. Rostami-Povey, *Afghan Women*, 51–64.

In effect, bad donor-driven priorities and policies, in addition to aid mismanagement and ineffective implementation, have over the past seven years offered the vast majority of Afghan women very few improvements. Irrespective, President Bush insisted on the liberal success over the Taliban, encouraging Americans and Afghans to celebrate the signaling in of a new era of prosperity for the entire country. The Bush administration clearly set out to distinguish the old (Taliban-ruled) Afghanistan as a country plagued by a shortage of health facilities, disease, poverty, illiteracy, unemployment, and the public and private oppression of women. In contrast, the newly liberated Afghan nation was ostensibly emerging as a strong, changed nation. In a speech delivered in Washington in February 2007, President Bush stated,

Today, five short years later, the Taliban have been driven from power, al Qaeda has been driven from its camps, and Afghanistan is free. That's why I say we have made remarkable progress. . . . Under the Taliban, women were barred from public office. Today, Afghanistan's parliament includes 91 women—and President Karzai has appointed the first woman to serve as a provincial governor. Under the Taliban, there were about 900,000 children in school. Today, more than 5 million children are in school—about 1.8 million of them are girls.²²

Although the West's liberal ideological triumph was publicly declared, such glib and simplistic contrasts between the old and new Afghanistan are hardly convincing. Not only is the Afghanistan parliament under siege by warlords intent on intimidating Afghan women parliamentarians and undermining women's rights, but after billions of dollars of postconflict reconstruction and development aid poured into Afghanistan, the harsh living conditions once attributed to the illiberal rule of the Taliban have remained in this post-Taliban period.²³ The Bush administration very early on proved to be interested much more in meeting the requisite ideologi-

cal criteria to declare ideological victory than in actually prioritizing and committing the funds needed to ensure that humanitarian and development assistance was specifically and effectively supporting women in their communities, particularly the rural majority. However, in the wake of aggressive insurgent activities, the United States has slowly realized that a military operation will not be sufficient to win the war on all fronts, that it must be accompanied by reconstruction and development interventions in order to earn the trust of Afghans and thereby weaken Afghan support for the Taliban.²⁴ In this sense, as the next section explores, the moral and ideological struggle against the Islamist insurgents has relied on, and will increasingly rely on, development aid as a key weapon in the battle to galvanize popular support against the insurgency.²⁵

The Insurgent/Counterinsurgent Aid Battlefield

Puncturing any perception of Western ideological or military success in Afghanistan is a central tactic used by the insurgency that since 2005 captured worldwide attention and cemented the possibility that the United States could actually be defeated in Afghanistan. According to a RAND report, the U.S. government acknowledged the invidious challenge posed by insurgent forces over the past few years, admitting that “violence was particularly acute between 2005 and 2006. During this period, the number of suicide attacks increased by more than 400 percent (from 27 to 139), remotely detonated bombings more than doubled (from 783 to 1,677), and armed attacks nearly tripled (from 1,558 to 4,542). In 2007, insurgent-initiated violence rose another 27 percent from 2006 levels.”²⁶ The unrelenting violence in the southern and eastern parts of the country between U.S.-led coalition forces and insurgents have dampened hopes for peace and security, and the indiscriminate U.S. air strikes killing hundreds of innocent civilians

22. George W. Bush, “President Bush Discusses Progress in Afghanistan, Global War on Terror,” Office of the Press Secretary, 15 February 2007, www.whitehouse.gov/ (accessed 9 September 2008).

23. Obaid Younossi and Khalid Nadiri, “Afghanistan at the Crossroads,” in Benard et al., *Afghanistan*, 75–83.

24. See U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, *Afghanistan: A Plan to Turn the Tide?* 110th Cong., 2nd sess., 31 January 2008, testimony of Richard A. Boucher, assistant secretary of state for South and Central Asian affairs, foreign.senate.gov/testimony/2008/BoucherTestimony080131a.pdf.

25. Jill McGivering, “Fighting the Taliban with Literacy,” *BBC News*, 11 November 2008, news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/7719251.stm.

26. Seth G. Jones, *Counterinsurgency in Afghanistan* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2008), 49.

yearly are fueling anger and resentment against the foreign military presence.²⁷ The resurgence of the insurgency is also due to perceptions of failed foreign aid interventions and widespread impressions of the government as fraught with corruption and incompetence.²⁸ As early as 2003, more than three hundred Afghans held an anti-U.S. demonstration in Kabul, outraged by growing insecurity, slow reconstruction, and salary payments.²⁹ Both Rostami-Povey and Antonio Donini note that there is a growing perception among many Afghans that aid is stifled in the country and that very little is being done by the government and the international community to meet their urgent needs.³⁰ Despite the claim made by the U.S. government that the newly democratic and liberalized Afghanistan would be much better off in the post-Taliban period, as Peter Viggo Jakobsen reveals, the United States and the international community did not, at least initially, match the rhetoric with the proper funds needed to redress the humanitarian and development crisis. Jakobsen notes, “the operation remains seriously undermanned and underfunded in comparison to other recent nation-building operations. The \$57 per capita proceed in external economic aid during the first two years of the Afghanistan operation is much lower than the \$679 in Bosnia, \$233 in East Timor, \$526 in Kosovo and \$206 in Iraq.”³¹

Over the years a number of international reports have circulated consistently urging Western donor governments to urgently respond to the further deteriorating health, social, economic, and security conditions of Afghans generally and the plights of Afghan women and children specifically.³² These reports documented the prevalence of gender-based and

sexual violence across the provinces that continues to be neglected. Very little political will and international donor support focuses on forced marriages, domestic violence, kidnappings, honor killings, and the daily threats, intimidations, and harassments women endure. The health indicators for Afghan women also remain some of the worst in the world, and as Cheryl Benard notes, it took the community of international planners two years to even identify health and hygiene as priorities in the post-Taliban period.³³ The limited availability and accessibility of health services, undernourishment, and infectious diseases are still the contributing factors to the overall poor health of rural women, and perhaps most alarming has been Afghanistan’s high maternal mortality ratio, between sixteen hundred and nineteen hundred deaths per one hundred thousand live births, roughly translating to almost one death every half hour.³⁴ As Barnett Rubin and Humayun Hamidzada note, aid to Afghanistan is only a fraction of the amount allocated to other postconflict countries.³⁵ Not only is aid to Afghanistan among the lowest compared with other postconflict states, but Afghans admit to the invisibility of aid on the ground. Worse still are rapidly spreading speculations that aid is wasted on the lavish lifestyles and salaries of expatriate staff, corruption, and the greed of national and international nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and their high overhead costs and redundant, ineffective projects.³⁶

In direct response to insurgents capitalizing on these growing resentments, the U.S. government has rather slowly realized, at least formally, that more aid in the country is needed to win the trust of Afghans and weaken insurgent support. These sentiments were expressed

27. Human Rights Watch, “‘Troops in Contact’: Air-strikes and Civilian Deaths in Afghanistan,” www.hrw.org/ (accessed 14 December 2008).

28. See Thomas H. Johnson, “The Taliban Insurgency and an Analysis of *Shabnamah* (Night Letters),” *Small Wars and Insurgencies* 18 (2007): 317–44; and Jones, “Counterinsurgency in Afghanistan.”

29. Kolhatkar and Ingalls, *Bleeding Afghanistan*, 101.

30. See Rostami-Povey, *Afghan Women*; and Antonio Donini, “Local Perceptions of Assistance to Afghanistan,” *International Peacekeeping* 14, no. 1 (2007): 158–72.

31. Peter Viggo Jakobsen, “U.S Interests and Stakes in Afghanistan: In for the Long Haul or Gone Tomorrow?” in Benard et al., *Afghanistan*, 7.

32. See, e.g., Human Rights Watch, “Lessons in Terror: Attacks on Education in Afghanistan,” www.hrw.org/en/reports/2006/07/10/lessons-terror (accessed 10 November 2008); and Amnesty International, “Afghanistan: Women Still under Attack—a Systematic Failure to Protect,” www.amnesty.org/en/library/asset/ASA11/007/2005/en/dom-ASA110072005en.pdf (accessed 14 November 2008).

33. Benard, “Next Afghanistan,” 51n5.

34. World Bank, “Afghanistan: National Reconstruction and Poverty Reduction—the Role of Women in Afghanistan’s Future,” siteresources.worldbank.org/AFGHANISTANEXTN/Resources/AfghanistanGenderReport.pdf (accessed 28 October 2008).

35. Rubin and Hamidzada, “From Bonn to London,” 9.

36. For detailed discussions on Afghan perceptions of aid, see Rostami-Povey, *Afghan Women*; and Yama Torabi and Lorenzo Delesgues, “Afghanistan: Bringing Accountability Back In: From Subjects of Aid to Citizens of the State,” www.iwaweb.org/BringingAccountabilitybackin.pdf (accessed 9 September 2008).

by high-ranking U.S. officials, notably Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice in her remarks in early 2008 before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. She admitted that the military campaign was not doing very well, further stating,

I also saw reconstruction efforts that frankly are not as coherent as they need to be. And we are searching now for an envoy who can help to bring coherence to that international effort because we now understand that in counterinsurgency you have to defeat the enemy, keep him from coming back and then give the population reason to believe in a better future. I believe that the Afghan project is making progress. The situation is better than some reports. It is not as good as it needs to be. And I am—we are paying a lot of attention to improving the circumstances in Afghanistan.³⁷

There is certainly nothing new about the U.S. government's interest in channeling foreign aid to serve specific foreign policy objectives in Afghanistan. During the Cold War, for example, the United States directed aid to Afghanistan to propel an armed struggle against the Soviet Union and further used development and humanitarian assistance to strengthen pro-U.S. allegiances among Afghans to ensure they maintained a strong influence in the country.³⁸ Interestingly, Canada and the United States have revived the Helmand-Arghandab Valley irrigation project, a signature development project that in the 1950s garnered the United States leverage over domestic Afghan policy.³⁹ The restoration of these large dams is no doubt a massive undertaking, and as in much of the developing world, dams are the signifiers of modernity, development, and progress. In Afghanistan, large-scale and visible reconstruction projects, such as the Helmand-Arghandab initiative, operate as arsenals in the counterinsurgent strategy to demonstrate to Afghans that a secure and promising future is possible in the new Afghanistan. By visibly demonstrating improve-

ments to Afghans, the U.S. government hopes to weaken local support and allegiances to the Taliban and expects Afghans to rebuff the possibility of a return to the Taliban years. The U.S. government is hoping to win the battle of ideas and values, expecting Afghans to be convinced by and support the (re)construction of an externally facilitated free, liberal, and democratic Afghan state and society, one that is still rooted in a national Islamic identity. As Donini confirms, some Western aid organizations are supportive of this ideological and political campaign since they are tightly aligned with the foreign policy goals of their home country.⁴⁰ It is a reality, no doubt, that echoes Colin Powell's remarks at a 2001 National Foreign Policy conference for NGO leaders, where he remarked the U.S. government must "have the best relationship with the NGOs who are such a force multiplier for us, such an important part of our combat team."⁴¹

Despite these efforts, however, the insurgency has already capitalized on the widespread disillusionment of aid programming over the past eight years, dovetailing these disappointments with accusations made against aid agencies as fronts for intelligence gathering and Christian proselytizing. The Taliban categorically declared aid agencies nonneutral actors, hinting at their role as "agents" of U.S. imperialism who are corrupting Afghans and polluting their traditional values. The fight against reconstruction and development of the "hinterland" is therefore morally and religiously warranted to curb the supposed insidious attempts at modernization, westernization, and the spread of Christianity. By locking the Afghan government, the U.S. military forces, and all foreign interventions into a simplistic, nondifferentiated construction of "enemies" and "infidels," the Taliban justifies by "divine" decree the targeting of all development and nation-building efforts, rendering civil servants,

37. Condoleezza Rice, "Secretary Rice Discusses Foreign Aid, Departmental Changes, Iraq, Afghanistan," Embassy of the United States, Montevideo, Uruguay, montevideo.usembassy.gov/usaweb/2008/08-143EN.shtml (accessed 2 January 2009).

38. Jonathan Goodhand and Mark Sedra, "Bribes or Bargains? Peace Conditionalities and Post-conflict Reconstruction in Afghanistan," *International Peacekeeping* 14 (2007): 41–61.

39. Kolhatkar and Ingalls, *Bleeding Afghanistan*, 114.

40. Donini, "Local Perceptions," 159.

41. Colin Powell, "Remarks to the National Foreign Policy Conference for Leaders of Nongovernmental Organizations," U.S. Department of State, avalon.law.yale.edu/sept11/powell_brief31.asp (accessed 20 April 2010).

foreign diplomats, and aid workers as equal and fair targets for insurgent strikes.⁴² In an open letter to all Canadians, for example, the Taliban threatened to kill more Canadian aid workers if Canada continues to occupy Afghanistan to advance the American agenda.⁴³ Working from within this fundamentalist worldview, the Taliban is attempting to evoke latent sympathies among Afghans to global Muslim solidarity by relating the Afghan plight to the suppression, mockery, and blatant disrespect of Muslims worldwide by Western governments. As Mullah Dadullah, a Taliban military commander killed in 2007, had stated, “We are not fighting here for Afghanistan, but we are fighting for all Muslims everywhere. . . . The infidels attacked Muslim lands and it is a must that every Muslim should support his Muslim brothers.”⁴⁴ These kinds of rhetorical statements are used to justify the violence and enlist popular support against Westerners by reducing the war to a simplified struggle of “us” against “them.”

This rigid and oversimplified binary defining loyalty and betrayal to the nation is conveyed to communities through the infamous “night letters,” which, as Thomas H. Johnson points out, have labeled those Afghans perceived to be supporting the Americans and the Karzai government as “so-called Afghans.”⁴⁵ As such, the Taliban demarcates “good” Afghans from the “bad.” The former are constructed as friends of the insurgency, pious Muslims who are loyal to the global Muslim brotherhood and supportive of the Taliban’s mission to return to power to restore the country to proper religious rule. The “bad” Afghans are in turn those individuals who are cooperating with the Afghan government and the international presence, hence complicit in foreign rule and the subjugation of Muslim lands. The attempt here is to “expunge” Afghans from their core cultural and religious identities based on their associations with foreigners, which is a means by which the Taliban has justified the attacks made against

countless numbers of Afghans as a form of punishment. The authoritative and patriarchal base of the insurgency further isolates women and girls identified as benefiting from externally facilitated reforms, as central to this nation-betraying narrative. Afghan women and girls are the recast foils for authentic Afghan cultural and social traditions in the war on terror and so are reinscribed symbols of family honor and Islamic purity. Feminist scholars have identified the burdens women bear as cultural symbols in the aftermath of wars, exploring male violence against women through romanticized notions of a return to “normalcy.”⁴⁶ This has largely meant rescripting women’s roles as mothers and wives, and in the case of the Taliban, enforcing “normalcy” in Taliban-held areas further requires removing women from public spaces and relegating them back to their homes. It seems women and girls must now be further “protected” from the imported male gaze, that is, foreign soldiers, diplomats, consultants, and aid workers and the corrupting influence of Western morals and values generally that have infiltrated the media, government, and schools.

In effect, the insurgency seeks the restoration of the old Taliban religious order as a corrective to Western imperial penetration, and although it does not have formal governing authority, it is without doubt a de facto force to be reckoned with, particularly in the southern and eastern parts of the country. In these regions, insurgents (as well as others) continue to violently reprimand women and girls benefiting from the Karzai government’s reforms and the U.S.-led nation-building efforts, whether they are gaining access to education and training, learning about their rights, earning salaries, or contributing to a changing society. Their participation and activism is projected as disavowal and resistance to the old order, and certainly this defiance has facilitated a vociferous backlash against women and girls, whose mobility in public is regularly stifled under Taliban

42. Michael Scheuer, “Al-Qaida Hails ‘Revival’ in Afghanistan,” *Asia Times* (Hong Kong), 1 August 2008, www.atimes.com/atimes/South_Asia/JH01Df01.html.

43. Tobi Cohen, “Pull out or Else, Taliban warns Canada,” *Toronto Star*, 18 August 2008, www.thestar.com/News/Canada/article/480326.

44. Jones, “Counterinsurgency in Afghanistan,” 101.

45. Johnson, “Taliban Insurgency,” 322

46. See Sheila Meintjes, Anu Pillay, and Meredith Turshen, eds., *The Aftermath: Women in Post-conflict Transformation* (London: Zed Books, 2002); Donna Pankhurst, ed., *Gendered Peace: Women’s Struggles for*

Post-war Justice and Reconciliation (New York: Routledge, 2008); and Cynthia Cockburn, *From Where We Stand: War, Women’s Activism, and Feminist Analysis* (London: Zed Books, 2007).

surveillance and policing. Afghans are warned that they are being “watched,” and anyone who dares to collaborate with foreigners or the government will inevitably be punished.⁴⁷ This environment of intense intimidation is not offset by the government’s presence, police visibility, or foreign security or military forces. As Meredith Turshen explains, women are aware of the different sets of laws that regulate them, and customary regimes of power within their own communities create intrusive hierarchal power relations intent on controlling women’s lives.⁴⁸ The Afghan government’s limited presence in much of the country has paved the way for the Taliban to set up parallel administrations to enforce harsh orders and command allegiance and obedience from communities.⁴⁹ Subverting government institutions by establishing an authoritative presence is an attempt to convey to Afghans primarily that Talibanized religious edicts intend to stay, long after the foreigners and their diverse agenda’s pull out. It would be misleading, however, to suggest that the Taliban gaze has penetrated evenly across the country. There is a spectrum of experiences among Afghan women, such as in Bamiyan Province, wherein women are reported to be quite active politically and are successfully taking part in community development councils and initiatives.⁵⁰ In contrast, in southern Afghanistan, where the insurgency is most active, the Taliban draws strength from a Pashtun cultural ethos giving men considerable authority over women. Men in Kandahar Province, for example, typically have authority on all aspects of women’s lives, often giving them permission to leave their homes and escorting them in public. The right to choose a marriage partner is still curtailed and subject to male authority; many women and girls endure forced marriages or early marriages, and they have virtually no rights to divorce.⁵¹ It is important to mention, therefore, that there are many other interlocking factors and forces (in addition to the Taliban) contrib-

uting to the public and private violence against women. But, as Deniz Kandiyoti cautions, one must be careful not to make sweeping generalizations linking local culture to women’s abuse. Indeed, a more nuanced approach is needed, linking Afghanistan’s history of war, insecurity, foreign influence, and economic factors, as well as the politicization of religion, which all intersect and continue to impact women diversely across the country.⁵²

In the current tense and conflict-ridden terrain, however, there is a reassertion of restrictive and regulatory gender-based practices attempting to unravel any gains made by women and girls under the Karzai government. Relegating women and girls “back” to their homes by creating a hostile, intimidating, and threatening public environment is a key insurgent strategy used in southern and eastern Afghanistan to halt the politico-ideological shifts that may be operationalized by aid interventions. The rebuilding of schools and especially the return of girls to schools are representative of a systematic attempt to dismantle the Taliban’s system of social control and singularly represent the expanding reach of the new Afghan state. Since many parts of Afghanistan remain out of the reach of the central government and aid agencies alike, schools are consequently the only visible proof of the presence of the government and a Western-led nation-building effort. Hence it is not surprising that insurgents have expended much time and resources to sabotage nationwide efforts to restore the war-damaged educational infrastructure and reverse the impact of the ban on girls’ education under the Taliban (1996–2001). Threats and intimidations made against students and teachers, as well as the bombing of schools, have directly impacted access to education across the provinces.⁵³ In Kandahar Province, where the female literacy rate is 16 percent, a fire in 2004 destroyed the largest girls’ school, in Kandahar city, and the long distances for girls to reach schools and the threats

47. Johnson, “Taliban Insurgency,” 327.

48. Meredith Turshen, “Engendering Relations of State to Society in the Aftermath,” in Meintjes et al., *Aftermath*, 78–96.

49. Jason Burke, “Taliban Win over Locals at the Gates of Kabul,” *Observer* (London), 24 August 2008, www.guardian.co.uk/world/2008/aug/24/Afghanistan.

50. Carlotta Gall, “In Poverty and Strife, Women Test Limits,” *New York Times*, 5 October 2008, www.nytimes.com/2008/10/06/world/asia/06bamiyan.html?hp.

51. Amnesty International, “Women Still under Attack.”

52. Deniz Kandiyoti, “Between the Hammer and the Anvil: Post-conflict Reconstruction, Islam and Women’s Rights,” *Third World Quarterly* 28 (2007): 503–13.

53. Human Rights Watch, “Lessons in Terror.”

to their safety along the way have impinged the willingness of many girls to study and their families to allow them.⁵⁴ The Taliban night letters issued in Parwan and Kapisa provinces made an explicit warning to those instructing girls, including religious clerics as well as teachers, that they would be punished, because the education of girls is an explicit act of evil.⁵⁵ Consequently, girls represent less than 15 percent of the total enrollment in nine provinces in the east and south. In active insurgent regions such as Kandahar, for example, in the years 2004–5, 19 percent of officially enrolled students in Kandahar Province were girls, but outside of the city, enrollment of girls was only 10 percent and still no girls were enrolled in four of Kandahar's fifteen educational districts.⁵⁶

The insurgent strategy has also violently targeted women in positions of power and influence, most certainly because they symbolize an epitomized “betrayal” to the old order through their active, vocal, and visible participation in the “new” Afghanistan. Many high-profile women lawyers, journalists, and others are sent intimidating and life-threatening letters urging them to stay home for their own protection and the protection of their families. Donna Pankhurst identifies backlash against women as common and pervasive in many postconflict settings, suggesting that women are often barred from actively exercising any new rights that may be opening up for them in the aftermath of wars. Restricting women's mobility in the name of “protecting women” is evident in many postconflict societies, aimed at ensuring women remain in the private/domestic sphere and take part in the informal economy rather than leave their homes and compete for work with men.⁵⁷ In the context of Afghanistan, however, the Taliban masquerades behind the notion of “protecting” women in order to carry out an offensive, punitive campaign of repression, specifically targeting high-profile women to send a message of threat to all women.

In Kandahar, the assassination in September 2006 of Safiye Amajan, the head of the Ministry for Women's Affairs, illustrated the dangers facing women in the province, especially those active in human rights organizing. Considerably more women, teachers, aid workers, journalists, and other women in high-profile positions have either been killed or issued death threats. The Taliban claimed responsibility for the death of Captain Malalai Kakar, gunned down on her way to work. Kakar was often profiled in the media as an icon of the new liberalized Afghan society.⁵⁸ Interestingly, she had been a police officer since 1982 but left during the Taliban, only to resume work after the U.S.-led invasion. In response to these threats and targeted assassinations, Afghan women leaders and activists organized a press conference to bring attention to the daily threats and risks to their lives. Requesting that the media not take their pictures, one woman, Marya Bashir, the country's only provincial female chief prosecutor, admitted that she is now in more danger than when she was first appointed more than two years ago: “‘From the time that I was appointed to now, the situation has completely changed. Every day is getting worse’ with death threats and attacks. . . . ‘My children cannot go to school because I have got this position.’”⁵⁹

For the Taliban, reprimanding educated, intelligent, and successful women in the discourse of “betrayal” is an attempt to infantilize women and thrust them into a rigid ideological trap. The activism and participation of women in public life is constructed as “anti-Afghan” behavior, denying women agency and political subjectivity to take part in changing the conditions of women in the country. Despite the threats and intimidations, the resistance and resilience of women and girls is exercised by their *very* return to school and work each day, as students, teachers, health-care providers, and civil servants, and, in doing so, defying insurgent, criminal, or other male authoritative obstacles.

54. Masuda Sultan, “From Rhetoric to Reality: Afghan Women on the Agenda for Peace,” www.eldis.org/static/DOC18563.htm (accessed 24 September 2008).

55. Johnson, “Taliban Insurgency,” 333–35.

56. UNICEF, “Humanitarian Action Report, 2007.”

57. See Donna Pankhurst, “Gendered War and Peace,” in Pankhurst, *Gendered Peace*, 1–29.

58. John F. Burns, “Taliban Claim Responsibility in Killing of Key Female Afghan Officer,” *New York Times*, 28 September 2008, www.nytimes.com/2008/09/29/world/asia/29afghan.html.

59. Heidi Vogt, “Afghan Women Leaders Face Growing Taliban Threats,” *The Huffington Post*, 4 December 2008, www.huffingtonpost.com/2008/12/04/afghan-women-leaders-face_n_148528.html.

Many Afghan women working for aid agencies or the government are specifically targeted. Speaking to IRIN, the humanitarian news and analysis service, one Afghan woman health-care worker threatened by the Taliban in Kandahar reveals,

Who will treat diseased women in this country, if no woman is allowed to work as a doctor or nurse? Many women are already dying from diseases and lack of access to health services. I do not know why they [the insurgents] want women to suffer diseases. I also cannot leave my job because it's the only means of supporting my family. My children will starve if I have no income. I do not work as a matter of luxury. I work to serve destitute and needy women and children, and also to support my family. I will continue to work, no matter how serious the threats are.⁶⁰

Conclusion

Although the larger social, humanitarian, and development challenges that underpin the daily struggles of Afghans are swept under the political rug, many Afghan women individually and through women's organizations are working to circumvent these harsh realities and alongside international organizations are calling for greater international support. Compounding the work of Afghan women's organizations, however, is the ambivalence of the U.S. administration to their social and economic plight and an unaccountable foreign military operation. Worse still is the refortified presence of U.S.-backed warlords and what appears to be an expanding mandate on part of Western governments to further arm local militias to help the United States win the fight against the pernicious insurgency. Although Western feminists have paid considerable attention to the "pathologies" of local Afghan patriarchy and misogyny, I have argued here that for the most part feminist analysis has failed to identify and interrogate the "imported" regimes of masculine power and authority operating in Afghanistan, such as international agencies, foreign governments, and nonstate actors, and their various ideological, political, and military agendas. Closer attention must now be paid to

the differences, contradictions, and synthesis of foreign and local militarized masculinities that distinctly and collectively perpetuate insecurity and violence against Afghan women. Examining the implications on women as a result of the aggregated and interlocking militarization of Afghan society is no doubt a complex undertaking. Although this article focused only on the U.S.-led coalition force and the Taliban insurgency, one must recognize and skillfully untangle the impact of a rather scattered armed fraternity that is also made up of the ISAF, regional U.S.-backed strongmen, the Afghan police, the Afghan army, privatized security contractors, and an entire loose network of criminal and tribal groups.

As the war on terror continues and the roles of these armed actors are likely to expand, I have suggested that aid efforts in Afghanistan cannot be disconnected from the war; hence the "aid battlefield" as described here has referred to how insurgent and counterinsurgent strategies rely on aid settings to further their objectives to declare ideological victory. I have suggested that this tug of war is on the one hand largely focused on performing and proving liberal-imperial success by constructing Afghan women as champions of Western liberal success in the aftermath of the Taliban. On the other hand, the insurgency draws its core strength by associating betrayal to Afghan culture and religion with Afghan compliance and participation in government-organized or foreign-facilitated programs. Afghan women and girls are therefore reprimanded violently for advancing the goals of the "puppet" Karzai government and giving in to U.S. imperial rule. As long as the war on terror continues in Afghanistan, it seems doubtful that Afghan women can easily untangle themselves from these imposed ideological traps. S

60. "Afghanistan: Nazia, 'I work as a health worker despite threats to my life,'" IRIN, 1 December 2008, www.irinnews.org/Report.aspx?ReportId=81740.