Pathways to public life for professional women in Afghanistan: Negotiating shifting patriarchal political regimes and gender regimes

PATHWAYS TO PUBLIC LIFE FOR PROFESSIONAL WOMEN IN AFGHANISTAN: NEGOTIATING SHIFTING PATRIARCHAL POLITICAL REGIMES AND GENDER REGIMES

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Pathways to public life for professional women in Afghanistan: Negotiating shifting patriarchal political regimes and gender regimes

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Abstract

This thesis examines how Afghan women from the professional social class have negotiated the patriarchy in that country and claimed their agency and public life during different political regimes. Resisting the Western representation of Afghan women as passive victims, it uses the life story method, based on interviews with a wide range of women in public life during the period of US-sponsored democracy and intervention, to analyse the complex factors involved in enabling women to access public life. From a historical sociological viewpoint it examines the shifts in the forms of patriarchy and their sustaining gender regimes from 19th century to the present, and draws on Walby's six structures of patriarchy in order to understand how those shift affected the ability of women to access public life and employment. Those structures – culture, religion, education, employment, family – are explored through the experiences and life histories of my interviewees. The thesis also pays attention to the involvement of external, foreign actors in the affairs of Afghanistan and the impact of those interventions on the possibility for women's agency and participation in professional and public life through different political regimes. It thus challenges a simplistic view 9/11 was a watershed moment for women's empowerment, and notes that the economic issues, an aid-dependent economy and political regimes, security and safety, poverty and psychological trauma, corruption and power struggles among different forces (local and foreign) in many ways undermined women's prospects in public life. The finding of the research shows that the rights and position of women in Afghanistan have fluctuated over the last 100 years depending on the patriarchal cultural, political and religious ideology and practice of the political regimes, and in no small part due to the influence and interference of external actors in the country.

Key words: Afghanistan; professional women; public life; gender regimes; political regimes, patriarchy; external actors; political economy; culture

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Abbreviations

AIHRC	Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission
AREU	Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit
AWC	Afghan Women's Council
AWN	Afghan Women's Network
BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women
CSO	Central Statistical Office
DRA	Democratic Republic of Afghanistan
DWOA	Democratic Women's Organization of Afghanistan
EVAW	Elimination of Violence against Women
ICRC	International Committee of the Red Cross
ISI	Directorate of Inter-Services Intelligence (Pakistan)
KhAD	Khidamat-i Ittla' at-i Dawlati (State Information Services)
KOAW	Khalq Organization of Afghan Women
MOWA	Ministry of Women's Affairs
MP	Member of Parliament
NAPWA	National Action Plan for the Women of Afghanistan
NGO	Non-governmental organization
OHCHR	Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human -Rights
PDPA	People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan
PGNs	Practical Gender Needs
RAWA	Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan
SGNs	Strategic Gender Needs
UNAMA	United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
UNOCHA	United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Assistance in Afghanistan

UNODC	United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime
USA	The United States of America
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics

Glossary

AWN	The Afghan Women's Network, which is a non-governmental organization (NGO) and it was created in 1996 by Afghan women following the World Conference on Women in Beijing with the aim of empowering women and ensure their equal participation in Afghan society.
Baad	Giving away/offering a girl as brides in "compensation" to settle a dispute/reparation for offences between tribes or families
Burqa/Burka	a traditional garment covering the entire body and face. Worn by Afghan women for centuries, the burqa was periodically enforced as mandatory dress for women throughout Afghan history. Although Islam mandates modest dress, it does not dictate the covering of the face.
Jihad	holy war
Jirga	Tribal council (Pashtun)
Loya Jirga	a Pashto word meaning "Grand Council", a meeting of tribal, political, military and religious leaders to discuss issues such as setting foreign and domestic policy, declaring war, and legitimacy of rulers.
Mahram	Close male relative with whom women are allowed to have contact
Mujahid	(plural, Mujahideen) is he who fights in the way of/for Allah (God), usually to restore the rule of God or protect the believers (Muslims) from non-Muslims enemies. The Mujahideen were non-state fighters in efforts to repel the Soviets.

Mullah	Religious Leader
Pashtunwali	The Pashtun ethical code of conduct. It is a system of law and governance that is preserved and still in use today.
Sharia Law	Islamic law based on the Muslim holy book, the Quran, and teachings of Prophet Muhammad
Shura	village council
Talib	(plural, Taliban) usually refers to a student of Islam studying in a religious school or madrassa, usually located in a mosque.
Ulama	Religious scholars
WDOA	Democratic Organization of Afghanistan. It is a Marxist-oriented political group active between 1965 and 1992. The Democratic Organization of Afghan Women (DOAW) was founded in 1965 as a component of the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) by Anahita Ratebzad, who served as its first president.
Wolesi Jirga	Lower House of Parliament
Zina	Adultery (Article 427, Penal Code)

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Chapter 1 - From a caricature to a kaleidoscope

"Women need security. Women want to use their rights. Political candidates want to use their rights for elections. We want to raise children. We want good education. We hope for the better future."

(Interviewee, Judge Mrs. Fahima, Ministry of Women's Affairs, 2013)

1.1 Introduction: the research question

Are all women in Afghanistan forever the burqa-clad victims of extreme patriarchy, waiting to be "rescued" by the intervention of the West? A glance at Western media appears to suggest so. But reality is far more complex than a cover of Time magazine. Women in Afghanistan are not all shut away in their homes, not now, nor in the past. Through the many and varied turbulent periods of Afghan history in the last century, many women, especially professional middle-class women, have persistently sought to exercise agency outside of the home, in the public sphere, as working professional women. These women have been rendered invisible by this dominant narrative of passivity and victimhood.

This Western representation of "Afghan women" ignores the diversity of experience among different classes of women and across different moments of Afghan history. This narrow depiction tends to erase the agency of women themselves. This dissertation will challenge this dominant representation of Afghan women as passive victims by examining the life experiences of a group of women who are under-represented in the literature: middle-class professional women who have managed to forge careers and a presence in the public sphere despite the environmental constraints they had to face.

The central question of this research is: how have professional Afghan women negotiated their own agency in public life during different patriarchal regimes over the last century? This thesis examines the key challenges faced by professional women in their working lives in Afghanistan, and how they have overcome them.

In so doing, it challenges the Western narratives about, and representations of, Afghan women and seeks to re-present them in a wholly different light.

The term “professional women” is used in this thesis to refer to women whose education, skills, career path, and working status have enabled them to earn their own living and be successful in diverse areas. They may be working for the public or private sector, for example in areas such as law, business, education, media, medicine, and politics. The Australian Council of Professions defines a “profession” as: “a disciplined group of individuals who adhere to ethical standards and who hold themselves out as, and are accepted by the public as possessing special knowledge and skills in a widely recognised body of learning derived from research, education and training at a high level, and who are prepared to apply this knowledge and exercise these skills in the interest of others”.[1] Some professional jobs, such as doctors and judges, are defined by group membership and internal and external regulation, as noted in the first part of the definition. This membership of a closed group, where entry is defined by specific qualifications and which confers a high social status, as a result, is, however, only part of the notion of “professional”. In a much broader sense, alluded to in the second part of the definition, the idea of professional activity and identity is related to education and the acquisition of specific knowledge, and social participation in, and recognition by, other professionals in a given field. The notion of a 'vocation', or calling, also suggests that for these women, their work and professional status forms a primary part of their personal identity. In this thesis the term ‘professional’ women applies to women who work in fields that require a certain level of education and skill, generally have some kind of career and progression structure. These women have, as a result, some financial independence, even if they are not the only earner in their family, and enjoy a degree of social status. They may be working for the public or private sectors. The women interviewed that I interviewed for this thesis in 2011 and 2013 work in a variety of fields, with professions as varied as: judge, doctor, actress, journalist, CEO of a local media company, staff of international non-governmental and inter-governmental organisations, police commander, and Member of Parliament. There is also a class connotation to the notion of the professional: the implicit possession of a higher-level skill set, in

[1]https://www.professions.org.au/what-is-a-professional/

whatever field of employment, marks out professionals as middle-class, at the least. Therefore, it is important to acknowledge that this dissertation focuses on a subset of women in Afghanistan, not all women. However, it attempts to trace the kinds of opportunities and pathways that professional women were able to use, from whatever class starting point, as a means of reaching the professional classes.

In order to answer the primary research question -- how these professional women have negotiated their own agency in public life -- the thesis addresses a number of secondary research questions. First, how have Afghan women been represented by the Western media, and in the knowledge regimes produced by Western aid organisations and academia? Second, how have the different political and patriarchal regimes in Afghanistan since 1919 shaped varying gender regimes, influencing the possibilities for agency of professional women? Third, in what ways have professional Afghan women managed to claim agency and negotiate with these ranges of patriarchy imposed on them since 1919? Fourth, to what extent did 9/11 became a watershed moment in terms of the patriarchal regimes that have existed in Afghanistan and the opportunities for women's agency in public life? Fifth, how does the dominant representation of Afghan women reflect geopolitical contests in which Afghanistan has found itself? There are thus two levels of analysis here, of sets of structures that intersect. Not only do Afghan women immediate day-to-day challenges within their homes and working lives, but attitudes to their presence in public life are also shaped by the geopolitical games in which Afghanistan has found itself a pawn in an international chess game for regional power and influence.

My research into the life experiences of professional Afghan women draws on interviews with professional Afghan women during fieldwork conducted in Afghanistan in 2011 and 2013, as well as on a reading of the particular representations of Afghan women in the media, in academic and policy literature. Methodological issues are addressed in greater detail later in this chapter.

1.2 The rationale: Why Afghan professional women?

The purpose of the research is to explore – within a wider historical and socio-political context – the status of professional Afghan women and to analyse the various obstacles to, and opportunities for, their participation in public life. It explores how these women have won the ability to participate in public office and private professional careers, despite the deep-rooted structures of gender discrimination derived from norms and rules of extreme patriarchy. My interviews in Kabul revealed that, despite cultural and political environment of extreme patriarchy, many professional women were able to achieve success reaching very public positions in diverse functions.

My personal interest in these questions started in 2001 when images of Afghan women became prevalent in the international media, depicting them as oppressed victims awaiting their rescue by a benevolent international community. This reproduces the neo-colonial trope of "white men saving brown women from brown men", in Spivak's much-quoted formulation. I lived and worked twice in Afghanistan, in 2011 and in 2013, first employed by the Asia Foundation and later as an Associate Professor at an Afghan university. My personal experience with professional Afghan colleagues and friends provided me with a much more nuanced understanding of (urban) Afghan society, remedying the impressions I had formed before my arrival in the country. That is when I noticed a disconnection between the phenomenon of successful professional Afghan women and the generic depiction of Afghan women in the international media.

The dominant representation of Afghanistan in the international media is that of a backward, violence-prone, corrupt country, whose men deeply disrespect their women. There is, of course, truth in these depictions yet, as with any caricature, they obscure other realities. Exaggeration and homogenization in such representations means that variations in women's experience historically, in different regions, in urban centres and rural areas, are ignored. It is true that Afghan women wishing to pursue a career outside home face a variety of cultural and societal obstacles, but the notion that they are fully subjugated and completely lacking in agency is not. Afghan women are fighting an uphill battle against culturally enshrined discrimination and are often forceful agents in the family, in the wider community and in cultural settings. The wearing of burqa is a case in point.

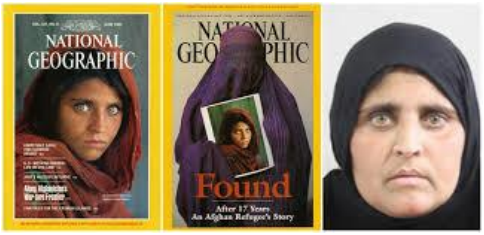
In the West the image of the burqa has deployed symbolically as the epitome of oppression whereas in the Muslim world wearing a veil has multiple connotations, ranging from religious to aesthetic to political (Abu-Lughod, 2002, p.785). Reducing judgements about the agency of Afghan women to whether they wear a burqa or not is not helpful for understanding complex realities.

As I discovered the lived realities of many professional Afghan women and was able to interview them for my research, I realised that their stories could provide a perspective on a social group that has rarely received the focus it deserves and could thereby contribute to the existing literature on women's lives in contexts of extreme and variable patriarchy. Cultural, social and religious constraints vary, within families and communities. These constraints also vary over time, and different historical junctures either stimulate or limit gendered agency. The Taliban's reign was a very different experience for professional women than the period under the Soviet-backed communist government, and different again from the Mujahideen era and the earlier monarchy. The research assesses these historical changes from a sociological perspective. Will professional women's current advances prove sustainable, that is, are they sufficiently rooted in Afghan society and resilient enough to cope with future pressures? This version of the dissertation was concluded just after the Taliban had returned to power in August 2021, so the final chapter, in particular, considers the implications of the collapse of the Western-backed regime for women's prospects.

1.2.1 Western representations of Afghan women

My thesis challenges the standard views in the Western media in relation to gender and conflict in Afghanistan, which are sometimes also replicated in academic literature. Although the Western depiction of Afghan women claims to put their gendered agency upfront, in multiple ways they are depicted in generic terms as victims – of their husbands, fathers and brothers, or of the political system of the day. In both cases Afghan culture is seen as morally deficient. In line with the stereotype of "feeble" Oriental women, it is therefore seen as the part of the "white men's burden" to come to their rescue and change their fate (Cloud, 2004, p.285). Indeed, the portrayal of the "Oriental other" is generally a feminised image of

passivity and helplessness. Although Afghan boys and men are equally victims of conflict, their masculinity prevents them from being depicted as such in the Western media. A stereotype is set out, of the passive Afghan woman, subjugated to barbaric, violent fanatics, terrorists, and uneducated male chauvinists.
For example, the first emblematic example of “Afghan women” to receive wide circulation through the Western media in recent decades was the striking picture of a beautiful



Pashtun girl, on the front cover of the National Geographic in June 1985 (see the picture) and called by some the Afghan Mona Lisa (Schwartz-DuPre, 2010, p. 340). The name of the refugee girl would become public knowledge only decades later but then the messaging was never about the individual, as it was intended to attract sympathy for the Afghan refugees in Pakistan due to a geopolitical conflict. The iconic picture reminded the West of the ongoing war between the Mujahideen, or “Afghan freedom fighters”, as they were denominated in February 1985 by newly appointed US President Ronald Reagan, confronting the Soviet “occupiers” (Pach, 2006, p.75). The ensuing Reagan Doctrine, in which the President argued in his 1985 State of the Union address that the United States should not "break faith" with anti-Communist resistance groups, allowed for covert US military operations in Afghanistan initiated by the Pakistani Inter Service Intelligence (ISI) and partly funded by Saudi Arabia. As a result, the extremely patriarchal Saudi-Wahabi ideology was introduced into Afghanistan, and would form the foundations of the Taliban regime. It would take 17 years, until she reappeared in the April 2002 issue of National Geographic magazine, before the refugee girl was identified as, Sharbat Gula. She was by then about 29 years old, living in Peshawar (Pakistan) and mother of four children of which one died in infancy. The accompanying article again depicted Afghans as impoverished and feminised victims of war and helpless refugees.

This thesis aims to correct this view and to provide a more nuanced perspective, by demonstrating not only the obstacles that women, especially those with professional aspirations, have to face but also the ways in which they were supported in those aspirations by the men in their families, and were able to take on signifi-

cant roles in rebuilding their country after consecutive wars. The thesis also identifies many of the constraining factors in women's life as being a function of Western interventions and the kinds of dynamics that those unleashed in Afghan society, rather than seeing those constraints as being somehow the result of some underlying, and ahistorical pathology in Afghan culture. Representations of Afghan women have been, in the context of these Western interventions, a key piece of a wider geo-political context over the future and governance of Afghanistan. The stereotypical image of the "Afghan woman" has been deployed to serve an external political objective.

1.3 Data collection and methodology

The empirical core of my research, interviews with Afghan professional women, was conducted between July and August 2013. The subjects researched are successful professional women in the ethnically diverse, war-torn country of Afghanistan. My study aimed, in part, to highlight how women have contributed socially, economically, and politically to their country despite many challenges. Participants were thus selected based on their working status and position. A total of twenty-one women in government and private sector positions were interviewed, with ages ranging between 25 and 65. The interviewees were professionals in the following fields: Afghanistan International Human Rights Commission; Members of Parliament; journalists; Chief Executive Officers; Non-governmental workers; United Nations staff members; senior officials in the Ministry of Women Affairs, Ministry of Public Health, Ministry of Interior, and Ministry of Justice. To do so, I introduced myself personally to those women of interest for the analysis. A second mode was to contact women of interest through the help of the UN Women office in Afghanistan.

After receiving a positive response, dates and timing were agreed as were the locations for the interview. Although the interviewees originated from various provinces in-country, the interviews were conducted in Kabul. The place was always the preferred site by the interviewee. The fact that the interviewee chose the place of the interview afforded them the familiarity of their house, office or

workplace. It resulted in me travelling from houses to courts and to even the female prison in Kabul to conduct the interviews. For several of these women it involved heavily secured locations. I recall being surprised by one Member of Parliament who admitted that she did not have the financial means to contract armed guards – a necessary precaution for most of her colleagues. This said, I personally never experienced security problems whilst interviewing.

In relation to consent, many of the participants were very enthusiastic at this invitation to share their life experiences, particularly the politicians, judges, the policewoman, journalists and an actress. No doubt, for some of them they considered their participation as a contribution to or recognition for their personal status and esteem. Evidently, no financial compensation or other rewards were provided, promised or alluded to. Participants agreed to my recording and note-taking during the interviews, on terms previously agreed to by email. In the thesis, the identities of the interviewees are withheld and instead pseudonyms used. This is largely for security reasons. Being outspoken as a female carries risks in Afghanistan. The interviews were conducted in English and whereas warranted a translator was used. Nine interviewees were able to answer directly in English and eleven required a translator. Those who spoke English fluently were mainly working for the United Nations and international NGOs; the majority of those not speaking English were Members of Parliament. As can be expected, not all interviewees offered a similar time space for the interview. Some interviews were thus limited in time, whereas others allowed ample time. One advantage of asking them to talk about their life was that the more they engaged, the more they relaxed and became comfortable. The settings of the interviews were conductive for an open exchange. As mentioned before, all interviewees were welcoming and enthusiastic but it also struck me that personalities were very varied, from timid to extrovert, from friendly to reserved, and from buoyant to measure in their demeanour. What they had in common was their success in their professional undertakings. However, the divergence of experiences and characters contributed to the more nuanced knowledge of the Afghan women studied as displayed in my study.

The interviews were conducted one-to-one in an open-ended fashion, using the life story method. In this method a person chooses to tell about the life that she has lived, told as completely and honestly as possible. It reflects reality “as experienced”, implying that facts can be filtered through what the person remembers and what she wishes others to know. It usually results from a guided interview conducted by another person (Atkinson, 2002, p.125). According to Titon (1980, p. 276) a life story is simply a person's story of her life, or of what she thinks is a significant part of that life. It is therefore a personal narrative, a story of personal experience, and, because it emerges from conversation, its ontological status is the spoken word, even if the story is transcribed and edited for the printed page. The life story qualitative research method is rich and flexible. It can range from a factual to a metaphorical form, from poetic to any other creative and expressive form. (Atkinson, 2002, p.125). The method is thus perfectly suited to my research on Afghan women in public life. A “life story” provides a means to understand the past and the present of an individual, and to comprehend a wider, shared experience of Afghan women and their public life before and during the “post-conflict” era not provided in other secondary sources. Life history/life story as a research method can provide insights into what can often be an ‘unspoken’ and therefore ‘unknown’ aspect of an individual’s life (McKay, 2000). The life history/life story method has been applied in a wide variety of academic studies and has become a primary methodology of anthropological field work (Atkinson, 2002, p.123). That said, this thesis does not take an ethnographic approach. I followed the life-story approach that implies that relatively few open-ended questions are asked, and interviewees were free to respond and elaborate. Of key interest in the interviews was to understand how they had achieved the professional status and what vectors of influence, both positive and negative, had been. The open-ended questions asked are listed in Appendix A.

The interviewer then takes their lead from participants’ emotional expressions and personal stories about their lives and experiences in asking follow up questions. In this sense the interviewer is not just a recorder but also a shaper of the narrative in the way they listen and interpret. It has been argued that the life story interview approach is problematic with respect to the reliability or accuracy of the

data provided to the researcher. Titon (1980) believes life story to be a fiction and argues that naïve listeners might assume a life story to be a truthful factual account of the storyteller's life. A more sophisticated listener understands that no matter how sincere the attempt made by the interviewee, remembering the past cannot render that past as it actually was, not only because memory is selective, but also because the storyteller is now a different person from what she was ten, twenty, or thirty years ago, and she may be unable or unwilling to imagine that she was different then (Titon, 1980, p. 290). This was not different for the women I interviewed for this research. Certainly, the women intended to rely an honest recount on how they had experienced the past and present. Yet, undoubtedly, filters of memory and narrative came into play. This research takes at face-value, as it must, the narrative and interpretation that the interviewees provide about their lives. These interviews are then analysed against the backdrop of the changing social and political contexts of Afghanistan, and in relation to the dominant literature and media narratives claiming to describe and/or represent Afghan women's social, cultural, and gender situations.

1.4 Feminist methodologies

As noted above, the life story method is an approach in which the researcher also plays a key role in the process of data collection. How they frame the question, how they relate to the interviewees, how they are perceived by the interviewees, and how they then use and interpret the material collected has a major bearing on how the life histories are "re-presented" in academic work. Therefore, in this section I first consider my own position as a researcher and I also pause to look at what principles of feminist methodologies, in its evolving forms have informed my work throughout.

Connecting on an inter-personal level with the interviewees came easily. First, I had been working at the time for the Afghan office of the Asia Foundation and later as an Associate-Professor at the local Bakhtar University, where I was surrounded by locals. This helped me to become more acquainted with the local culture and norms, if only in dress and speaking style. Secondly, I myself was raised in a patriarchal context and therefore the experiences shared were not

foreign to me, which helped to establish a conduit of mutual understanding. Finally, my Asian features (I am Burmese) bear some resemblance to the Hazara ethnicity in Afghanistan, a far more common feature than the Western interlocutors they often met. Nonetheless, despite these favourable factors, I ultimately remained a foreigner in Afghanistan and a full assimilation to the life-experience of professional Afghan women was thus impossible. I therefore share the "outsider" status of many of those who write about Afghan women and, whilst I do my best to critique mis-representations of Afghan women, my subject position, non-Afghan, living in the West, will colour my interpretations and understanding of the lives of these women and the contexts in which they are survived and, sometimes, thrived. This is an inevitable limitation of the study.

Reflexivity on the part of the researcher is a core element of feminist methodology. As I was researching the lives of women, I found feminist methodologies to be useful and appropriate on many levels. But what is feminist methodology? Kaplan writes "I do not believe that there is a feminist methodology. Indeed, in my opinion it would be dangerous to assume that there was or should be one. Rather: there are feminist perspectives and results." (Kaplan, 1995, p.88). The difference between method and methodology is explained by Sandra Harding, who asked in a much-cited piece: "Is there a feminist method?" Harding carefully distinguishes between method as "techniques for gathering evidence" and methodology as "a theory and analysis of how research does or should proceed" (Harding, 1987a, pp. 2–3). Are there methods that are specifically feminist? What is it that makes feminist approaches to methodology unique? A core trait is the rejection of traditional research methods, considered to be male-oriented. Shulamit Reinharz' summary of feminist methods is useful for appreciating the diversity of feminist approaches, their aims, their representation and their desire for social change, including shifting knowledge production a from masculinist approach to feminist approach in scholarship. After reviewing hundreds of projects where researchers identified their work as "feminist," Reinharz concluded that: feminism is a perspective, not a research method; feminists use a multiplicity of research methods; feminist research involves an ongoing criticism of non-feminist scholarship, is guided by feminist theory, may be transdisciplinary, aims to create social

change, strives to represent human diversity, and frequently includes the researcher as a person, attempts to develop special relations with the people in the studies (in interactive research) and defines a special relation with the reader. (Reinharz, 1992, 240 cited in Shirley Rose and Janice Lauer, 1994, pp.140-141).

Krook reiterates the inter-relationship between the analytical field of study, that is, laying bare the mechanisms of gender inequality by paying attention to the importance of gender as a central element of social life, and an implicit challenge to epistemology in the social sciences when such methodologies challenge the socially constructed norm of "objectivity" by incorporating subjectivity and reflexivity into research, avoiding the exploitation of women as objects of knowledge, and empowering women through social research (Krook, 2007, pp.4-5). Lather (1991), like others, sees which feminist methodology as emancipatory and expansive: it is human-centred, acknowledges the subjective as a valid source of knowledge and recognises the impact of the researcher on and in the research situation; it privileges natural as opposed to laboratory settings; it takes a holistic perspective that does not exclude some details as irrelevant; it retains a sense of the uniqueness of what is studied; it operates inductively and recognizes that data from inquiry conducted by humans is value laden.

The life-story approach adopted in this dissertation is a form of naturalistic case study research and is consistent with those practices and values in paying close attention to how women understand and can offer narratives about their own lives, particularly in a context such as Afghanistan where competing narratives about women are put forward as a kind of single story, propagated by actors ranging from the Taliban to Western aid agencies. Krook also highlights how feminist method is about process and outcome, not just subject matter: "Although many assume that feminist research involves female scholars writing on issues of women and gender, most do not limit their scope to these kinds of studies. Rather, they focus on how the means and ends of the research process might be made more or less "feminist'" (Krook, 2007, pp.4-5). My choice to study the agency of Afghan women through their life stories is designed as a feminist method, with feminist aims, that is, to amplify voices that get lost in these dominant narratives.

1.4.1 Debates in feminist methodologies and theory

The development of feminist methodologies, as epistemological approaches, is also linked to the development and history of feminism as a political and social movement. The term feminism emerged from women's claims for the rights and emancipation promised by the French Revolution. Historian of feminisms, Karen Offen (1988), has demonstrated that since its first appearance the term has been given many meanings and definitions, it has been put to diverse uses and inspired many movements. The history of feminism proceeds in visible waves during which time analysis category of “women” becomes gradually more expansive. Women are not a homogenous group and the different strands of feminism and feminist thought have been shaped by the voices that were heard – or were silenced, or misrepresented – at different points. First wave feminism, from the mid-19th century up to the early 20th century, was dominated by Western white middle- and upper-class women, and was focussed on access to education and employment, and obtaining voting rights. As a result, access to the public sphere and educational opportunities were accelerated and in 1882 women won property rights with the promulgation in the UK of the Married Women Property Act. This first phase of feminism demonstrates many of the elements of liberal feminism that continue to inform the policies and approaches of Western aid organisations, with its focus on legal reform, education, employment, and property rights as the gateways to women’s emancipation. These are not unimportant, as the testimonies of my interviewees demonstrate. However, the liberal feminism that has become the core of modernisation theory and of women-in-development approaches internationally has many limitations, in often ignoring other more controversial issues, and in its assumptions that the vigorous promotion of these values and policies is always uncomplicated and positive. In practice, as the history of attempts at “modernisation” in Afghanistan shows, a lack of deeper appreciation of very specific contexts and experiences – something that would be promoted by a truly feminist methodology, as outlined above – would go some way to avoiding.

The second wave of feminism from approximately 1960 to 1990, took the discussion to a more wide-ranging level. First**,** white middle-class feminists, epitomised

by Betty Friedan, and her best-selling book *The Feminine Mystique*, started theorising on sexism and the sexist power structure, with the slogan was “the personal is political”. They focussed on issues of equality and discrimination, topics left unaddressed throughout the first wave whilst gender inequality was identified in broader areas such as in social, cultural, political and economic spheres. It was during this Second Wave that feminist theories and academic works proliferated, combined with the movements for social change and social justice. This momentum also resulted in a diversity of approaches, definitions, theories, and methods, in a challenge to monolithic masculinist, positivist and essentialist approaches.

1.4.2 “Third World” and postcolonial feminisms

However, this diversity still remained constrained by a certain Western-centric world view. While the second wave of feminism coincided with the civil rights movement in the United States, it was not sensitive to issues of diversity among women in terms of class and race. Imelda Whelehan (1995) wrote that “Feminism was (..) regarded as one of “the flawed grand narratives of modernity” which “were perceived from a postmodern perspective as potentially tyrannical and unhelpfully universalizing.”

This critique led to a third wave, one part of which comprised the Third World Women theory, also known as postcolonial feminism. This originated out of a critique of the classism, racism and sexism of the colonial experience, and the way in which white Western feminists had failed to engage with the impacts of this colonial history. Figureheads in this movement were Chandra Mohanty, with her essay "*Under Western Eyes*", and Gayatri Spivak with *Can the Subaltern Speak*? Third-wave feminism is characterized by three important tactical moves that aim to resolve theoretical problems earlier untouched by the second wave. First, in response to the collapse of the category of “women,” the third wave foregrounds personal narratives that illustrate an intersectional and multiperspectival version of feminism. Second, as a consequence of the rise of postmodernism, third-wavers embrace multi-vocality over synthesis and action over theoretical justification. Finally, third-wave feminism emphasizes an inclusive and non-judgmental approach that refuses to police the boundaries of the feminist political

(Snyder, 2008, p.175). Kamala Visweswaran (1997) in her essay, “Histories of Feminist Ethnography”, writes “Gender is today the site of considerable cross-disciplinary and transnational crisis” (p.592). She argues “different forms of feminism have produced different understandings of gender, where gender itself cannot be separated from the categories of race, class, or sexual identity that determine it.” (p.592). McCann, C.R. and Kim, S.K. (2010) come to a similar conclusion: “Thus, in multiple-identity based sites of theorizing, feminists- North and South – struggled to understand the specific connections and disconnections between gender domination with race, nationality, class, and sexuality. Sometimes, this theorizing considered the intersections of several systems of domination simultaneously, sometimes not” (p.148).

Thus postcolonial feminism or Third World feminism emerged in response to Western liberal feminists who tended to homogenize and universalize women and their experiences. Raj Kumar Mishra (2013) reasons that “Western feminism has never been heedful to the differences pertaining to class, race, feelings, and settings of women of once colonized territories” (p.129). Postcolonial feminism, like Black feminism, rejects white Western liberal feminism on the grounds of its utter “eurocentricism” and White American-centrism. Third World or post-colonial feminism is inspired by around Edward Said’s groundbreaking 1978 book *Orientalism*”. To Said, orientalism is a hegemonic discourse that artificially constructs an “East” fitting an imperialist purpose. Western feminism often echoes and reinforces this colonial knowledge-discourse system by viewing third-world women as an undifferentiated “other” (Said, 1978, pp. 162-206 cited in Riyal, 2019, p.84). Thus, postcolonial feminist theory is primarily concerned with the representation of women in once colonized countries, even when residing in western locations (Tyagi, 2014, p.45). For postcolonial feminists, the root problem for the feminist struggle for unity lies in the privileged hegemonic White Western liberal feminist discourse.

Mohanty reproaches Western feminist texts for fabricating the “third world woman” as a singular monolithic subject (1991, p.51). She similarly accuses Western feminist methodological practices of over-simplifying and of only try to find “proof” in order “to support the classical notion of Third World women as powerless victims” (Ibid). The White feminist concept of “sisterhood” implies a

false sense of common experiences and goals; as if all women are oppressed by a monolithic, conspiring sort of patriarchal dominance. This concept is not useful, says Mohanty, as it only paralyses women. Yet, it also relies on essentializing *difference* as much as commonality, propagating a binary concept of first world woman versus "third world woman" as well as a "men-oppressors versus women-victims" trope which need to be deconstructed. Schrock (2013) notes that Mohanty's "criticisms do not rule out the possibility of women working collectively across difference, but reveal the ways in which Western feminist discourses risk reinforcing colonial knowledge practices if they set up discursive binaries that reproduce the West and Western feminists as superior and more advanced than women in the global South" (pp.49-50).

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988) delves into the complex relationship between being the subject of the study (in this case, western feminist critics) and being the object of the study (in this case, women in the third world). Influenced by her reading of Michel Foucault and his thoughts on the relationships of power and control, she suggests that "If, in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow. . ." This is a form of double silencing. For Ritu Tyagi (2014) this is the result of "double colonization" as simultaneously experiencing: "the oppression of colonialism and patriarchy. She has to resist the control of colonial power not only as a colonized subject, but also as a woman. (…) Not only that, she also suffers at the hand of Western feminists from the colonizer countries who misrepresent their colonized counterparts" (p.45). The task of a postcolonial feminist is thus complicated, resisting her native "brother" who considers her inferior and her "sisters" in the West who silence her racial, cultural, social, and political specificities. This "double colonization" approach is still today very valid approach and applicable to the topic of my research thesis, the situation of Afghan women. In this, and coming back to Mohanty (1984), the thesis aims to reconstruct the real agency of Afghan women, away from the imaginary "Woman", the artificial result "from a cultural and ideological composite through diverse representational discourses (scientific, literary, juridical, linguistic, cinematic, etc.)" (pp. 334-335). She adds that: "It is in this process of homogenization and systematisation of the oppression of women in the third world that power is exercised in much of recent

Western feminist discourse, and this power needs to be defined and named" (p.335).

In Western knowledge production, Third World women became one-dimensional, choosing these attributes fitting their narrow concept box and rejecting or denying other dimensions. On the topic of Afghan women, Shahnaz Khan(2001) notes: "The continual recurrence of liberal visual and textual representations of Afghan women sensationalize their plight and conflate third world women "over there" with third world women "over here." Khan refers to Trinh Minh-ha (1989) who reminded us that these one-dimensional accounts of the third world women's pain and oppression, reduced them to inmates in a private zoo where "the archetypal image of the veiled woman, even when accompanied by a speaking subject remains limited to the immediate sensory experience of what it is like to be confined." (Khan, 2001) Mohanty's statement describes perfectly the aim of my research: "it is time to move beyond the Marx who found it possible to say: They cannot represent themselves; they must be represented." (1991, 1984, p.74). If "postcoloniality is defined as that condition in which colonized peoples seek to take their place, forcibly on otherwise, as historical subjects" (Boehmer, 2006), in my thesis, I try to "let the subaltern" speak. My object of study is Afghan women, who have been repeatedly framed by Western, colonial narratives in a way that suited wider geopolitical aims. One aim of this study, in epistemological terms, was to see their lives through their eyes, not through Western eyes.

From this perspective equally relevant to my research is feminist literature produced by Muslim women. Muslim feminist scholars theorised about feminism and religious ghettoism in contradistinction to the white supremacist feminist theorists, to borrow the language of bell hooks. This literature strongly rejects the stereotype of misery and backwardness among Muslim women as depicted in the Western hemisphere. Muslim feminism has a far longer history than is generally appreciated, particularly in Egypt, Turkey and Iran in the 19th century and in Afghanistan starting in the early 20th century. It progressed with the anti-colonial and nationalist movements that emerged in this time period in the Middle East and in other Muslim societies. Islamic feminism is described as "a feminist discourse and practice articulated within an Islamic paradigm" by Margot Badran (2002).

She recounts that “By the first decade of the 20th century the term [feminism] made its appearance in English, first in Britain and then in the 1910s in the United States; by the early 1920s it was in use in Egypt where it circulated in French and in Arabic as nisa'iyya”. The transnational circulation of the idea of Islamic feminism was much assisted by Iranian scholars such as Afsaneh Najmabadeh and Ziba Mir-Hosseini, writing in the Teheran women's journal Zanan that Shahla Sherkat founded in 1992. She also refers to the Saudi Arabian scholar Mai Yamani and the Turkish scholars Yesim Arat, Feride Acar and Nilufer Gole: “Already by the mid-1990s, there was growing evidence of Islamic feminism as a term created and circulated by Muslims in far-flung corners of the global umma” (Badran, 2002). It was this that accelerated the study of Middle Eastern women, past and present, in the past few decades (Keddie, 2007, p. 1). Post 9/11, Islamic feminist movements only got stronger during the “War on Terror”, which targeted Muslims with both physical and symbolic-discursive weapons. Stellar Muslim feminists have produced excellent scholarly work over recent decades. Yet, to truly connect, it is up to the Western neo-liberal feminists to step down from the one-dimensional and colonial Orientalist view, and fully appreciate the complexities and challenges Muslim women face.

1.4.3 Transnational feminism: the debate

Transnational feminism emerged as a theoretical position and social movement intended to address the Western-centricity of some forms of feminism. A term coined by Chandra Talpade Mohanty (2003) in her book, “*Feminism without borders: decolonizing theory, practicing solidarity*”, it seemed to offer a solution, by advocating solidarity and action across borders. Alexandra Tsuneta (2020) points to its high aspirations submitting that it: “allows us to critique how globalization and capitalism impact people across all nations, races, genders, and sexualities”. She was optimistic that “Transnational feminism asks us to truly examine and critique the ideologies of white, classist, Western models of feminism using an intersectional approach.” This was to allow for “analytical practice on a global scale”, connecting capitalism and globalization. She refers to Transnational feminism as “global feminism” because it constitutes “a feminist

practice that examines global systems of inequality and subsequently acts globally" (Tsuneta, 2020).

But this idealistic and hopeful picture painted by Tsuneta hardly mirrors the reality, given how the language of feminism has been so readily co-opted by Western states in their neo-colonial projects. Following the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, the War on Terror and the War for Afghan Women became near interchangeable. Rescuing women from their barbaric fate became part of the public advocacy to justify the military intervention in Afghanistan. For instance, the Feminist Majority Foundation (FMF) was one among the many lobbying hard to this end (Khodor, 2018, p.3). Spike Peterson (2007) analysed the way the status of role of women was used the Afghan and Iraqi wars. She accuses then President Bush of using "the logic of crusading protectionism" while claiming "to be liberating women of Afghanistan and Iraq: rescuing "other" women from the "barbaric" conditions of their subjection to the Taliban and Islamic fundamentalists" (Peterson 2007, p.18). She repeats Zine (2007) stating that, "the archetypal image of the deprived and debased Muslim woman was resurrected" with the aim of disgracing Islam and its "barbarity" making it easier to justify US military interventions (Ibid, p.18). An enemy was constructed who essentially was depicted as unpredictable, religiously (irrationally) motivated, indiscriminately violent, vicious towards women, and bent on destroying (Western) civilization. Any critique first has to counter these shaped perceptions, meanwhile running the risk of sounding "dangerously treasonous and capable of imperilling the project of saving civilization" (Ibid. p.18) By linking gendered identities, ideologies, and activities, Peterson demonstrated how these intersected in normalizing domination and violence (Ibid, p.22).

Jennifer L. Fluri (2008) does not hide her disappointment when writing: "even more insidious and dangerous for transnational feminist movement is the way in which US neo-liberal feminists "rescue narratives" fit so neatly into U.S. neo-liberal global ideologies and practices" (Fluri, 2008, p.473). The globalist neo-liberal agenda appear to serve narrow interests, using prominent women, such as Fawzia Koofi. Potentially as part of their propaganda and messaging about the

benefits of foreign occupation.[2] Those who do not toe the line, such as Malalai Joya, a former Afghan MP, lose their voice and status. She lost her spot on mainstream media although she was on Times Magazine's annual list of the *100 most influential women* in 2010*,* after she had become critical of the US-led occupation. Fluri (2008) denounces this as reinforcing "a global hierarchical system in which one-third world U.S. feminists act as "saviours" of two-thirds world women imprisoned within oppressive, violent, traditional/fundamentalist patriarchal structures of underdeveloped nations" (Ibid p.473). She accuses these feminists to negotiate their own position and agency within their capitalist and patriarchal system, thereby and ironically, becoming a tool of their own patriarchs who brought the war to Afghanistan. She reflects on her own position as an American: "In doing so, we shift our own vulnerability to and culpability in the violence of U.S. patriarchal and capitalist practices onto the backs of two-thirds world women, and claim agency and self-representation for ourselves while denying this same capacity to them" (p.473).

Eliza Noh (2003) also strongly opposes Tsuneta's upbeat version of Transnational feminism and places it in the context of transnational flows of multinational corporations, cultural imperialism, and supranational geopolitics. This transcending of national boundaries is not giving us the utopia of a global community filled with "world citizens" given that "relationships of power, as under imperialism… continue to be nationally determined, except now on a larger scale. Thus, transnationalism is neither new nor truly "trans-national"". (Noh, 2003, p.135) One cannot magically do away with real differences between the First and Third worlds, "between empires and colonies", as if racialised geopolitical and economic hierarchies never existed. This has already been recognized by Asian American women and other women of colour in neo-colonial settings, but, Noh continues, "since the modern age of European (and later American) imperialist expansion, modernist feminism is still coming to terms with the effects of transnationalism on women in European and American contexts" (p.134). Especially, Anglo-feminism deserves criticism since it made it impossible for

[2] http://www.rawa.org/temp/runews/2015/12/06/see-the-real-face-of-fawzia-koofi-and-her-corrupt-family.html

Third-world women to contest patriarchy without simultaneously challenging imperial nationalism and modernity. It is thus ironic that "the world of white liberal feminism opened up precisely when the domestic comfort of white colonial elite women began to fall apart when the balance of power between the empires and the colonies became destabilized through anticolonial revolutions" (Ibid).

On the other hand Valentine Moghadam (2006) argues, as Mohanty (2006) did earlier, that transnational feminism started out as anti-capitalist having a decidedly radical economic critique (p. 70). It was only when it was hijacked or co-opted by neo-liberals and international bureaucracies the term got corrupted (Mogdaham, 2006). Is it then even feasible to assume that feminist movements can again unite behind a common method? Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan (2000) are pessimistic while Hester Eisenstein (2017) has a positive view on this potential for unity. All that said, the evolving theoretical interpretations of transnational feminism not only resulted in confusion but, worse, undermined the Third World feminist movement and postcolonial feminism. It never fulfilled the aspirations of those feminists in the Third World who had put their hopes on a truly integrated and comprehensive feminist concept and their feminist cause.

Hegemonic Western feminism is in need of internal critique while the formulation of autonomous, geographically, historically, and culturally grounded feminist concerns and strategies is much needed to achieve social change (Mohanty, 1991, p. 51). Postcolonial feminism "is a hopeful discourse it seeks peaceful solutions for all world marginalized women. Postcolonial feminists imagine a world in which differences are celebrated and enjoyed [and] work for social, cultural, economic, and religious freedoms for women" (Mishra, 2013, p.129). This fit my own criticisms of transnational feminism, and my preference to choose postcolonial /Third World feminist approaches as well as internationality in my research on Afghan women.

1.4.4 Intersectionality

One of the responses to the second wave of feminism mention above came from Black women, who dismissed the universal interpretation given by white women

to the feminist movement, given their different reality and experience. Black feminists such as bell hooks in her *Feminist Theory: From the Margin to the Centre*, developed their own separate black feminist theory. This in turn led to the feminist notion of "intersectionality". Coined by the legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989, it explains the oppression of African-American women which could not be encompassed adequately with the terms "racism" or "sexism". It describes how systems of oppression overlap, creating distinct experiences for people with multiple identity categories. In terms of feminist methodology, it thus proceeds from lived experience and complexity, and seeks to avoid reductionism.

For my purposes intersectionality is a better analytic tool than transnational feminism, a version of which in this postmodern, or even post-feminist, era, has been co-opted into a transnational corporate agenda with a multi-cultural feminist façade. Women in the Global South have been used as one-dimensional poster-girls to advance a neo-colonial agenda. Hester Eisenstein, in her 2017 essay, "Hegemonic Feminism, Neoliberal and Womenomic: 'Empowerment' instead of Liberation?", asks if neoliberal feminism in an era of globalised capitalism is "really" a feminism and whether it could ever offer the tools and the methodology to capture and understand the agency of women in Third world countries or of colour and provide a vision towards fundamental social change. (Eisenstein 2017, p.36).

As much of the academic research on Afghan women is consciously or unconsciously rooted in a neoliberal bias or the transnational (neo-liberal) school, intersectionality is potentially a more neutral and inclusive approach, allowing us to analyse "the complexity in the world, in people, and in human experience" (Collins and Bilge, 2016, p.25). The latter argue that "Intersectionality as an analytic tool is neither confined to nations of North America and Europe nor it is a new phenomenon. People in the Global South have used intersectionality as an analytic tool, often without naming it as such" (Ibid, p. 3). For example, Crenshaw notes in "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Colour" that women from many immigrant communities are vulnerable to violence, not just because of their gender, not only because of their ethnicity or social status, but because of the inherent legislative

bias against women in the immigration law itself. Thus intersectionality allows for analysis of social structures and the gendered and racialized character of those structures.

Indeed, its core ideas embrace a variety of vectors such as social inequality, power, rationality, social context, complexity, and social justice formatted through crisis and social movements responding to colonialism, racism, sexism, militarism, and capitalist exploitation. Intersectionality appreciates that not only systems of power but also their convergence affect women of colour. Intersectional feminist theory locates its analysis within systems of ideological, political, and economic power as they are shaped by historical patterns of race, class, gender, sexuality, nation, ethnicity and age (Thornton-Dill et al. 2007:629 in McCann and Kim, 2010, p. 148). As with any other evolving feminist method, intersectionality too has its flaws. Although "Within the academy, intersectionality is doing substantial work within research, teaching, and administration", this is occurring "without agreement about what it actually is" (Collins 2019, p.3). It is still malleable and under construction.

The position of Afghan women is extremely complex and analysing the status of the Afghan women in their society, both privately and publicly, the connection between gender, women, state, patriarchy, religion, dependency economy, ethnic conflict and militarism, is best dealt with by the method of intersectionality. The intersections in intersectional approaches extend beyond the individual experience to local, national and transnational structures of power. My research is largely inspired by Valentine Moghadam (1999) and her perspective is thus applied in this thesis. In her view, dating from before the 2001 military intervention, the status of women in Afghanistan is best understood as the result of complex intersections, between entrenched patriarchal social structures and a hostile regional and international climate, which undermined the consecutive Afghan governments' reform programmes, strengthened Islamist opposition up to their overtaking of power in-country, and reversed the legal status of women. (Moghadam 1999, p.173). This perspective is helpful in identifying linkages between the global military industrial complex and the subordinate status of

women in Afghanistan. Even the complicit role of some Afghan women within the controversial RAWA, is best analysed through the intersectionality method.

1.5 The structure of the thesis

This chapter has outlined the what, why and how of the thesis. It has paid especial attention to the question of methodology, particularly of how this work positions itself within feminist methodologies, epistemologies and interpretative approaches. The structure of the rest of the dissertation is as follows. The chapter does not contain a chapter entitled literature review per se, as a consideration and critique of the relevant literature is provided in the course of each chapter.

In chapter 2, I outline the key theoretical framework for the dissertation, namely the concept of patriarchy, its varieties, structures, and functions and process in historical and sociological context. The chapter sets out Connell's and Walby's notion of gender orders and gender regimes, governing and reproducing key areas of social life, such as religion, education, family and employment, are helpful for understanding the social structures that Afghan women have to navigate.

Chapter 3 sets out the interplay between political regimes, and gender orders/gender regimes in Afghanistan through the various phases of Afghan nation-building and foreign intervention. It asks how each political regime reconfigured the gender order, examining both domestic and external factors, such as geopolitical influence. This forms the historical-sociological backdrop to understanding the challenges and opportunities for women in general and professional women in particular.

Chapter 4 and 5 examine the intricate interaction between culture, religion, and gender relations, a relationship that has shaped the lives of women and their place in Afghan society. In particular they examine the ways in which patriarchy is reproduced within, and between, different ethnic groups and how ethnic identity intersects with interpretations of Islam in producing customary cultural practices that constrain women, but are also seen as forms of resistance to Western interference.

Chapter 6 examines the institution of the family in the Afghan nation-state, and how individual family dynamics, including attitudes to marriage, reproduction and violence, can strong shape the opportunities for women. Through family ties, networks, social class, and family attitudes towards education and work, professional women have been supporting to developing a public and professional identity.

Chapter 7 examines gender and educational opportunities for professional women in Afghanistan**,** given than education is one of the key resources that women need to develop a professional identity**.**

Chapter 8 looks into the economy, gender and labour market and public sphere in Afghanistan**.** This chapter looks at the Afghan economy and the significance of labour market and public sphere in Afghanistan on gender issues. It also relates to economic participation and the challenges caused by economics on furthering to involve in public sphere for women. It discusses aid economy as well as illicit economy, a significant source of revenue for many Afghans. Chapter 9 concludes the dissertation with final observations, particularly in light of the Taliban's return to power in August 2021.

Chapter 2 - Key Theoretical Concepts: Patriarchy and Gender Regimes

In this chapter I outline and discuss some of the theoretical ways in which we can understand how women's agency is constrained, or facilitated. This will provide a sociological language and conceptual framework for the rest of the dissertation and my study of professional women in Afghanistan and the challenges and opportunities they have face. One of the key concerns of feminist scholars has been to identify and explain the structures that maintain women's oppression, and patriarchy is seen as the main cause. As Sylvia Walby stated, "The concept of patriarchy is an essential tool in the analysis of gender relations" (Walby, 1988, p. 213). This chapter is concerned primarily with patriarchy and its functions and process in a historical and sociological context. In order to understand the mechanisms by which patriarchy, in its variety of forms, is maintain, reproduced and, sometimes challenges, the chapter also examines the theoretical ideas put forward by R W Connell and Walby about overarching "gender orders" and the way that gender regimes – set of norms and values – are reproduced in the spheres of everyday life.

2.1 Patriarchy: From private to public

Patriarchy is a concept extensively referred to in women's studies literature, but with little uniformity (Mirchandani, 1993, p.135). This is due to the fact that the working definition of patriarchy itself is contested in the feminist literature. The concept of patriarchy has been both essential and problematic in the development of feminist thought (Acker, 1989, p. 235). However, we need to be careful looking into the power dynamic, is it power of all men over all women? One school of thought sees patriarchy as the rule of all men over all women. According to Kandiyoti (1991) patriarchy is a problematic concept and radical feminists were the first to initiate a fairly liberal usage of the term to apply to almost any form or instance of male dominance (p.25). She argues that "patriarchy defined in those terms was an all-pervasive, virtually timeless phenomenon, its manifestations could be sought anywhere" (ibid). The location of patriarchy in radical feminism

was by and large allocated to the ideological sphere, with a material basis in the division of labour between the sexes, and, in particular the facts or reproductive biology) (Kandiyoti, 1991, p. 25). Ideologically speaking, the patriarchal system is also underpinning by religious and well as cultural belief “based on androcentrism [that] maintains the maleness is the natural order of things, and in the Abrahamic traditions, God is male who created the female after man’s image. Women, therefore, are bound to submit to men and follow their orders without questioning their merits” (Emadi, 2005, p.168). Additionally, society and its prevailing culture, customs, and traditions confine women’s activities to the domestic realm (ibid).

However, the origins of the word suggest something more precise. Walby notes “Patriarchy as a concept has a history of usage among social scientists, such as Weber (1947), who used it to refer to a system of government in which men ruled societies through their position as heads of households”(Walby, 1989, p.214). This reflects the etymological roots of the word in Greek, literally, rule of the father, or the elder men. In Afghanistan, this is very evident with the society structured alongside the extended patriarchal family, with the elder male taking decisions for the family members and with very confined roles for both males and females.

It is also important to see patriarchy as a general kind of ordering of society, but with many variations and varieties, through space and time. Historian Gerda Lerner gives a broad definition of patriarchy as “the manifestation and institutionalization of male dominance over women and children in the family and the extension of male dominance over women in society in general”. She sees patriarchy as a primary social system and structuring element in society, and recognised that it is very old, and nearly universal, rooted deeply in culture, pre-empting the contemporary civilization influenced by Christianity. Yet she also insists that patriarchy is also changeable, adaptable, and variable (Lerner, 1986, pp. 128-239). This position taken by feminist historians and scholars runs contrary to the sociobiological perspective that would argue for some kind of genetic predisposition towards males dominance over women. In this sense alone it is similar to the radical feminist position on patriarchy, which treats it as both a static and timeless phenomenon. One of the most challenging tasks of women’s history has been to trace with precision the various forms and modes in which patriarchy historically

appears and the adaptations it makes to female pressure and demands (Lerner, 1986, pp. 238-239). Lerner and her colleagues thus practice a form of historical sociology that also informs this thesis that is, paying attention to patriarchal orders, structures and mechanisms change over time, and to how and why they do. What women can or should or must do according to the social norms or state requirements and why, depends on the location, time, demands, regimes, resources and the enlightenment of the generation. Different political regimes can alter the various degrees and forms of patriarchy.

Within this dynamic view of patriarchy, there is always the possibility of women's agency. It is never the case "that women are either totally powerless or totally deprived of rights, influence, and resources." (Lerner, 1986, pp.238-239). Faced by these altering states in which they find themselves, women are obliged to look for opportunities in different spheres of life (as Walby describes) to exercise more agency. Women are facing with a choice of accepting some aspects of patriarchy in order to trade off agency in other spheres. That bargaining process often happens on a strictly personal level, but can be seen at a collective level too and is useful in explaining why a system that constrains women is often embraced and defended by them. Equally resistance and pressure by women, and strategic use of their patriarchal bargaining power, can expand the space available to women and change the gender order, or at least the gender regimes of certain social institutions (Kandiyoti, 1988). As patriarchy is a social construct, it thus can be challenged and deconstructed**.**

One of the cornerstones of patriarchy is the imagined division between the public and the private, in which women are consigned to the latter. Many feminist theorists have argued that "women's subordination is due to their confinement to the private sphere" (Walby, 1990, p. 174). Within the discourse of "modernity", the liberation of women from the private sphere was to be achieved through opening up entry to the public sphere. Classic liberal feminist discourses focus the ability for women to enter in public life through formal political and economic emancipation. For liberal feminists, this entry in public life allows the freedom from domestic oppressive gender roles. It also suggests an end to the notion that women are only fit for household chores and unable to take on public responsibilities in the workplace. Earning an independent income and carving out a public role, are

considered significant gains towards female empowerment. This push from first-wave feminism to step out of the confined household roles was made feasible with a fast-expanding economy from the 1960s and onwards. However, moving away from private patriarchy does not automatically imply the complete liberation of women from patriarchy, since the mechanisms of subordination and oppression might relocate to the levels of work/employment and the state. Junior and subordinate job positions for women with a marginal prospect towards promotion, and unequal pay for similar work are a few examples. Access to wealth, influence and power are still male dominated. Walby (1990) accepts the two main forms of patriarchy, private and public, but offers a unifying analysis. For instance, when during both World Wars women were mobilized in great numbers to enter the workforce, compensating for the males fighting overseas, such did not benefit the patriarchy. In turn she rejects the conventional view that the gender division of labour is consensual based on material factors rather than cultural and ideological ones. The author demonstrates that at the end of the First World War, women left paid employment not on voluntarily basis but because they were forced to by agreements between employers and male unions, backed by state legislation (p. 57). Thus, she concluded, the relationship is much more complex than originally believed, with transfers of control over women from private to public spheres, from domestic relations to the state, from husband and father to the government. Patriarchy is rarely static and keeps evolving. In Afghanistan, where the economy has suffered fluctuations and distortions, the pathway into the public sphere, into public sector employment, for example, has been very constrained as option for women to build a professional and public identity beyond the private domain.

2.2 The mechanisms of patriarchy

Patriarchy can be examined through two main variables. The first is the “ideology” of patriarchy and the other is the “practice” of patriarchy. Generally, patriarchy is expressed and sustained within the framework of gender and sex inequality in many areas of life; objectification; structural, cultural and physical violence; discrimination; domination, power, control and oppression; and stereotypes. But this in itself does not explain how these are maintained. It is Walby’s major contribu-

tion, in her book *Theorizing Patriarchy* (1990), to explain how patriarchy is sustained and reproduces itself through key social mechanisms and six structures. 1) Paid Employment 2) Household Production 3) Culture 4) Sexuality 5) Violence 6) State. In her theory, the different forms of patriarchy in different cultures and different times are dependent upon the interaction of these six key patriarchal structures (Walby, 1990, p. 177). Women's agency can be increased, or constrained, depending on what happens within those six structures. The “gender order” of a society describe the overall level of agency of women in that society, or, expressed a different way, the intensity of the patriarchal order in place. However, beneath this macro-level assessment, there are meso and micro-level dynamics at play. Each of these six structures in social life generates its own *gender regime*, that is, set of rules to which men and women should conform. Changes within those gender regimes, within those social structures, can happen at very difference paces, in uneven and contradictory ways. It is therefore an invitation to attend closely to the detail of social relations.

I will be using Walby’s conception of the six key patriarchal structures, and of the gender regimes within them, throughout my thesis. In this chapter I introduce the model limiting myself to the essential, with the understanding that added detail follows in other chapters. I intend to start with culture since it is not only a heavily debated issue among researchers, but equally in this thesis a dominating topic.

2.2.1 Culture

The term culture is notoriously difficult to define. ‘Despite a century of efforts to define culture adequately, there was in the early 1990s no agreement among anthropologists regarding its nature’**” (**Spencer-Oatey, 2012**).** Yet, we know that culture is a very important element in human society defining the individual in relationship to the cohesiveness of the group. Culture is a set of values, norms, language, dos and don’ts, a way of life of a social and political group of people. It is one of the essential components of nationhood. Laws made by the state are founded upon the cultural norms of that nation “The culture, or cultures, that exist within the boundaries of a nation-state certainly influence the regulations that a

nation develops" (Smith and Bond, 1998, pp. 60–2). On the other hand, the process of nation-building is also one of decided what that shared cultural ground might be, particularly difficult in pluri-ethnic societies such as Afghanistan.

While we find it difficult to define culture, culture defines us and makes us who we are. Our identities are founded on the culture norms we are nurtured with. Generally, the way culture affects our lives is similar to an iceberg we see surfacing knowing that underneath what we visually witness, there is far more. When people talk about one's own culture what comes to our mind is traditional clothing, the distinctive food staple, rituals and how different festivals are celebrated, music, literature and folklores, arts, religious beliefs and symbols, etc. Individuals can refer themselves as part of a collective to these important components. Yet this is just the tip of the iceberg, and submerged beneath are the norms and values.

Lynch (2017) writes, "Individuals may be able to see and describe certain aspects of culture by simple observation. However, they can develop a better understanding of deeply rooted ideas by studying formative factors, reflecting on their own core values and analysing observed core values of members of the culture". This says Lynch (2017), is not immobile: "these values can be changed over time because the new experiences and shifts in cultural views may shape a person's core values".

In this thesis, I will discuss gender and patriarchy in its relationship to culture. Culture, religion, gender and patriarchy are closely associated. Power drives religion and culture. Those with social authority put their stamp on the group values and norms. If patriarchy is the norm, religion and culture are the tools to sustain this power in the hands of males. Women are portrayed through a patriarchal viewpoint in religion, education, and media, formatting a template which becomes the norm. Culture and gender equality are thus interlinked. Among the six structures of patriarchy, culture is at its core. Culture sets parameters for gender violence, gender legislation, sexuality, salary inequalities, and household roles.

For example, there is a cultural expectation that women are expected to dress with 'modesty and chastity' in Islamic societies. In many of these countries, women are not allowed to enter the public sphere without a male company and

women are forbidden to enter certain sport activities reserved for men only. Even in non-Islamic societies, as in my native country, Buddhist Myanmar, until recently a spouse had to pay respect to her husband before going to sleep and female underclothes were not to touch male clothes.

In fact, every human interaction in society; how we think; what we eat; how we process our thoughts and ideas; how we socialize; how we consider our materialist world and finances; are culturally influenced. According to Walby (1990 p.90) “Ideas about masculinity and femininity are to be found in all areas of social relations; they are part of the actions which go to make up the patriarchal structures”. The socialization theory sees nurture as more important for social norms and culture than nature. The latter explains the physical difference between female and male but, “could not account for the content of these ideas. Further, they were typically unable to deal with the variation in the content of gender identity between classes, ethnic groups, or cultures, or with social change” (Walby, 1990, p.103).

The socialization theory has its own limitations. “Writers proposing this theory have clear notions of what distinguishes masculinity ad femininity, usually conceived of as mirror opposites. Masculinity entails assertiveness, being active, lively, and quick to take the initiative. Femininity entails cooperativeness, passivity, gentleness and emotionality” (p. 91). Walby (1990) refers to Khun (1982) who remarked that “the plot of many Hollywood movies is one in which the narrative starts when a woman steps out of line and ends when she is restored to proper feminine subjection (p. 92).

Psychoanalytic theories and approaches in turn emphasized the unconscious templates imprinted during early childhood as the construction of gender identity. However, these suffered from similar difficulties of essentialism and ahistoricism, ignoring the social mediation of the notions of femininity and masculinity.

Discourse analysis provides the theoretical means to overcome the problems of essentialism and ahistoricism. It shifts the conceptual tools away from the individual to the social level understanding the power of language as gendered interaction. Through examining the “various manifestations of difference, and the power they accrue or withhold, in media texts, conversations, advertisements,

novels, films, political speeches, meeting minutes, interview transcripts, or wherever they may occur" the shifting content and relations between sexes can be explored. Nonetheless, the analysis and its outcomes are hardly universal, especially when analyses of discourse were related to the circumstances of production of those discourses as well as to their content.

2.3 State

What is a state? Richard S. Newell (1986) defines a state as "a state is a political authority, organized hierarchically, capable of overcoming internal factionalism and succession disputes in order to perpetuate itself for at least several generations. It has the administrative capacity to impose a monopoly of coercive sanctions upon the society it governs (which its practitioners may elect not to exercise completely). Its functions require a persistent, professional bureaucracy designed to supersede, coopt or absorb such pre-existing authority structures as were rooted in the primordial elements of the society in question. The state's greater capacity to control and mobilize human resources enables it to initiate new levels of activity, e.g. new or expanded modes of production, extensive long distance trade, complex logistical connections" (p.105)

Who control the state? According to Richard S. Newell (1986) "an elite caste controls the state. It either created it to protect or extend its previously established interests, or it seized authority from other contenders in the process of creating a governing apparatus. (p.105)

The dimension of ideology furnishes religious sanction or identity to the state, and in recent times secular nationalism has become the basis for its popular support. Ideology legitimates state claims to authority by mixing bodies or received knowledge and myth regarding the origin, history, and cultural traits that set the state and its society apart from rivals" (ibid).

It is important to understand the term "modern" and the state's modernisation. Afghanistan has been trying to modernise its state for many decades. What is a modern state? Newell (1986) explains "The modern state, is set apart from its precursors by the intensity of its impact on society as made possible by innova-

tions in organization, ideology, and technology. The modern state is also associated with the formulation of a national identity, so much so that the twentieth-century concept of “state” is ritually synonymous with “national-state” (Newell, 1986, p.106).

2.3.1 State-women relationship

Walby (1990) argues that “the state is an important factor in the determination of women’s empowerment; that this is not a result merely of economic or economic and familial reasons. Further, that the role of the state is not uniform but has changed radically as a result of women gaining political citizenship.” (p. 51)

A state provides a series of (dis)incentives to regulate, coach and nudge its population towards a preferred direction serving the power balances underpinning the state. Looking at this through the prism of gender, a state promulgates legislation and provides services to stimulate family and gender relations such as education, health care, family planning, family law, inheritance law, laws related to employment, entrepreneurship and mobility, etc. Its institutions are a major factor explaining how gender values and positions are shaped, formulated and applied. They guide human behaviour and shape human interaction (Ziegler,2011, p.54).

This explained, a growing literature on women and the state in the Third world, seeks to challenge the universalising language of the Western feminist and developmental state discourses. According to Shirin Rai (1996) “much of Western feminist state theory has largely ignored the experience of Third World women under the post-colonial state. Often the assumptions made are Western-centred but the theorising takes on a universalising language. Similarly, some of the theories of the ‘developmental state’(as opposed to ‘theories of development’ in general) have developed in gender–blind and sometimes Orientalist ways and therefore ignore the particular relationship that women in the Third World find themselves in vis-à-vis the post-colonial state” (Rai, 1996, p. 25).

A case in point is Afghanistan. It is debatable if present-day Afghanistan is a fully sovereign state as it is largely dependable of financial and military support from a Western backed alliance of countries. How much of its decisions are sovereign, benefitting its own interest instead of the interest of the sponsoring states? How much of the Afghan gender policy rolled out is genuinely rooted and negotiated

among the local interest groups and how much is imposed from the outside through ideologies foreign to the Afghan culture?

What is needed is a continuing and more focused debate about women and the post-colonial state as Third World women come to experience not only national but also international economic and political power in the era of 'restructuring and democratisation'. Such focus will also allow to examine the growing and diverse areas of women's political activities which include not only oppression, but also negotiation, not only struggle but also strategic bargaining in spaces that are intersections of the private and public spheres.

Governance and state institutions are construed on cultural foundations and traditions, offering its legitimacy within the cultural context and providing culture its validity. Religious culture, ethnic culture, local culture prescribe social interaction and most people take these rules for granted without questioning. Dupree and Goultierre (1997) write that "Within the vast store of Afghan folktales covering religion, history and moral values, many reinforce the values governing male and female behaviour. They illustrate what can or cannot be done, describe rewards and punishments, and define ideal personality types. Thus they serve to perpetuate the existing gender order and through example make it psychologically satisfying." (p. 42).

For instance, norms prescribe that women's principal role is to bear children and that boys are preferred over girls, as it is the case in Afghanistan. The gender inequality has become 'common sense', offering a meaning of interdependency, group identity and through its predictability, even provided a connotation of group security for a society that is largely illiterate and uneducated. Ideology forms then the next stage, another layer, reflecting power acquired and negotiated. As explained above with the example of Iran, ideology and culture are not necessarily compatible.

This explains the difficulties for the Afghan State to induce gender empowerment. Afghans are a proud people with a great sense of decentralised independence, even from Kabul – the capital. As explained in other parts of this thesis, Afghanistan's history is packed by botched reforms ultimately failing due to conservative religious leaders who refer to tradition and religion to mobilise large segments of

the population, against foreign influences and ideologies. “Afghan women’s and men’s perceptions of women’s liberation is a world apart from that of the invading forces. The Western perception of women’s liberation and democracy wrongly advocates that Afghan women and men should simply abandon the repressive practices of their culture and adopt the ‘superior’ Western culture. (Rostami-Povey, 2007, p. 160)

2.4 Sexuality

Afghanistan is a model example of the different rules applying to both genders in social norms and expectations regarding sexual behaviour. Dupree and Goultierre (1997) explain that whereas males are assumed to be loyal and submit to the family patriarch, “Afghan society regards women as the perpetuators of the ideals of the society. As such they symbolize honour – of family, community and nation – and must be controlled as well as protected so as to maintain moral purity.” (p. 42). The authors further detail how male conservatives consider females socially immature, lacking moral control and physical restraint. “Consequently, women are untrustworthy and must be kept behind the curtain so as not to disrupt the social order” (p.42). To put this in context, “Afghan women view their sexuality more positively and question male maturity and self-control. In reality the differences between private and public behaviour are significant. In private, there is a noticeable sharing of ideas and responsibilities and in many households individual charisma and strength of character surmounts conventional subordinate roles” (ibid.).

To appreciate this interplay, the culture of the Afghan patriarchal family system is be understood. According to Kalwant Bhopal (1997) “the dominant norms and values of South Asian culture disadvantaged South Asian women. Women are expected to be homemakers, participate in an arranged marriage and engage in dowry practice” (Bhopal, 1997, p. 151). Elders, specifically the fathers, decide with whom their daughters are going to marry.

Deniz Kandiyoti (1988) “Under classic patriarchy, girls are given away in marriage at a very young age into households headed by their husband's father. There, they are subordinate not only to all the men but also to the more senior women,

especially their mother-in-law. The extent to which this represents a total break with their own kin group varies in relation to the degree of endogamy in marriage practices and different conceptions of honour (Kandiyoti, 1988, p.278).

Whether the prevalent marriage payment is dowry or bride-price, in classic patriarchy, women do not normally have any claim on their father's patrimony. Their dowries do not qualify as a form of pre-mortem inheritance since they are transferred directly to the bridegroom's kin and do not take the form of productive property, such as land (Agarwal 1987; Sharma 1980). In Muslim communities, for a woman to press for her inheritance rights would be tantamount to losing her brothers' favour, her only recourse in case of severe ill-treatment by her husband or divorce. The young bride enters her husband's household as an effectively dispossessed individual who can establish her prestige in the family-in-law by producing male offspring (Kandiyoti, 1988, p. 279).

Isabelle Delloye (2003) writes rather provocatively that, “In a society based on family, where marriages never take feelings into account, love is almost always a scandal. The woman is subjected to the greatest constraint: the man can travel or try his luck with another woman, but all that remains for the young girl is forced marriage to a mouzigai, the “little horror” chosen by parents.” (Delloye 2003, p. 106)

Emadi (2005) appears to agree: “romantic love affairs and courtships are an alien concept in this society, where strict social and cultural traditions are based on segregation of sexes” (p. 172). However, Emadi (2005) admits that “such love affairs can occur on occasion among educated strata in urban areas” (p. 172). This I witnessed among my working colleagues in Afghanistan where young girls can have love affairs, even multiple boyfriends before marriage. Not surprisingly, they were raised in middle-class urban liberal family settings, not typical for the average Afghan.

One of my colleagues benefitted from an extraordinary variety of boyfriends, the fact that she was the breadwinner for the family might have been a defining factor for this rare liberty. Ultimately, she entered an arranged marriage in traditional Afghan cultural fashion. Kalwant Bhopal (1997) confirm that a “women’s position in the labour market influenced their position within households” (Bhopal, 1997,

p.149). My thesis is about these relatively exceptional women, who succeeded in certain degrees to break through the patriarchal culture barriers in Afghanistan.

While the above examples are not representative for Afghanistan at large, stereotyping Afghan women as if they are chattel in the households of their in-laws is neither accurate. The gender roles are considered essential for the functioning of the Afghan family, because of the absence of a functional alternative such as a social welfare system. The social and economic solidarity within an extended family, headed by a patriarch, has proven a bedrock during the recent decade of disruption and conflict. As Dupree and Goultierre (1997) correctly state, "individual social, economic and political rights and obligations are found within the family which guarantees security to each man and woman, from birth to death" (p. 38). Prescribed roles and norms cannot be overstepped in public and both genders are to conform to these values.

Female roles do stress motherhood and family nurturing and have publicly to display modesty, chastity and obedience. Alluring sexual attraction outside marriage is an absolute taboo and the family's social position depends on the public behaviour of its female members. This does not imply that young people in Afghanistan have any different behaviour than other youngsters in the world. It does imply though that flirting behaviour among the young is shunned, especially outside the urban areas. When employed at a private industry in Kabul, I personally witnessed the students courting each other and when they did marry their loved ones, they were proud to relate this exceptional feat to foreigners. This said, sexual interaction before marriage was unmentionable. Emadi (2005) explains, "The strict moral code of conduct does not allow for young men and women to get acquainted before marriage and demands chastity and virginity for men and women" (Emadi, 2005, p. 172)

When the emphasis of sexuality is on reproduction within marriage, female sexual pleasure takes second stage defining the female's agency. Motherhood and reproduction are at the centre of the feminist discourse and the right on control of the female body, such as through abortion, are still today contested in many Western countries. In Afghanistan, this debate has not event started. To put the issue in perspective though, sexuality at large is off-limits. For instance, sexual

education is not part of the education curriculum and both genders are on this issue treated in a similar manner. Tonita Murray (2012) explains, “The requirement in a patriarchal and collectivist society to obey the father and assume onerous obligations to an extended family mean that men too have little choice over how they lead their lives.”[3] Sexuality for both genders is oppressed and a largely taboo subject. More on this topic will follow in a later chapter of my thesis.

Finally, Afghan women’s bodies have been exploited for political means, both from the religious conservative end, considering female sexuality as deeply suspect and in need of control, as from the West, considering female sexuality as to be liberated from the perverted hands of illiterate barbarians. In her blog ‘Navigating sex as an Afghan woman: sexual pleasure and the political body’, the Afghan author Armeghan Taheri (2018) explained, “There is no other body whose oppression is more integral to a political strategy. There is no other body whose framing as the victim, as opposed to the freed, is a vital condition for the ongoing war in Afghanistan. This has not only been harmful to women, but also marking Afghan men with a continued toxic masculine identity. The reliance of the Afghan woman as inherently victimised lies at the very core of our modern neo-imperialist wars in Afghanistan – this is the most convincing argument within the Western public opinion as it reproduces a moral rationale for intervening.”[4]

2.5 Household Production

The traditional family template of the male as breadwinner and the female as house-wife has gradually become obsolete throughout the Western world as the dominant normative model for couples (Kitterød and Rønsen, 2011, p. 4). A tremendous shift has taken place regarding women’s social and economic role since the post-war welfare model. Even in Norway, a country where this template was longer encouraged than in the other Nordic countries “women usually have paid work during larger parts of their adult life. Norway comes close to what Lewis

[3] Murray, T. (April 23, 2012) “The Oppressed Women of Afghanistan: Fact, Fiction, or Distortion”, Mei@75, Middle East Institute. https://www.mei.edu/publications/oppressed-women-afghanistan-fact-fiction-or-distortion

[4] Taheri, A. (April 3, 2018) *“Navigating sex as an Afghan woman: sexual pleasure and the political body”*. https://gal-dem.com/navigating-afghan-woman-sexual-pleasure-political-body/

(2001) has termed “the adult worker model family”, where all adults are assumed to provide for themselves via the labour market” (Skrede, 2004 in Kitterød and Rønsen, 2011, p.4). Western society demands women to have a professional career and perform their natural reproductive role as well.

Notwithstanding the fact that the formal Afghan economy is too feeble to offer full employment to the male labour force, not to say also females, the biggest impediment for women’s participation in public life is the specific gender roles attributed within the traditional family. Breaking through this set role demands courage and wealth as indicated in the interviews with successful professional women I undertook for this thesis. Even then, as explained in a different chapter, several of the interviewees remained single; a trade-off for the professional career track they opted for. Personal autonomy is not an easy choice in a country that imposes the communal patriarchal family as the bedrock of society. Any nonconformist deviation of the norm is considered as negatively affecting the reputation and good image of the family within its community.

Within these rigid gender roles, Gladstone (2001) explains, “The status of a girl increases as she moves from child to bride to mother to grandmother. A successful marriage with many sons is the principal goal of Afghan women, wholeheartedly shared by Afghan men.” (p.146)[5] Prescribed roles of Afghan women are essentially but not exclusively to undertake the household chores, household management, caring for hospitality, and nurture plus educate the children. Pending on ethnic group and labour needs arising within the family, rural women might help in the fields during harvest and process the dairy products. Gladstone (2001) points out to the large differences between ethnicities with for instance, “Nuristani women plow the fields while the men herd the flocks and process the dairy products. Nomadic women care for young lambs and kids and make a wide variety of dairy products, for sale as well as family use. They spin the wool sheared by men and weave the fabric from which their tents are made.” (p. 146)

Weaving *qalee* (pile carpet) and *geleem* (tapestry rug), embroidery, leather, metal, and woodcrafts are common handicrafts in Afghanistan. *Qalee* weaving is

[5]Gladstone, C. (2001) (ed.) “*Afghanistan revisited*” New York: Nova Science Publishers.

done solely by women and girls, but in the years since invasion and civil war took a toll on the economy male family members also have started to weave carpets (Emadi, 2005, pp. 188-189). Embroidery is a common profession for women and young girls. It is their work at home in addition to the household chorus. Women and girls work in the home to embroider caps, shirts, vest, handkerchiefs, table-cloths, pillows, belts, bags, gun cases, door hangings, and more. For some families, works of embroidery are done for members of the immediate and extended family and for honoured guests and for some families, embroidery also has an economic aspect; if the women are highly skilled it can provide an additional source of income. (Emadi, 2005, p.190)

As dealt with in other parts of my thesis, the Afghan State has at several intervals aimed to break through the traditional gender norms and values, gradually working towards female empowerment. One of the truly far-reaching was the proclamation by the communist Democratic Republic of Afghanistan, in power since 1978, of equal rights between men and women and the end of 'unjust patriarchal feudalistic relations between husband and wife'. (Gladstone, 2001, p. 147). While this draconian statement triggered deep resentment among the rural population and the clergy, it followed Marxist-feminist philosophy.

For Marxist-feminists, the organization of production both within and outside the family is shaped by patriarchy and capitalism (Hartman, 1981, p. 368). According to Hartman (1981) "our present social structure rests upon an unequal division of labour by class and by gender which generates tension, conflict and change" (p. 368). Hartman (1981) believes that "these underlying patriarchal and capitalist relations among people, rather than familial relations themselves, are the sources of dynamism in our society" (p. 368)

Sylvia Walby (1990) has her own opinion: "Marxist feminist analyses start from the significance of class relations and the exploitative economic relations between classes for the understanding of gender relations. These are seen to be importantly implicated in the oppression of women, sufficiently so that women's liberation from the family would not be achievable outside a socialist society" (p. 70). Neither the socialist society nor gender equality survived the Mujahideen

taking over a decade later, reviving traditional male supremacy. In reality, patriarchy had never left rural Afghanistan, even under communism.

2.6 Paid Employment

Paid employment refers to employment outside the home such as professional work for women or even low paid jobs. Paid employment is an important category within the structure of patriarchal oppression. Women's inferior position in the labour market has been well documented (Bhopal, 1997, p.9).

According to ILO (2020) "Development Relevance: Estimates of women in the labour force and employment are generally lower than those of men and are not comparable internationally, reflecting that demographic, social, legal, and cultural trends and norms determine whether women's activities are regarded as economic" (ILO, 2020).

ILO has warned us "In many low-income countries women often work on farms or in other family enterprises without pay, and others work in or near their homes, mixing work and family activities during the day. In many high-income economies, women have been increasingly acquiring higher education that has led to better-compensated, longer-term careers rather than lower-skilled, shorter-term jobs. However, access to good- paying occupations for women remains unequal in many occupations and countries around the world. Labour force statistics by gender is important to monitor gender disparities in employment and unemployment patterns" (International Labour Organization, ILOSTAT database. Data retrieved in June 21, 2020).[6]

As Kate Millet states, the history of paid employment for women is rather perplex. Women have always worked. Even before the industrial revolution brought them to the factory, women had always done menial labour, most of its physically exhausting and tedious, much of it agricultural. They have generally worked longer hours for smaller rewards and a less agreeable tasks than have men. (Millett, 2016, p.85) She argues that "the fact remains that the sexual revolution began

[6] https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.TLF.CACT.FE.ZS?locations=AF

to accomplish a great deal for women economically. Despite the dreadful hardships of exploitative and discriminatory employment, they attained through it a measure of that economic, social and psychological independence which is the *sine qua non* of freedom" (p. 88).

Paid employment for Afghan women is uncommon. Women's representation in the job market remains at the lower end of value chains for the lack of access to many internal and external resources (Shakib, 2014, p.13). Agriculture is the largest employment sector in Afghanistan, providing 44% of all jobs (2.8 million people) and contributing 23% of the country's GDP. The sector has the highest prevalence of low-skilled jobs, with 87% of workers having no formal education and being unable to read or write. Almost 20% of the labor force (1.3 million) are engaged in the service sector. Subsectors include security (army and police), which make up 4% of total employment, education (4%) and social services (5.7%). Other economic sectors are barely visible in the employment statistics (ALCS 2016-17, p. 68).[7]

The Afghan National Risk Vulnerability Assessment 2011–2012 indicates that the vast majority (81 percent) of the employed population in Afghanistan work in the informal sector, "characterized by low-paid, irregular, insecure and low-productivity jobs. Workers in the farming and livestock sub-sectors – accounting for 40 percent of the employed population – are almost entirely in vulnerable employment (own-account workers, unpaid family workers and day labourers). In the manufacturing/ processing, construction, trade and private service sectors, which employ another 43 percent of workers, the share of vulnerable employment reaches 84–94 percent". (Raja, n.d, p.18)[8]

Self-employment provides a vital and dominant source of income for women in the informal labour sector, particularly in areas where they are prevented from working outside their homes due to cultural norms and/or restricted mobility.

[7]Ahmed, A. (2018) Refugees return to poverty, unemployment and despair: Afghanistan's labout market and the status of women. Vienna Institute for International Dialogue and Cooperation (VIDC). Available at:https://www.vidc.org/fileadmin/michael/studien/afghanistan_s_labor_market_and_the_status_of_women-1.pdf (Accessed 22 September 2021)

[8] https://afghanistan.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/UNFPA%20SDES%20Mono%20Labour%2028%20May%20for%20web.pdf

Home-based economic activities range from carpet weaving, sewing, embroidery and tailoring to agricultural work, such as taking care of livestock and selling dairy products" (Ahmad, 2018, p.33)

Looking into the profile of the female labour force, Ali Ahmad (2018) states: **"**In-security, cultural barriers and low levels of education/literacy are the most commonly cited obstacles hindering women's engagement in the labour market. Aside from domestic work, female employment is typically restricted to agriculture, manufacturing and services. Over 78% of workers in the clothing and textile manufacturing industries are women, while agriculture employs around 65% of the total female labour force". (Ahmad, 2018, p.46) Correct that decades of conflict and warfare did not equip Afghan women to participate in the labour force, but more significantly, as explained above, patriarchal traditions, cultural, familial and social barriers played a decisive role in explaining the low number of women in paid employment.

Sylvia Walby explicates that the State plays a significant role between the patriarchy and capitalist forces over the utilization of women's labour and has been central to the resolution of certain conflicts between them, "however, the mode of intervention of the state has not always been the same." (Walby, 1990, p.50). For instance, statistics indicate that by 1978 increasing numbers of females were joining the labour force. Looking closer, a majority worked in health and education, considered culturally most appropriate, as these "are extensions of traditional women's roles" (Gladstone, 2001, p. 146). Others were urban dwellers, employed as professionals and government workers. All by all, "only about eight percent of the female population received an income". (Ibid.)

Shakib (2014) noted that "the chief problem for female entrepreneurs in Afghanistan is the conservative attitude of the community and the larger society; these attitudes make it difficult for a woman to function and to make decision independent of a husband or father (Shakib, 2014, p.13).

2.7. Violence

Violence is a major issue affecting women around the world. It arises in public as well as private spheres, in times of conflict, and in times of peace. In the public

sphere, UN Security Council Resolution 1820 (2008) on Women and peace and security reads: “women and girls are particularly targeted by the use of sexual violence, including as a tactic of war to humiliate, dominate, instil fear in, disperse and/or forcibly relocate civilian members of a community or ethnic group.”[9]

In the private sphere, the UNODC Global Study on Homicide (2019) documents that, “Some 87,000 women and girls were intentionally killed in 2017, a decrease from 2012. The share of women killed by intimate partners or other family members, however, rose from 47 per cent of all female homicide victims in 2012 to 58 per cent in 2017, and the overall number who lost their lives to this type of homicide rose from 48,000 victims in 2012 to 50,000 in 2017. The home remains the most dangerous place for women, who continue to bear the heaviest burden of lethal victimization as a result of inequality and gender stereotypes” (p. 14).[10] The Study points out that, “Women killed by intimate partners or family members account for 58 per cent of all female homicide victims reported globally last year, and little progress has been made in preventing such murders.” (p. 4)[11]

Kathleen Lynch (2016) remarks on gender based violence, “This is not random or individual as it might appear. Instead, it operates under patterned and systemic criteria. When states do little else other than condemning male to female violence, they effectively perpetuate it via non-interference.”[12]

Again, Afghanistan is a case in point. Dupree and Goultierre (1997) point to the fact that authorities subordinate personal autonomy to the dominant societal norms of the patriarchal family unit. A girl can run away from home due to abuse within the paternal home, but the public act is considered more severe than the private one: “moral misconduct can be largely overlooked until it becomes a matter of public knowledge. Then punishment must be severe for male and family honour must be vindicated. It is the public image that counts.” (p. 42)[13]

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[9] https://www.ohchr.org/en/newsevents/pages/rapeweaponwar.aspx
[10] UNODC (July 2019) *“Global Study on Homicide”*, Executive Summary, Vienna.
[11] UNODC (July 2019) *“Global Study on Homicide”*, Booklet 4, Vienna.
[12] Lynch, K. (August 2016) “*The BIG Thinkers, Leaving Certificate Politics and Society*”. https://ncca.ie/media/2566/kathleen-lynch.pdf
[13]Dupree, N.H. and Gouttierre, T.E. (1997) “Chapter 2, The Society and Its Environment’, In A Country Study: Afghanistan, 28-70. Baton Rouge, LA:

These social, moral, and religious pressures coerce some people to engage in honour killings of their own family members in case they defy norms, thereby restoring prestige and standing of the family within the community. Research undertaken by Gibbs et al. (2019) indicates that "First, in families where women report an 'honour killing' there is more violence against women and girls, second these women are more likely to report more patriarchal gender attitudes than others, and third these families are exposed to higher levels of poverty."[14]

In case of violence against women, the victim access to justice is jeopardized by a preference to settle the dispute to traditional mediation mechanisms instead of the statutory law and justice system, effectively resulting in impunity. As a UNAMA report (2018) observed: "the frequent failure of State officials to exercise due-diligence in investigating, prosecuting and punishing perpetrators, and providing reparations to survivors, contributed to the existing high rate of impunity and strengthened the normalisation of violence against women in the Afghan society." (p. 6).[15]

This attitude of non-interference confirms the gender inequality within the Afghan justice system, normalizes violence against women, and erodes the confidence in the legal system. Then UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein reacted by stating that "to use mediation for such offences is at its core a human rights violation by the State, which has an obligation under international law to ensure the effective prevention of such crimes and the protection of women, and to provide an effective remedy where such violence occurs."

Giving the final word to the UNODC Global Study on Homicide (2019) I agree with it statement that: "High and persistent levels of violence are a threat to achieving gender equality. Societies with pronounced gender inequality tend to

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Claitor's Pub. US Library of Congress, Federal Research Division. Available at: https://www.hsdl.org/?view&did=440431(accessed 12.01.2021).

[14] Gibbs A, Said N, Corboz J, Jewkes R (2019) Factors associated with 'honour killing' in Afghanistan and the occupied Palestinian Territories: Two cross-sectional studies. PLoS ONE 14(8): e0219125. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0219125 (Accessed 20.09.2021)

[15] UNAMA (May 2018) "*Injustice and Impunity, Mediation of Criminal Offences of Violence against Women*", Kabul, Afghanistan.

be characterized by higher levels of interpersonal violence against women, including lethal violence. Conversely, the empowerment of women has been shown to be accompanied by a decrease in the level of intimate partner violence. Greater autonomy and independence, when also combined with a higher social status, help to protect women from the risk of homicide." (p.9). [16]

2.8 Conclusion

In this chapter I have outlined the discourses on patriarchy. As many feminist scholars have identified and explained the patriarchal structures, private and public, that maintain women's oppression, is the main cause of preserving gender inequality. Afghanistan's history is packed by botched reforms ultimately failing due to conservative religious leaders who refer to tradition and religion to mobilise large segments of the population, against foreign influences and ideologies. Afghanistan's bedrock structure is still the extended and inter-generational patriarchal family structure performing a task of social and economic security in absence of alternatives. In turn, both males and females have to fit restrictive moulds of behaviour with distinct tasks, duties, and responsibilities. This has strong implications for what Sylvia Walby (1990) has defined as the six patriarchal structures: (1) Paid Employment; (2) Household Production; (3) Culture; (4) Sexuality; (5) Violence; and (6) State. Walby's structure/model will be used throughout the thesis as a key concept.

[16] UNODC (July 2019) 'Global Study on Homicide'Executive Summary, Vienna.

Chapter 3 - Changing Political Regimes and Shifting Gender Regimes: challenges and opportunities for women in Afghanistan

3.1 Introduction

The gender order in a given society is a product of a number of factors, one of the most important being the political regime of the day and its ideological underpinnings. As noted in the previous chapter, the status of women is often seen as emblematic of the social order and therefore of the identity and character of the nation. For that reasons, women's perceived role and agency in society is often contested, becoming the topic of heated political debate and contestation. This chapter takes the historical sociological approach surveys the often dramatic shifts in political regime type and ideology in Afghanistan over the last century to map out those debates and contests over women's role and rights. Those shifts have been shaped by a number of powerful factors in Afghan society that are further explored in the following chapters, including the underlying social structures of religious and ethnic identity and belief system, as well as factors external to Afghanistan, namely the involvement of foreign actors seeking to exert influence over the country for geo-political as well as ideological reasons. These shifts in political regime have altered the gender order overall, but also the gender regimes, for example in relation to law, educational access, and employments, that have, at different moments, offered either opportunities or obstacles to the capacity of women to participate in public life and develop a professional identity.

3.2 Political regimes, nation-building and impacts on women's status

This survey of the different political regimes in recent Afghan history makes another point. There is a tendency in some of the narratives on Afghan women to see them as essentially passive agents within the history of Afghanistan. But such a representation is inaccurate. In reality, Afghan women have contributed substantially to changing the political, social, and economic landscape of their country. The significant impact of women on the nation-building process will be

illustrated in this chapter. For instance, among the Afghan women who actively strived to advance women in society are globally known political figures such as Malalai Joya, Dr. Sima Samar, Wazhma Frogh, Shukria Barakzai, Azra Jafari, Sekena Yacoobi, Fawzia Koofi, and Suraya Dalil. Too many have paid with their lives for their efforts, such as Meena Keshwar Kamal, Safia Amajan, Zakia Zaki, Nahid, and Malalai Kakar. These women are known as heroines, but many more died a silent death. My analysis will show that secular reformers, key to the advancement of women in the society, have been frustrated both by traditional forces within Afghanistan and by foreign proxy interests furthering their own external political ends.

Political regimes in Afghanistan can be broadly divided into six main historical periods: the period of the Great Game (1813-1907); from Kingdom to Republic (1930-1978); the Soviet-supported government era (1978-1992); the Mujahideen regime (1992-1996); the Taliban regime (1996-2001), and the Western-supported regime (2001-15 August 2021). In what follows, I discuss these political regimes underpinning these six eras and their associated gender regimes impacting Afghan women. Those eras are summarised in the tables below, and discussed one by one.

In particular, the account of each era emphasises the relationship between internal politics and external influences. These related in part to the political economy of the country – how it "developed" economically, and what this meant politically, for with each reshaping of the economy, some sectors of society were favoured, and others neglected.

Table 3.1: Kings of Afghanistan in the modern era

Amir Abdur Rahman Khan [improved status of Afghan women]	1880-1901
Amir Habibullah Khan	1901-1919
Amanullah Khan [improved status of Afghan women]	1919-1929
Nadir Shah	1929-1933

Mohammad Zahir Shah (Daoud, Prime Minister, 1953-1963) [improved status of Afghan women]	1933-1973

Table 3.2: Leaders of Afghanistan in the modern era

Republic of Afghanistan (1973-1978)		
Mohammed Daud Khan	17 July 1973	28 April 1978
Democratic Republic of Afghanistan (1978-1987)		
Colonel Abdul Qadir	28 April 1978	30 April 1978
Nur Muhammed Taraki	30 April 1978	14 September 1979
Hafizullah Amin	14 September 1979	27 December 1979
Babrak Kamal (Soviet occupation)	27 December 1979	24 November 1986
Haji Mohammad Chamkani	24 November 1986	30 September 1987
Mohammad Najibullah	30 September 1987	30 November 1987
Republic of Afghanistan (1987–1992)		
Mohammad Najibullah	30 November 1987	16 April 1992
Abdul Rahim Natif	16 April 1992	28 April 1992
Islamic State of Afghanistan (1992–2002)		
Sibghatullah Mojaddedi	28 April 1992	28 June 1992
Burhanuddin Rabbani	28 June 1992	22 December 2001
Hamid Karzai	22 December 2001	13 July 2002
Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (Taliban: 1996–2001)		
Mullah Mohammed	27 September 1996	13 November 2001

Omar		
Mullah Mohammad Rabbani	27 September 1996	13 April 2001
Maulavi Abdul Kabir	16 April 2001	13 November 2001
Transitional Islamic State of Afghanistan (2002-2004)		
Hamid Karzai	13 July 2002	7 December 2004
Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (2004- 15 August 2021)		
Hamid Karzai	7 December 2004	29 September 2014
Ashraf Ghani	29 September 2014	15 August 2021

3.3 From the Great Game to the end of the monarchy

3.3.1 King Abdur Rahman Khan (1880-1901)

The “Great Game” between the United Kingdom and Czarist Russia started with the First Anglo-Afghan War in 1838. While this may appear very distant history, its repercussions are still felt today by the women of Afghanistan because each of these powers was willing to mobilise the discontent of local actors, sometimes around issues of custom and ethnicity, including the status of women, to their own ends. Meanwhile consecutive rulers of Afghanistan were attempting to modernise the country socially and economically.

King Abdur Rahman Khan (1880-1901) became the most significant king in the written history of Afghanistan. As a nation-builder he introduced several Western concepts, including reforming and modernizing the traditional role of Afghan women. Known as the “Iron Amir” when assuming the throne, King Abdur Rahman Khan began to consolidate his territories and oftentimes utilized brute power to unify the country with the Emirate of Afghanistan. Regarded as the founder of the modern nation, he understood that economic prosperity was as important as political unification. He hired European advisers in an attempt to

introduce European technology and tried to secure the country's revenues, establishing a revenue department and systematic collection of taxes from the landlords, who were legally required to pay annual taxes to the throne. The land tax was fixed at one-third of the crop value. Thanks to taxes, customs duties, exports, fines, registration, and postage fees, along with the revenues from mines, government monopolies, and manufacturers, the annual income of Afghanistan rose to more than one million British pounds (Jalalzai, 2003, p.20). In addition to this, the British, who feared Russia's expansion toward Afghanistan and India, supplied King Rahman Khan with substantial amounts of arms and ammunition. In 1882, Britain granted him an annual subsidy of 1.2 million Indian rupees (INR), which was raised to 1.8 million INR in 1893 (Rasanayagam, 2005, p.11). This income and the tax revenue which he instituted, allowed him move his reforms ahead (Fishstein, 2010). However, trade with Russian Central Asia was virtually suspended after the Panjdeh incident in 1885, a military clash between intruding troops of the Russian Empire, moving its influence forward in Central Asia, and the British supported Afghan army.

Among the multiple reforms this monarch introduced, the status of women improved dramatically, at least in legal terms. In line with trends in continental Europe at the time, he modernised elements of the gender regime of the family, in relation to marriage and inheritance. For example, under Rahman Khan, on attaining puberty, a girl was legally permitted to refuse an arranged marriage and widows were no longer required to follow the tribal custom of marrying the brother or a close relative of their deceased husband (Armstrong, 2002, p.50). He also gave women the right to divorce in cases of cruelty and non-support and the right to inherit property from fathers and husbands (Dupree, 1986). These reforms were partly due to the influence of his wife, Bobo Jan, a vivacious and stylish woman, who travelled widely, dressed in European fashion, and went without a veil in public. As noted in Chapter 1, women who wield influence in the public space often do so by proxy, empowered and protected by their familial association with powerful men. This is not, however, to deny their individual agency as actors, as they also choose to act in ways that occupy and expand the public space that patriarchy at that moment accords them, often explicitly or implicitly challenging the gender norms of the time.

3.3.2 King Habibullah Khan (1901-1919)

His successor, King Habibullah Khan (1901-1919) was the first Afghan ruler to ascend to power peacefully and continued the reforms instituted by his predecessor and father, the Iron Amir (Fishstein, 2010). Among the modernization reforms he introduced related to education, health, the establishment of a more professional military and investment in the country's infrastructure. For example, he established in 1903 a secondary school, Habibiya College that up to today is the country's premier high school, employing foreign teachers from India, Turkey, and Germany. The new military academy ran with guidance of Turkish officers. Elements of a public health system were put in place with the opening of a state hospital. In economic terms a major contribution was the construction of Afghanistan's first hydroelectric plant built between 1910 and 1913 at Jabal-ul-Siraj, near Jalalabad, with a capacity of 1,500 kilowatts. Gregorian 1969; Magnus and Naby 1998; Dupree 1973, quoted in Ghosh, 2003, p.3). He boosted local industry with added investments in a boot factory and tannery, a textile mill, and a distillery although he had to abandon plans to export alcoholic beverages to India, as this was perceived to encourage alcoholism. By the end of Habibullah's reign, the number of industrial workers had risen to an estimated 5,000. Trade with the rich trading city of Bukhara in Uzbekistan, was restored and even extended prior to the Anglo-Russian Convention of 1907. An iron bridge, high tech for these days, was constructed to move people and goods across the border. Despite this, Afghan industrial development remained slow due to a shortage of skilled workers and, more important, capital. Banking facilities were virtually non-existent until their introduction in the 1930s. Besides, despite the best intentions, the government workshops, which were in fact royal monopolies, tended to stifle private initiative. During Habibullah's reign, the cost of living increased with the price of bread in Kabul rising fourfold, while workers' salaries remained unchanged. The plight of the workers became critical, especially in 1903, when a famine and a cholera epidemic together took the lives of thousands of people (Jalalzai, 2003, p.25)

In relation to the international powers circling Afghanistan, his relationship with London had become troublesome. Aiming to navigate both the British and Russian Empires independently, he rejected the annual financial subsidy provided by the British. He outraged the British Viceroy, Lord Curzon, many times in a variety of ways. (Dupree, 1973, p.430-431). On the question of gender relations, Amir Habibullah proved less active than his father in moving forward the agency of women. On the one hand his wives, fashionably dressed in Western clothes, appeared unveiled in public, continuing the practice of elite women in copying Western customs. The most notable reform that he introduced related to marriage and the family, in his decision to put a ceiling on the extravagant marriage expenses that caused poverty in many families.

3.3.3 King Amanullah Khan (1919 – 1929)

On February 20, 1919, Amir Habibullah was assassinated and succeeded by his son Amanullah Khan (1919 – 1929) who is considered the founding father of modern Afghanistan. An ardent reformer, he declared independence from the British at the end of the First World War with the signing of the Treaty of Rawalpindi on 19 August 1919, which granted Afghanistan full independence from Britain. The ensuing third Anglo-Afghan war (6 May-8 August 1919) ended with the Treaty of Rawalpindi, when the Durand Line was imposed as the political boundary between the Emirate of Afghanistan and British India. A significant chunk of then Afghanistan was annexed by British India, splitting the area inhabited by the dominant Pashtun tribe in two. The impact of this unnatural demarcation was far-reaching and long-lasting, and it became the root cause of the hostility between Afghanistan and Pakistan that continues to this day. The long-run disputes over this territory have in many ways hindered both state- and nation-building in both countries. However, the treaty offered Kabul the full independence it had aspired for.

In 1919, the Soviet Union was the first country to recognise Afghanistan as a new state soon after King Amanullah declared independence from the British.

Afghanistan in turn was the first to recognise Lenin's Bolshevist regime in Russia. This alliance permitted investment both in the economy and in further attempts to establish modern national armed forces. In 1920, Moscow's envoy to Kabul pledged 5,000 rifles to Amanullah's kingdom along with financial aid of a million gold roubles. The next year the two nations signed a friendship treaty, and the Soviets subsequently built telephone lines and a telegraph office in Kabul, sponsored a textile factory in Herat, and began work on a highway over the Salang Pass in the Hindu Kush. The Soviets also started an Afghan air force, providing eleven military aircraft along with personnel for training and maintenance (Tanner, 2009, p.221).

Amanullah embarked on an ambitious programme to reform and modernize the Afghan State along the lines of a modern secular European society (Emadi, 1991, p.2-3). He launched rapid socioeconomic reforms including the first Constitution of Afghanistan. The Constitution accorded equal status to all nationalities and abolished the practice of slavery. He also turned around a number of Abdul Rahman Khan's more inward-looking policies by actively developing the communication infrastructure and encouraging the exploitation of Afghanistan's mineral deposits (Fishstein, 2010). He also tried to combat corruption while improving trade to boost the economy.

To finance the modernisation of the country, the state levied heavy taxes on the peasantry farm labourers and businessmen (Emadi, 1991, p. 176). According to Musa Khan Jalazai (2003) "The change Amanullah made that genuinely advanced Afghanistan's trade was the reduction of the duty on Afghan exports and interregional trade items to a 5 percent *ad valorem* tax" (Jalalzai, 2003, p.27).

In respect of gender relations and women's status, while both his father and grandfather had introduced reforms benefitting women, in 1919, oppression of women was still common in Afghanistan's tribal society in the periphery outside Kabul. King Amanullah introduced deeper reforms in the gender regimes of marriage, education and legal rights. In regard to the family, he discouraged the veil and polygamy and promoting the free choice of spouses. He also abolished child marriage and increased the minimum age of marriage to twenty-two for

men and eighteen for women. He promoted education for women, opening schools for girls, with some were sent abroad to attend higher education. According to Nawid (1999, p.125), by improving the position on women's rights and female education, Amanullah was also improving the larger framework of social change, which was "essential for the overall development of the Afghan nation".

However, conservative religious elements, combined with feudal landlords, were disenchanted with the King's land reforms and, indeed, his gender reforms, which were rejected in 1928 by the Loya Jirga (Litcher, 2009, p21). This disenchantment made them prime targets for British political meddling. With the king pulling closer to the sphere of Russian influence, the British developed a plot to discredit King Amanullah's wife, Queen Soraya, and thus discredit the king. Soraya was the first Afghan woman to publicly take off her veil during the Loya Jirga (Grand Council) meeting at Paghman in 1928 -- the third Loya Jirga of Amanullah's reign and called by the king to discuss political and institutional reforms. She had also established the first women's hospital and girls' school in Afghanistan. She is known as the founder of Afghan women's rights and equality, and one of the most powerful women of Afghanistan. The Queen presented an inspiring and determined speech on the 7th Independence Day:

> Independence belongs to all of us and that is why we celebrate it. Do you think, however, that our nation from the outset needs only men to serve it? Women should also take their part as women did in the early years of our nation and Islam. From their examples we must learn that we must all contribute toward the development of our nation and that this cannot be done without being equipped with knowledge. So, we should all attempt to acquire as much knowledge as possible, in order that we may render our services to society in the manner of the women of early Islam (cited in Armstrong, 2002, p.53).

The British, rankled by the fact that an old imperial possession was courting the enemy, Russia, used the Queen's **"**free spirit**",** unconventional, nonconformist

and progressive character to strengthen their hand against the regime in Afghanistan. During a triumphant tour through Europe's capitals (1927-28) Queen Soraya was photographed without a veil, dining with foreign men, and having her hand kissed by the President of France (Stewart, 2000, p.341). Ahmed-Ghosh (2003 p.5) argued that the British circulated copies of these photographs to the conservative mullahs and regional leaders in an effort to destabilize the Afghan monarchy. The reaction was predictable, taking the images and details from the royal trip as a flagrant betrayal of Afghan culture, religion and the honour of women. Thus women's agency and emancipation was instrumentralised by external powers, as it would be repeatedly through the following century, to mobilise internal political forces. Sometimes these foreign powers have invoked women's freedoms as a call to action to the most traditionalist forces in society, for purely geopolitical reason, knowing full well that the consequences would be set-back for women's autonomy and a deepening of the patriarchal order. At other points, women's status has been invoked in the name of modernisation and Westernisation, even if the results have been very uneven.

In consequence, a rebellion broke out in 1929 and so-called Saqaoists rose temporary to power of the across several regions of the country. *Bacha-i Saqqao,* the nickname of the Tajik bandit Habibullah Kalakani, leading the rebellion. The British role in the revolt is not clear (Dupree, 1973, p. 449), but Amanullah's outspoken anti-British attitude and his acceptance of Soviet technicians made him a prime target for overthrow by the British. Qassem (2013, p.36) notes of the rebellions that erupted against Amanullah's regime in the southeastern regions of Afghanistan from 1924 onwards, that commentators have interpreted these in various ways, some stressing the role of internal factors (violent reaction from a conservative and tribal society against reforms introduced by the government) and others the crucial role played by British India in fomenting the revolts. What was evident was the British who aided and abetted the rebels were unconcerned with the modernisation and development of Afghanistan (Emadi, 1991, p.3).

In the middle of the night of 14 January 1929, Amanullah Khan abdicated and handed his kingship to his brother Inayatullah Khan Seraj. The "Great Game"

between the British and Russian empires halted the most crucial era of the modernisation of the Emirate of Afghanistan and with it this window of unparalleled gender reforms.

After Amanullah abdicated, it was not his brother Inayatullah Khan Seraj who become the next Afghan Amir. Instead Habibullah Kalakani took power. He demanded that Inayatullah was to surrender or prepare for war. Inayatullah was airlifted out of Kabul by the British Royal Air Force and spent the remainder of his life in exile. For nine months, the “bandit king” and his gangs spread devastation and ruin across the country: trade and agriculture were crippled, people starved, disease spread, schools closed, and poverty became rampant (Rasanayagam, 2005, p.22; Fry, 1974, p.10; Jalalzai, 2003, p.28). Nadir Shah, a former General of King Amanullah, finally defeated Habibullah and his men, and the former was executed on 1 November 1929.

3.3.4 King Mohammed Nadir Shah (1929-1933)

King Nadir Shah took over a country whose economy was in ruins. To promote the development of industry and trade, in 1930 the Amir established a modern-style bank in 1930. Later renamed the Afghan National Bank or Bank Melli Afghan, its branches reached from Herat, Kandahar to Berlin, Paris, and London as Afghanistan tried to insert itself into the global economy. Amir Nadir also initiated a number of social and economic development projects, including the building of some modern schools and the establishment of several industrial and manufacturing enterprises. He also worked to improve the economy through infrastructure development. He built a road across the treacherous high passes of the Hindu Kush, opened up the economy to private enterprise and gave great impetus to the development of a laissez-faire economy. This forced entrepreneurs to use their capital to drain the malarial swamps of the north and turn them into productive land. Another of his new policies was to establish a new export cotton industry centred on Kunduz in the north. The cheap land attracted settlers from many parts of the country (Barfield, 2010, p.203).

In terms of relations with regional and global foreign powers, trade relations with Russia and India were promoted. However, a trade deficit was the outcome with

imports exceeding exports. (Jalalzai, 2003, p.28). Qassem (2013) observed that, although the Soviet Union was the first to recognise the new Afghan monarchy, in foreign policy matters, Nadir favoured closer relations with British. Nadir discontinued Amanullah's policy of support to the independence movements, including that of the Pashtuns, in British India. In 1931, British India supplied him with over 10,000 rifles, five million rounds of ammunition and £180,000 in cash (Qassim, 2013, p. 37). The British government provided such substantial assistance in order to enable King Nadir to build a modern army (Emadi, 1991, p.4).

In terms of the gender order maintained during Nadir Shah's reign, the balance sheet was more negative than with his predecessors. A year before his death in 1932, he passed statutes involving the status of women, specifically regulating the interconnected gender regimes of religion, marriage and national citizenship. This included the prohibition of marriage between Muslim women and non-Muslim men. Foreign women married to Afghan men were to be considered Afghan citizens. If a woman was widowed and a Muslim, she was allowed to resume citizenship of her birth country only if the government was satisfied that she would not abandon the Muslim faith. Non-Muslim widows were not allowed to repudiate their Afghan citizenship. Upon marriage to a foreign man, a woman with land and property in Afghanistan was obliged to sell it (Burki, 2013, p.107).

Nadir Shah was shot and killed by a high school student in Kabul in 8 November 1933, reportedly as the settlement of a blood feud. (Rasanayagam, 2005, p.23). Allegedly, a pro-Amanullah student was the culprit (Emadi, 1991, p.4). The issue of legitimacy of Amir Nadir Shah's royal bloodline was questioned, but "closeness with British India had its advantages since it acted as a coercive guarantor of his dynastic rule (Qassem, 2013, p.38).

3.4 From Kingdom to Republic

With the death of King Mohammed Nadir Shah, his son, Mohammed Zahir Shah ascended to the throne in November 1933. He became the longest serving Afghan monarch but also its last, being deposed in July 1973. French educated,

the first 20 years of King Zahir Shah's reign enjoyed stability and Afghanistan's trade started to prosper. The Afghan National Bank attracted most of the private capital in the country and invested it in some 50 trading and industrial holding companies (Jalalazai, 2003, p.29). Afghanistan was slowly moving its development and modernisation process forward. Zahir Shah's uncle, Hashim Khan, the younger brother of Mohammad Nadir Shah, was prime minister from 1929 to 1946 (Rasanayagam, 2005, p.23), providing continuity and dynastic stability.

The King brought in foreign advisers, founded the first modern university, and fostered cultural and commercial relations with Europe. Afghanistan became a popular destination for Western travellers wanting to view its rugged mountains and relics of ancient civilizations. However, the early progress during the first two decades was not sustained. Emadi (1991, p8) notes that between 1963 to 1973, "the country's economy was in a shamble, and living conditions for the overwhelming majority of the people deteriorated to the extent that approximately one million labourers were forced to migrate to Iran in search for employment." This culminated in public discontent about the King's poor response to the famine in 1971-1972, which killed thousands in the central and north-western parts of the country. This was a disaster for rural Afghanistan, and it underscores a recurrent theme in the country's political economy and attempts and modernisation – the neglect of the rural and tribal areas which have so often determined the political direction of the country in their revolts against the centralised rule that has brought them few benefits.

3.4.1 Mohammad Daoud Khan (1953 to 1963)

In July 1973, while in treatment in Italy for an eye condition, King Zahir Shah was ousted in a bloodless coup orchestrated by his cousin, Sardar Mohammad Daoud Khan, who had served as Prime Minister from 1953 to 1963. With support of the Afghan Army the monarchy was abolished and an autocratic Republic instituted with Mohammad Daoud Khan as its first President. Educational and progressive social reforms accelerated under his regime, but as witnessed in the modern history of Afghanistan, rapid progress engenders resistance. Having purged communists out of this administration and alienated the religious

conservatives, displeasure grew also in liberal circles with the one-party system the President favoured.

Balancing geopolitics and adhering to the non-alignment movement, Daoud Khan improved relations with the Soviet Union. From 1956-1978 Afghanistan received U$1,375 million in Soviet and Eastern Bloc aid (Rasanayagam, 2005, p.33). He also oversaw the completion of the ambitious USAID-funded Helmand and Arghandhab Valley irrigation project (HAVA), boosting the economy in the Southern parts of the country dominated by the Pashto tribe.

However, the relationship with neighbouring Pakistan was tense, since soon after its independence then Prime Minister Mohammad Daoud Khan had publicly rejected the Durand line, which the Treaty of Rawalpindi imposed this border line between British India and Afghanistan as a result of the third Anglo-Afghan war. Daoud Khan dreamed of the reunification of the Pashtun people implying that a considerable amount of territory from the new nation of Pakistan was to be returned to Afghanistan. As a reaction to Daoud's statement and his policies and support for militias in areas along the Durand Line, Pakistan closed its borders with Afghanistan in 1961. This caused an economic crisis and a greater dependence on the Soviet Union as its principal trading partner.

Not only due to its negative affect on the economy, but also for political reasons, Daoud Khan's vision of reunification of the Pashtun created serious concerns among its ethnic minorities towards the real motives of their President, himself being Pashtun. The previous King Zahir Shah may have had similar apprehensions on the internal and external tensions caused by Daoud Khan, when he introduced a new constitution which, for the first time, excluded all members of the Royal Family from the Council of Ministers. This de facto had excluded his visionary cousin, who had functioned as prime minister for a decade until 1963, from new leading government roles. Ten years later, Daoud Khan was to turn the table on the King.

In relation to President Daoud Khan's policies towards the emancipation of women, the balance was positive. In the sphere of employment, there was a notable increase of women's participation in the public sphere. This, however, was not in management functions. Women started working as receptionists and

telephone operators in the state-run telecommunications agency, and later a few women were hired to work as air hostesses for the national airline, Aryana (Burki, 2013, p. 108). The combination of increased access to education and public sector employment opened up the possibility of professional employment, careers and identities, at least for urban women.

Incremental as these steps were, for Afghan traditional circles these were seen as revolutionary and Daoud's reforms were not without opposition. As with many of these progressive measures, change was experienced in urban centres such as Kabul, whereas very little or no improvement in women's status was noted in the provinces. Whilst in the 1960s and 70s, middle-and upper-class women in Kabul had access to education and employment and moved freely around the city without chaddari and mahram (Rostami-Povey, 2007, p 11), it was the state, pushed by the political regime, that was the employer of many of these "liberated" women, and the mullahs wanted to compel it to overturn its favourable gender policies. Women's status became, yet again, a political battleground.

The tribal chiefs and religious clerics in the rural areas, mainly in the southern and eastern provinces of Kandahar, Wardak, and Nangarhar, staged big demonstrations against Daoud Khan's policies aimed at improving the status of women (Burki, 2013, p 109). In some instances, women who had removed their veils were beaten to death by the demonstrators. Determined not to cave, Daoud Khan used the military to crush the growing opposition to women's empowerment and it took only two days for the government forces to put down the resistance. Six hundred opponents were imprisoned and some of the key organisers were executed. With the resistance gone, the state set about continuing its programmes to empower women. Realizing that this was an ideological struggle as well as a religious one, Daoud challenged the mullahs to debate the subject of women and Islam in public.

Visionary and determined as President Mohammad Daoud Khan was, he did not lack opponents who were not able to express themselves openly in an autocratic one-party system. Next to the internal tensions, external relations with Pa-

kistan but increasingly also the Soviet Union soured. It was finally the Communist-led Saur Revolution in April 1978, who ended his five-year reign, during which he and most of his family were assassinated.

3.5 Soviet-supported Communist government regimes (1978-1992)

With President Sardar Mohammad Daoud Khan eliminated, a Soviet-supported Revolutionary Council was instituted with Nur Muhammad Taraki of the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan nominated as General Secretary. The new rulers introduced a wide-ranging programme for social change. This programme reflected Soviet-style understanding of social modernisation in relation to gender relations, focussing on women's right to work, serve in the army, and choose their spouses. The Taraki government stressed education for both women and men and launched an ambitious literacy campaign. Certain traditional customary and religious practices were also targeted, especially those that affected the private sphere of marriage and family. Under President Nur Muhammad Taraki, who was in power for over a year (30 April 1978- 14 September 1979), traditional practices that were deemed feudal, such as usury, bride price and forced marriage, were banned, and the minimum age of marriage was raised. Sharia Law was abolished. As had been the case for his predecessor, Mohammad Daoud Khan, this did not endear him with the conservative Islamic rural population who already felt slighted by the secularism the new regime stood for. As was anticipated, Taraki, in power for only a year faced numerous problems, mainly related to his land and social reforms. Mandatory literacy programmes for women and the abolition of the bride price were viewed as direct attacks on Afghan culture and honour, instigating yet another wave of violence from the staunchly conservative regions (Abirafeh, 2009, p.14).

Unable to crush the growing unrest, he turned to the Soviet Union for assistance.

In September 1979 Taraki was killed in a gun battle with his rival and Minister of Foreign Affairs, Hafizullah Amin. The gun battle took place at his official residence in the presence of then Soviet Ambassador Aleksander M. Puzanov

(Male, 1982, pp.158-159). Eventually the Soviet government, under leadership of Leonid Brezhnev, decided to deploy the 40th Army on December 24, 1979. Considered an invasion by the West and the rural rebels, the Soviet Union described it as a response to an invitation of the legitimate Afghan Government. However, on their arrival in the capital Kabul, a coup was staged and Hafizullah Amin was murdered. Babrak Karmal was installed as new Soviet loyalist.

The political turmoil did not end the socially reforming policies that had been favourable to Afghan women, and it left some legacy. Four women had been elected to parliament. Seventy percent of school teachers and 50 percent of civilian government workers were women. Many women's political stance was shaped both by their life experiences under the Soviets as well as religious life under Islam. However, Samar (2002, pp. 23-24) is more critical when discussing this era and its effect on women, "The issue wasn't about religion, it was about culture. While the Russian supporters said they were freeing the women, in fact they were only freeing women to sing on a stage or wear a short skirt. Our human rights were never advanced by them or, later, the Russians."

Even today there remain very divergent views among Afghans regarding the Soviet era, depending on who they were, their own beliefs, and how their lives were affected. Interviewee MP Mrs. Hanifah shares a mixed view starting positively with the period of the Daoud presidency when security was guaranteed and opportunities available. This in her experience altered after the Saur revolution disposing Daoud Khan and the communists to power. Landlords like her grandfather were dispossessed, jailed for his beliefs, and saw his land redistributed. Her father was released from prison during the Najibullah regime (30 September 1987-16 April 1992). In her view, the communist period under Najibullah, before the country fell into the different factional wars and suffered utter devastation, was the best time in Afghanistan's history. A number of my other interviewees shared a similar opinion.

Although, according to interviewee Ms. Minoo, the Communist era was far from optimal, in retrospect, it may have been one of the golden times in terms of women's rights, equal opportunity and their professional and public life. During the Soviet era, women in Kabul and a few other cities worked as scientists,

pharmacists, teachers, medical doctors and civil servants, that is, in highly skilled and high status professions. Some contrasted this period with what was to come. My interviewee Ms. Sita, also working for a UN entity, recounted: "Only the 1970s and 1980s (Daoud and Soviets) were good years. My mom was wearing shorts. The 1990s were not good years (Islamic State of Afghanistan). Everything was turned upside down. Women could not work. In fact, these issues are still ongoing. Not done yet. We went to Pakistan in the 1990s when I was only 2 years old and stayed there from 1993 to 2005. We came back to Afghanistan when I was 15 or 16 years old." (Ms. Sita, National Project Assistant, UNODC).

For some, the Soviet-invasion was highly destabilising and targeted the educated elite that represented the professional classes. For example, Dr. Samar, born in 1957, obtained her degree in medicine in February 1982 from Kabul University. She practised medicine at a government hospital in Kabul, but after a few months she was forced to flee for her safety to her native city Jaghori, in Ghazni Province, where she treated patients throughout the remote areas of central Afghanistan. When her husband was arrested by the communist regime, Dr. Samar and her son decided to flee to neighbouring Pakistan. There, she worked as a medical doctor at refugee camps. In 1989, she established the Shuhada Organization and Shuhada Clinic, dedicated to providing health care to Afghan women and girls and to the training of medical staff. She returned to Afghanistan in 2002 after the toppling of the Taliban, accepting a cabinet post as Minister for Women's Affairs in the Afghan Transitional Administration led by Hamid Karzai. She publicly criticised the erroneous interpretation of Sharia Law as applied by the fundamentalists in Afghanistan resulting in death threats and her resignation. She then served as the Head of Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC). Her experience of the Communist regime was, therefore, not a positive one as she was forced into exile. That exile, however, afforded her opportunities that might not have been available under the subsequent rule of the Mujahideen and the Taliban.

Another interviewee Ms. Minoo, UNODC Legal Advisor was equally critical: "In 1979, the Soviets came. The day of suffering started from that year. The coun-

try changed. Educated people were jailed. Ninety percent of the people who escaped from the country were good people. They were educated. The Communists took their properties. All gone". During the Soviet period, Ms. Minoo's father was jobless for seven or eight years. Only her mother worked as a teacher in a high school. During that time, the women were often the workforce and main income providers for the families, while men were jobless, unless they were working for the Communist regime. Thus women responded to a crisis and opportunity that had been created in the public sphere not by positive policies, but by the imposition of political restrictions on men. A large literature explores the double-edged impact of such contexts for women: they are forced to seek employment, and sometimes that is empowering in the long run, but equally women are put under enormous pressure, trying to fulfil roles in both the private and public sphere, but without a significant gain in status is either.

Whilst Soviet-style modernisation in theory supported women's access to public life, education and the professions, the life-story of Meena, the founder of the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA), suggests that Afghan women's movements and actors for reforms were not necessarily supported. As Mansoor (2002, p. 77) reports, Meena founded RAWA in 1977 as a "progressive and politically active twenty-year-old Kabul University student." This activism angered the Soviets and the fundamentalist forces alike: she was assassinated in Quetta, Pakistan, on February 4, 1987, aged 30.

As with the 'Grand Game' between the British and Russian Empires, geopolitics was again to catch up with Afghanistan. Conservative insurgent groups known collectively as the Mujahideen, fought a guerrilla war against the Soviet Army and the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan (DRA) mostly in the rural countryside. These largely Pashtun groups were backed by the USA, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, entering a proxy war against the USSR. The war was to cost the lives of an estimated 876,825 Afghans, constituting 7 per cent of the population, with an upward estimation of 1.5/1.7 million (Gul-Khan, 2013, p.212). Millions of Afghans fled the country as refugees, mostly to Pakistan and Iran. In Pakistan they would become exposed to Wahhabism, an ultra-conservative and extremely patriarchal Saudi brand of Salafism.

Succumbing to heavy financial and economic domestic problems, the then General Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, Mikhail Gorbachev, decided to cut his losses and end the costly presence of Soviet troops in Afghanistan. Ending what Westerners referred to as “Russia’s Vietnam”, allowed the start of a new political era in 1989. Babrak Karmal, installed as President of Afghanistan when the Soviet Union had entered Afghanistan in 1979, was removed and replaced by Mohammad Najibullah, who had joined the PDPA at its creation.

During Babrak Karmal's later years, and during Najibullah's tenure, the PDPA tried to shed its secularism and improve its standing with Muslims by moving, or appearing to move, to the political centre in order to create a new image for the party and state. In 1987 Najibullah re-added Ullah to his name to appease the Muslim community. Islamic principles were enshrined in the 1987 constitution. For instance, Article 2 of the constitution stated that Islam was the state religion, and Article 73 stated that the head of state had to be born into a Muslim Afghan family. The 1990 constitution went a step further and stated that Afghanistan was an Islamic state while the last references to communism were removed. Article 1 read that Afghanistan was an "independent, unitary and Islamic state”. The day the Soviet Union withdrew was hailed by Najibullah as the Day of National Salvation.

But this appeal to religious forces in the country was not enough and came too late. The Mujahideen had a stronger claim to legitimacy to protect Islam than the government could ever make. The Afghan government could not survive without Soviet military aid that continued after their withdrawal in 1989, and the provision of massive quantities of food and fuel. In 1990 Soviet aid amounted to an estimated U$US3 billion. When the Soviet Union finally stopped existing in December 1991, Najibullah had to turn to the newly independent states of former Soviet Central Asia for aid, for certainly they had no wish to see Afghanistan being handed to religious fundamentalists. Some 6 million barrels of oil and 500,000 tons of wheat were delivered to survive the winter.

It only postponed the inevitable and on March 18, 1992, Najibullah offered his government's immediate resignation, and by mid-April Najibullah accepted a UN

plan to hand over power to a seven-man council. Abdul Rahim Hatef became acting head of state following Najibullah's resignation. The Mujahideen forces took Kabul shortly thereafter and most of them signed the Peshawar Accord creating the new Islamic State of Afghanistan. The Mujahideen tortured and murdered Dr. Najibullah and hung his mutilated body from a lamppost close to the Presidential Palace. His death was the end of an effective and functioning state (Johnson and Leslie, 2007, p.144).

The Peshawar Accord proved of little avail to further stability post-Najibullah. The Mujahideen forces fell apart in warring factions leaving not only the country but also its capital in ruins. This situation lasted two years with a power void and different factions violently competing for the spoils of war. The track record of the incoming administration could not have been poorer (Ibid.). Graffiti appeared on walls in central Kabul months after the fall of Najibullah, likely summing up many people's feelings: "Give us back our cow and take away your donkeys". Najibullah's student nickname had been "the cow". With the collapse of the Afghan nation-state that had been constructed to that point, a very different political context for Afghan women started, one that eroded their personal security and their rights.

3.6 The Mujahideen Regime: proxy wars and gender regimes (1992-1996)

With the end of the Soviet-supported regime in Kabul, the country sank into disarray with the main seven Mujahideen groups fighting for control and political power. According to Chavis (2003, p. 36), the Mujahideen declared war on the rest of the Muslims, especially Muslim women, and all non-Muslims. They justified and consolidated their newly gained power by referring to "fundamental Islam". However, the fundamentalist reading of the words of God as told by the Prophet did not diminish the earthly cravings for the spoils of a war economy. According to the Peshawar agreement, Burhanuddin Rabbani was granted power and became the new Afghan President for a two-year term (Jalalzai, 2003, p.85). In fact, warlordism, exploitation and impunity ruled the day.

The USA had achieved its geopolitical aim of bringing the Soviet Union to its knees by engaging it in a prolonged and economically ruinous proxy war. Day and Bacevich (n.d, p. 31) notes that the United States' view on the Mujahideen was that, as long as the Mujahideen were hurting the Soviet Union, their political and religious views were of no importance. In her position of Secretary of State, Hilary Clinton admitted two decades later that Reagan's "Freedom Fighters" were instead religious fanatics who did not share any of the US values and that the USA had created the very problem that they were fighting in the form of the Taliban: "Let's be careful what we sow because we will harvest and we are making up for a lot of lost time." (DAWN, April 25, 2009). Yet even before the terrorist attack on the twin towers in NY, September 2001, Washington had turned its back on the country. Joya (2009, p.3) adds that "Many books were written about Afghanistan after 9/11 tragedy, but only a few of them offer a complete and realistic picture of the country's past. Most of them describe in depth the cruelties and injustices of the Taliban regime but usually ignore or try to hide one of the darkest periods of our history: the rule of the fundamentalist Mujahideen between 1992 and 1996."

The Afghan population at large were the first victims but Afghan women, having seen real benefits under the secular communist regime were the worst off. Ayatollah Asif Mohseni, the interim governing council spokesman and Sayed Ali Javed publicly announced in May 1992 a new set of rules governing the conduct of women. Appendix B contains some of the first decrees on women's behaviour and on cultural norms issued by the Mujahideen when they too power. The "Ordinance on the Women's Veil" outlined the conditions of wearing a veil and proclaimed that "a denier of the veil is an infidel and an unveiled woman is lewd" (Joya 2009: p. 28). Women and girls were subjected to coercion and sexual violence "Young girls were forcibly married to the jihadi commanders…They used rape as a weapon to dominate and terrorise the people. Their men raped children as young as four and cut off the breasts of the women. There were even reports reaching Pakistan of these criminals raping the dead bodies of women and the old grandmothers-which is beyond imagination" (Ibid, p.29).

In particular this extreme violence was targeted at women in the public sphere, especially women seeking education as a pathway to future independence. The

brutality of Rabbani and his followers is described in Chavis' book, about the Afghan heroine, Meena: "One of the most rabid among Rabbani's followers was Gulbaddin Hekmatyar, one of the founders of a political party called Hezb-e-Islami- the Islamic party. Rabbani incited his small group of male followers to action. They attacked women on the campus, throwing caustic acid onto their bare legs and leaving painful burns. The attackers even tried to splash acid into women's faces. The injuries were serious. As the attackers threw the acid they yelled at the women, 'Cover your faces and legs!' 'Go home where you belong!' and, 'The university is not for women!' They called the women 'whores' and 'un-Islamic'" (Chavis, 2004, p.37).

Violence, both political and gendered, and highly unpredictable, seemed to be the predominant recollection of my women interviewees of this period. This was a time of great insecurity for all Afghans, but especially for women, with the continual threat of targeted and sexual violence. In her interview MP Mrs. Hanifah recalled: "After 5 years, I graduated from the University. It was end of Dr. Najibullah's time and the beginning of the Mujahideen period. Dr. Najibullah was hiding in the UN compound. This was the starting point of all unlucky days. There were four factions fighting with the first led by Burhanuddin Rabbani, the second by Abdul Rasul Sayyaf, the third by Gulbudin Hekmatyar, and the last by the 'Lion of Panjshir', Ahmad Shah Masood. After these factions' fights, Kabul was entirely ruined. We can never see the same Kabul any more. Unrecognizable. The battles reduced much of Kabul to rubble". She witnessed the bloodshed with her own eyes: "I was a witness of all the fights and tragedy. Dr. Najibullah said one day you will see the blood pool in Kabul. I saw it in my own eyes, dead bodies everywhere on the streets of Kabul"

Female Prison Commander Mrs. Zahra recalled how Kabul was destroyed by the Mujahideen and how rockets bombarded the city from all directions. She saw the magnificent Presidential Palace turn into total ruin. There was no food to eat. All they could do was hide in underground bunkers, she recalled. In Ms. Minoo's view: "When the Mujahideen came, women could not work. After one month, women judges could work. However, it was very challenging for us. There was a lot of fighting. The security situation was very bad. Many of my relatives went to Peshawar." (Interviewee Ms. Minoo, UNODC). She describes

the terror perpetrated by both the Mujahideen and Taliban regimes: "During the Taliban time, Kabul was silent. But during the Mujahideen time, there was a lot of gunfire, everyone was afraid and people lived under threat constantly". Similarly, interviewee MP Ms. Suraya contrasts the experience of the Mujahideen period with the Taliban period, adding, "A lot of people were killed during the Mujahideen time as well as during the Taliban time. But Taliban time was short. Some of our elders could talk to them. Don't touch us, and we don't bother you, they would say, that's fine, even if for women, schooling was the problem." (Interviewee MP Ms. Suraya, Ghazni Province)

3.7 The Taliban Regime (1996-2001)

"Whether we like it or not, the Taliban is part of the West's legacy…"
Evening Standard (London), Feb.20, 2001[17]

The Taliban era became infamous, as the regime was branded as especially "evil" and accused of all what went wrong in the country without acknowledging that their existence, and political success, constituted a reaction to a political era of unseen bloodshed and brutality. They restored security and relative peace in most of the country and therefore initially popular among large segments of the population. As Commander Mrs. Zahra says above, "During the Taliban time, Kabul was silent". In 2013, I discussed this in Kabul with the Pakistani Head of the Finance Department in a well-known private University. He defended the Taliban in the following terms: "it was a very dangerous time. War and fighting were everywhere. Security was so bad that how could anyone go to school?" This logic appeared accepted by many Afghans during the initial days of the Taliban securing the country.

The Taliban are a creation of the Mujahideen in two ways. First, they are an immediate derivative from the US/Saudi supported and Pakistani trained fundamentalist Mujahideen. For example, the later leader of the Taliban, Mullah Omar, fought in his early young years as a rebel soldier with the anti-Soviet Mujahideen under the command of Nek Mohammed of the Hizb-e-Islami Khalis. Sometimes, they interchangeably call themselves Taliban and Mujahideen. For

[17] Cited in RAWA online website http://www.rawa.org/cia-talib.htm

instance, Mullah Zaeef, the former Taliban Ambassador to Pakistan and the author of the book *My life with the Taliban*, denominates himself both a Mujahideen and Taliban. In 1983, they were invited by the American President, Ronald Reagan, to the White House and had a pleasant meeting by all accounts. Reagan, when meeting with the Taliban again in 1985, before they split off from the Mujahideen, allegedly said “These gentlemen are the moral equivalents of America’s founding fathers” (Mills, 2007, p.97), a contrast to Hillary Clinton’s later designation of them as entirely lacking in any “American values”.

Second, they originated as a reaction to the barbarian infighting, pillage and extortion, impunity and chaos generated by Mujahideen warlords after the fall of Najibullah. It is part of the myth surrounding the enigmatic Mullah Omar that the raping of a group of travellers by a local warlord in Kandahar enraged him so much that he and a handful of followers killed the perpetrators and hung their bodies from the barrels of their own tanks. From then onward, Mullah Omar mobilized an effort to remove the corrupt, brutal Mujahideen groups from power. It is also suggested that the Taliban was in part born out of a public anger that local commanders had married *bacha* boys and were engaging in other morally licentious behaviour (Londono, April 4, 2012).

A third element is to be added to this. The earlier wave of warlords toppling Najibullah’s regime did not provide the regional stability and influence Pakistan had wished for. On Pakistan’s East border it was confronted by India with the unresolved Kashmir dispute. At its West border the turbulence incited its own Pashtun-dominated autonomous tribal areas and the instability had invited regional proxy warfare within Afghanistan, with different groupings supported by a variety of competing regional interests often along ethnic lines. Pakistan’s Army and Secret Service, financed by Saudi and Gulf money, was ready for a second act to ensure its influence in Afghanistan.

The Madrassa students providing the core of the Taliban might not know how to govern a country and an economy, but at least they delivered on their primary promise: getting the brutal warlords out of power and out of the country. Latifa (2002, p. 6) notes that the Taliban looked and acted terrifying, dressed like Pakistanis in long floppy trousers. “They're parading round in pick-ups, and only

stop at random to beat people in the crowd — especially anyone without a beard. The Taliban all wear beards. They state that beards have to be as long as a hand. They never wear a pakol, which is our traditional Afghan beret, sign of the Resistance. A lot of them aren't Afghani, or even Pashtun. Pakistan supports them and recruits them abroad. The pictures we see on television and the reports from witnesses in the Taliban-occupied provinces attest to that: in their ranks there are lots of Pakistanis, but also Arabs who've come from various other Muslim countries. The majority of them don't even speak our language." This portrayal of the Taliban is similar to that articulated by my interviewee Ms. Minoo. Even when I interviewed her she did not believe that the then Taliban's members were actual Afghans, because the Taliban she encountered or heard in her neighbourhood did not act or sound like Afghans. Regardless of whether they were born Afghans or not, their habits appeared alien.

Pakistani political analyst Ahmed Rashid (2008) notes how the Taliban quickly consolidated their military power capturing Kandahar in late 1994, then rapidly spreading north and west, taking Herat and Kabul in 1995 and 1996 respectively, overcoming opposition from Pashtun warlords, Pakistan, which had connections to the Taliban leaders, brought Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates on board to give financial support and political recognition to the movement, channelled the money through the Pakistani intelligence service. Despite a defeat in 1997, expelled from the northern city of Mazar-e-Sharif, the Taliban would ignore the Loya Jirga practice and decided that it alone would rule the country and enforce Sharia. This would lead to “Its definition of Sharia-influenced by extremist Islamic teachings in Pakistan and a perversion of Pashtunwali, or the Pashtun code of behaviour- and its harsh enforcement across the country were utterly alien to Afghan culture and tradition” (Rashid 2008, p 14).

Strongly rooted in the Pashtun tribes and largely embedded within Sunni Islam, the Taliban were also intolerant towards minority groups such as the Hazara. Of Central Asian descent and largely Shia they were considered inferior and religious heretics by the uncompromising Pashtun Taliban. In Mazar-e-Sharif, dozens of Hazara people were slaughtered by the Taliban when it captured the city. My interviewee, Prison Commander Mrs. Zahra, a Hazara, was shot by the Taliban. Her husband and other Hazara families were ultimately saved by their

neighbour Pashtun elder who intervened to their benefit. In this instance, whilst they had little respect for the Hazara, the Taliban did listen to a Pashtun elder.

3.7.1 The gender order under the Taliban

While the Taliban movement was popular at the start, the relationship between the population and the Taliban became increasingly strained. For women, the major problem was the role of women, based on a Pashtunwali interpretation of Sharia Law, embedded with Saudi imported Wahhabism, aimed to "secure environments where the chasteness and dignity of women may once again be sacrosanct" (Dupree, 2001, p.145). Like the Mujahideen, the Taliban also set out their expectations for women's behaviour (see Appendix C). Education for girls was not allowed; strict laws were enforced to control men and women, and rigorous gender segregation was expected. The Taliban had been welcomed to restore security and order but not the order or structure under President's Daoud's time or even the communist era. The Taliban enforced their traditional version of Sharia law or Islamic law. On the positive side, for many Afghans, swift and harsh "justice" reduced criminality drastically. On the negative side, the country was socially and economically paralyzed. Females could not leave house without male company, could not go to school, could not dress freely, and could not work. If they opposed this system, then the Taliban inferred promptly and severely. One of my respondents noted "There was no education allowed. No trip to make. No fun at all. Even when we go for shopping, we had to wear the burqa. Only female medical doctors could work, no other females were allowed to work" (Interviewee Ms. Minoo, Legal Advisor, UNODC). This latter disposition, allowing women doctors to continue in their public profession, was, ironically, a pragmatic strategy for enforced the restriction of the vast majority of women to the private sphere.

The Taliban period is recalled as one in which women's agency as autonomous human beings was not just curtailed but completely denied and experienced as brutally enforced de-humanisation. "During the Taliban period, I was tailoring at home. I was 14 that time. I can't remember that I was to go out. I heard some bad news about Taliban, killing and beating women. During the Taliban time, I

had to wear a burqa. I felt like I was in the darkest place. I can't explain my feelings. We had no rights, we were not like humans. We were not treated like women" (Interviewee Ms. Mahnaz, BBC reporter). MP Mrs. Hanifah expressed her personal experience during the Taliban time in similar vein, emphasising curtailment of freedom of movement in public space and this dehumanisation accompanied by violence" "My husband graduated during Taliban regime. After that, all the women were like animals. The Taliban treated women like animals. Women could not go anywhere. I was working as a tailor. When I needed to go out, I needed to wear burqa. We could not show our faces. I once experienced that there was a woman with a child. She opened her burqa to see something. The Taliban saw her and beat her up. You could not taste or see things, otherwise, you could be beaten up by the Taliban" (Interviewee MP Ms. Hanifah, Farah Province).

3.8 The Western-backed regime and gender reforms (2001-2021)

The terror attack in September 2001 on the twin WTC Towers in New York, pushed Afghanistan back in the eye of the geopolitical storm. In contrast to the later invasion in Iraq, toppling Sadam Hussein, the intervention in Afghanistan was sanctioned by the UN Security Council with the aim of fighting terrorism. In December 2001, a powerful power elite gathered in Bonn, Germany, to create a structure for an 'inclusive leadership' to guide the country in modernization. The defeated Taliban indicated their willingness to be part of an 'inclusive administration' but their participation to the Bonn Conference was rejected. Under the December 5 Bonn Agreement, a new government was formed, and Hamid Karzai nominated as Chairman of a 29-member governing committee. On 22 December, Karzai was sworn in as President of Afghanistan. Reminiscent to the fate of King Amanullah Khan, the Taliban accused the President of Afghanistan of being the stooge of Washington, and not a legitimate representative of the Afghan people.

A key component of this new Western-backed regime was to be the liberation of the oppressed Afghan women from backward traditional beliefs as promoted by

the barbarian Taliban. This became the rallying cry to mobilize popular opinion in the West.

Former First Ladies, Laura Bush and Cherie Blair, echoed the call for women rights and the end of gender oppression. Women's rights campaigners and the international media portrayed Afghan women as miserable, passive victims.

The second mass-circulation image of an Afghan woman was published in 2001, after the 9/11 attacks. On December 3, 2001, Time Magazine imitated the 'Afghan Mona Lisa' by picturing another green-eyed Afghan female on its cover with the title " Lifting The Veil: The shocking story of how the Taliban brutalized the women of Afghanistan. How much better will their lives be now?"" and offering a special report on Afghanistan as "an inside look at how women fared under Taliban oppression and what the future holds for them now." A month earlier, on 16 November, the US First Lady, Laura Bush, had addressed the nation condemning "the severe repression against women in Afghanistan." She stated that, "the fight against terrorism is also a fight for the rights and dignity of women" (Flanders 2001, in Berry 2003, p.137). Following the address of Ms. Bush, the State Department issued a report examining the conditions for women and children under the Taliban. The report detailed the Taliban policies that denied girls access to education, prevented all but a handful of women from working outside the home, severely limited women's access to health care, and denied women freedom of movement. Once again, the images of Afghan women were deployed to build public support for foreign policy, this time the 2001-2002 US-prosecuted war in Afghanistan (Cloud, 2004, p.285). Emphasizing images of women, Cloud argues that such representations evoke the idea of a "clash of civilizations". She argues that "Through the construction of binary oppositions of self and Other, the evocation of a paternalistic stance toward the women of Afghanistan, and the figuration of modernity as liberation, these images participate in a set of justifications for war that contradicts the actual motives for the war" (ibid.).

This was not the only image that was deployed to maintain support for Western intervention. Nine years later, in August 2010, Time Magazine again put a picture of an Afghan woman on its cover. She too has beautiful eyes, dark brown this time, but Bibi Aisha appears severely mutilated with her nose and ears cut off. Her husband, father-in-law and two brothers-in-law had committed this horrific cruelty with the blessing of the local Taliban Mullah. As a child bride, Aisha had fled her arranged marriage but was captured and returned to the village. Again, the message to the Western reader goes well beyond the individual horrific fate of Aisha and serves as a chill warning for those wanting the US military intervention to come to an end while the Taliban were still in control of parts of the country. Indeed, the caption on the cover asks: "What happens if we leave Afghanistan?" Rod Nordland, writing for the New York Times, comes to a similar conclusion: "Reaction to the Time cover has become something of an Internet litmus test about attitudes toward the war, and what America's responsibility is in Afghanistan" (Nordland, Aug. 4, 2010). In her analysis of the images, Cloud (2004) argues that "these images have warranted the use of force in Afghanistan on allegedly humanitarian grounds. In Kipling's terms, U.S. forces are there to "serve their captives' needs" (Cloud, 2004, p.287). Priyamvada Gopal (2010) alludes to other political motivations, suggesting in her article, "Burqas and Bikinis" in The Guardian newspaper that the accompanying editorial in Time magazine, claiming to neither support nor oppose the US war effort, is misleading. Instead, she notes that WikiLeaks documents revealed CIA advice to use the plight of Afghan women as "pressure points", an emotive way to rally flagging public support for the war" (Gopal, 2010). Despite the normative assumption that the media should report impartially on wars and conflicts, in reality the media do take sides and present a view in a war, presenting images intended to influence its audience. Leading Western media, such as National Geographic, the Times Magazine, and the New York Times have consciously or unconsciously strengthened a political message in favour of Western military engagement in Afghanistan, using women's victimization and suffering as a tool.

The Afghan activist and writer Sima Wali refused to accept this kind of Afghan mythology: "The dignity, courage, dedication, and vision I encountered belie the notion that they are only victims. The image of Afghan as miserable victims is

but one of a series of myths created and perpetuated by the Western world" (Wali, 2002, p. 6). This narrative obscured the fact that many Afghan women had achieved respected social status in Afghan society in different parts of its history. Valentine Azabijani-Moghadam, in her academic work, has contributed greatly in mapping the history of both intermittent gains and losses of Afghan women's rights since the late nineteenth century under the many different regimes, thus undermining this master narrative.

The fact that women's plight was the outcome of earlier US policies was handily overlooked. Ó Colmáin suggest that this shifting around of the blame was not due to naïve righteousness but an intentional ploy: "In the weeks before the Afghanistan invasion in 2001, television viewers were bombarded with images showing the plight of Afghan women under Taliban rule" but the media "never explained how it came to pass that such draconian laws could be foisted upon a country in at the end of the twentieth century" (Ó Colmáin, March 08, 2016). The media instead reported that since the Western intervention, women were for the first time stepping out from the dark ages and from under their burqas. Saba Gul Khattak (2002, p.21) as notes how women have often been used as pawns in colonial and neo-colonial discourse, "The British had pointed to practices of child marriage, sati and purdah, to indicate the uncivilized treatment of Indian women by Indian men and to justify their colonization of India. Khattak continues, "In a throwback to this thinking, US discourse on Afghan women, with its implicit claim to know all Afghan women and children, advocated bombing them in order to liberate them. The US representation of Afghan women as a helpless illiterate lot who were not even allowed to laugh out loud, stripped of rights and by extension of consciousness, is as colonial as the British idea of the White Man's Burden" (Ibid.) As noted by the postcolonial feminist theory explored in Chapter 1, yet again brown women needed to be saved from the brown men as part of the West's *mission civilatrice*.

Yet this mission denied the historical fact that it had been Washington's earlier support for the Mujahideen against the Soviet backed regimes, which had put back the gender issues for decades. Political analyst Gearóid Ó Colmáin analyses the situation as follows: "Afghanistan's women remain passive and largely absent from the media narrative, and only become visible when we forget why

we invaded the country in the first place. We are never told that Afghanistan women were once free and that it was we who put a brutal and ruthless end to their fledgling freedoms. We were never told that Women were free in Afghanistan long before Western intervention and that in fact it was Western intervention which enslaved Afghan women "(Ó Colmáin, March 08, 2016).

Malalai Joya, a former Member of Parliament, goes further in pointing to the cynicism of the US, bringing back the same warlords who earlier had denied women rights in the Mujahideen era: "Most people in the West have been led to believe that intolerance, brutality, and the severe oppression of women in Afghanistan began with the Taliban regime. But this is a lie, more dust in the eyes of the world from the warlords who dominate the American-backed, so-called democratic government of Hamid Karzai. In truth some of the worst atrocities in our recent past were committed during the civil war by the men who are now in power" (Joya, 2009, p. 27). Being initially a "low-cost" operation, Washington had opted to bribe the warlords of the past, earlier chased away by or compliant to the Taliban, for this undertaking. Even during the so-called liberation from the Taliban, atrocities against women by these warlords dating from the Mujahideen era continued unabated and with full impunity. Khattak recounts: "Warlords associated with Gen. Abdul Rashid Dostum, Deputy Defence Minister in the Afghan interim government, as well as soldiers of the erstwhile Northern Alliance, are reported to have attacked and raped Pashtun women living in northern Afghanistan with impunity. (…) Pashtuns were targeted in ugly scenes of violence in reprisal for their alleged support of the mostly Pashtun Taliban" (Khattak, 2002, p.23).

In addition, Pakistan was told that those who were not with the USA in their fight against terrorism, were to be considered enemies of the USA. Hence, many leaders from the Afghanistan's more recent unsavoury past found themselves back in Hamid Karzai's interim government.

None of the foregoing is to deny that once the Taliban were out of power and a US-backed Government in place, the position of women did improve – at least in legal terms and in urban centres. While still not everybody could afford it,

girls' education became the norm. While jobs were still scarce outside the service sector, women were again allowed to work. If money available, women are allowed their own bank account and control over their money. Burqas are not compulsory but wearing one still saved a lot of social trouble and harassment. Some of the detail on these gender-based reforms is explored in the following chapters. However, insecurity remained for many women who attempted public advocacy roles, given the very weak state- and nation-building process for the last two decades. For example, Safia Amajan was active in rebuilding the nation after the civil war and took on public responsibilities despite the threat by the Taliban. "She joined the newly formed government Department of Women's Affairs in 2001 and rose to be its head (…) working to educate girls and liberate women in Kandahar made her a target in this city, the volatile nest of the Taliban (…)" In 2005 she was gunned down by two men on motor-bicycles during a spate of attacks on hundreds of schools (Lichter, 2009, p.31).

Whilst the post-Taliban days were filled with optimism, there was a continual backdrop of violence. In 2016, an estimated 600,000 Afghan citizens were back on the road fleeing their homes due to violence. This broke the previous record since warfare had ended, despite the US military command in Afghanistan saying that the territory controlled by the central government increased to nearly 60 percent of the country's 407 districts. As we now know, the central government control of the national territory, despite the billions of dollars poured in by the USA, was tenuous indeed. In 2021 Afghanistan was once again confirmed as the "Graveyard of Empires".

3.9 Conclusions

"Afghanistan is occupied by America, we must liberate it."
Taliban insurgency slogan in Maidan Wardak.

With the return of the Taliban movement to power in August 2021, women find themselves between a hammer and a nail – torn between the 'what-could-be' and 'what-will-be'. Gender issues in Afghanistan have suffered from a geopolitical yo-yo, utilized as an inconsequential tool to be sacrificed or reinvented on

the political altar. The fate of Afghan women is as poorly understood as is war and conflict in Afghanistan. Since the British controlled Afghanistan in 1800s, the Soviet Union in the 1970s, and the USA starting October 2001, external powers have tried to install deferential and often weak rulers. The issue of gender equality was a very often politically instrumentalised, subservient to much larger goals of political power and influence.

King Amanullah Khan envisaged a modern state on par with the rest of the world, including the improvement of women's rights. Afraid of the expansion of the Russian Empire in Central Asia and beyond, the British had no qualms in undermining the King's legitimacy. This dynamic was repeated in the 1970s yet with different actors, with the USA undermining the Soviet-backed regime, had no regard for the attempts to set up a modern state or the progress made on women rights. These were easily discounted as collateral damage. Just a few years later, "modernization" and women rights were then cynically promoted to justify the invasion in 2001 and the toppling of the Taliban.

Due to these constant proxy fights, Afghanistan has found itself between the metaphorical hammer and nail. Foreign financial and military support helped prolong internal strife and exacerbate ethnic divisions. The result always was the virtual disintegration of the state and collapse of public services (Stewart and Fitzgerald, 2001, p.105). M. Jamil Hanifi (2009) wrote: "Over the last 30 years, the polity of Afghanistan has undergone several overlapping transformations. The structure of power at the centre has collapsed, causing the centre-periphery relations to evaporate. The movement of economic and human resources from various regions of Afghanistan to locations across international borders, especially in Iran and Pakistan, has intensified. Ethnic, sectarian, and regional cleavages have deepened. The framework of political discourse and processes has become increasingly grounded in Islamic ideology, and the Afghan periphery has become heavily weaponized". Afghanistan appears to be trapped in a perpetual cycle of reformist progress followed by a rapid decline of the situation. Its internal divisions on values and vision combined with ethnic fragmentation easily allows for external interference and manipulation. In this context, nation-building has been repeatedly tried and as many times failed.

After over a decade of major security, development and humanitarian assistance, the latest international intervention has not been able to leave behind a politically stable and economically viable Afghanistan. Despite investments going far beyond what Western Europe received through the Marshall Plan, state institutions remain fragile and unable to provide good governance, deliver basic services to the majority of the population or guarantee basic security. Afghanistan‘s human development indicators still ranks among the world’s lowest. Corruption is thriving and while it initially might have kept an unimaginable alliance of former warring factions together, it has today become the worst threat for a viable country.

Until 15 August 2021, before the fall of Kabul to the new Taliban, Afghanistan’s economy was running mainly on aid money and on an illegal economy, encompassing opium, illicit mining and smuggling of migrants. The international attention the country received has slowly faded away, turned instead towards new hot spots on the global scene. As part of the Doha Agreement, negotiated between the Taliban and Washington without the involvement of the central government in Kabul, the Trump administration agreed to a complete military withdrawal by May 2021.

The Taliban were once considered a popular and fundamentalist alternative to violent and brutal infighting of the Mujahideen, and once again this state fragility enabled the Taliban to gain popularity among large segments of the population by offering swift justice and rejecting corrupt behaviour.

This chapter analysed how several Afghan political regimes tried to modernise the country and elevate the status of women. It demonstrated the active role Afghan women played in this, challenging the myth of powerless Afghan women. Women themselves work for their rights alongside the men. I also pointed out the hypocritical narrative on the ‘liberation of women’, waiting to be rescued, so often overheard in the Western media. Regretfully, gender issues have only been a kite flying in these turbulent historic winds. With the return of the Taliban and the negotiations it is currently undertaking with Western powers, will women rights again be sacrificed on the altar of geopolitical convenience?

Chapter 4 - Culture and Ethnicity

This chapter examines how culture and ethnicity form gender regimes that constitute part of the patriarchal order in Afghanistan. In conjunction with other intersecting constituent components of social beliefs and values, such as religion, examined in the next chapter, culture and ethnicity -- in their diverse forms – have exerted considerable influence on gender norms for professional women in Afghanistan.

4.1 Culture and ethnicity

Culture and ethnicity are both social constructs, affecting gender roles overall. Afghan women, in their quest for social, economic, and professional equality, have had to negotiate cultural norms, which shift and change, and their own ethnic identities and cultures, both in their traditional and contemporary forms. Neither culture nor ethnicity are static phenomena, but rather exist in a continual process of redefinition and reconstruction. Here we consider ethnicity as it impacts the role of women in Afghanistan, and how they have experienced and navigated processes such as ethnic conflict, mobilization, resurgence, and change (Nagel, 1994, p.154).

The term “ethnicity” is best understood as a matter of the cultural identity of a group, often based on shared ancestry, language, and traditions. According to Zenner (1996), "Ethnicity can refer to a group of people of the same descent and heritage who share a common and distinctive culture passed on through generations". In turn, culture delineates our identity and worldview. It provides a framework or rules and practices in a given society for how to behave in certain areas of life. Culture also gives a certain unity and uniformity to a society due to the shared experiences, perceptions, and values penetrating our unconscious mind becoming part of an absorbed social script. Yet culture is not static: “Culture is not something that belongs purely to the past; it is an integral and inalienable part of what we are today and will become tomorrow. Individuals and institutions constantly create and re-create culture” (MacDonald, 1991, p. 10). Cul-

ture is also highly contested, and can become a political and ideological battleground. Who gets to define cultural norms and practices? Whose voices are dominant and who is silenced. The testimonies for the professional women interviewed in this thesis show how conscious these women are of occupying a space in the public sphere, providing a visible model of female agency, and, in so doing, creating a culture norm in which this is acceptable. In the contest between competing ethnic groups, religious groups, and Afghan actors and international actors, the question of culture, and of social norms in so far as they govern gendered expectations about behaviour, has repeatedly been central to political conflicts in that country.

Concepts such as ethnicity, race, caste, tribe, class, and minority within a general theory of group relations have long been debated within the social sciences (Vincent, 1974, p.375). Words such as “ethnic groups”, “ethnicity” and “ethnic conflict” are common parlance yet “the meaning of these terms frequently seems ambiguous and vague” (Eriksen, 2010). This has led, in the last few decades, to a boom in scholarly publications on ethnicity and nationalism, particularly in the fields of political science, history, cultural studies and conflict studies. While these terms are ambiguous, vague and contested, the influence of ethnic group identity seems today to be stronger than national identity everywhere, both in the global North and South. For some, “tribe” would be a more familiar term than ethnicity. In Afghanistan, for example, people identify by tribes—Tajiks and Pashtuns. Ethnic groups can exhibit such distinguishing features as language or accent, physical features, family names, customs, and religion. Ethnic identity refers to identification with and perceived acceptance into a group with shared heritage and culture (Collier and Thomas, 1988).

4.2 The nature of ethnicity and tribal society in Afghanistan

If ethnicity, culture, religion, and social class play significant roles in shaping any society, this arguably even more the case in Afghanistan where continued competition for resources and political influence between ethnic groups has resulted in further fragmentation and, periodically, in open warfare. In this thesis, the emphasis is on the norms and values defining how people are expected to interact within the social context. Race, ethnicity, and social categories are significant

factors in political and social relations, and their impact on women is profound. According to Rostami-Povey (2009), in order to be able to understand gender in Afghanistan it is particularly important to understand ethnic groups. As Emadi (2002, p.13), notes female subordination to men is common to all regions and all parts of the population of Afghanistan, but local customs and traditions vary from one region and one tribe to the next.

Afghanistan is a pluri-ethnic and multi-linguistic country with an estimated population of about 30 million (World Fact Book, 2012). Table 4.1. summarises the diverse ethnic, linguistic communities and religious communities in the country. Based on language and self-identity, there are around 25 distinct groups in Afghanistan, peoples whilst Afghanistan's 2004 constitution recognizes 14 ethnic groups: the main ones are Pashtun, Tajik, Hazara, Uzbek, and Aimaq (also known as Chahar Aimaq), plus Baloch, Turkmen, Nuristani, Pamiri, Arab, Gujar, Brahui, Qizilbash, and Pashai, living as a predominantly rural population of Afghanistan (Nawid, 1999). More than 30 languages are spoken in Afghanistan. The main languages are Dari (Afghan Persian) and Pashto (Pashto is a member of the southeastern Iranian branch of Indo-Iranian languages spoken in Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iran and the language of the Pashtuns, the major ethnic group in Afghanistan). Current numbers suggest that roughly 42 per cent of Afghans consider themselves Pashtun. The Tajik Sunni Dari-speakers are the second-largest group at 27%. They are organised along local lineages, village clusters, valleys, and occupational groups. They live in Kabul and other cities and identify with the geographical areas that they come from as well as with their ethnicity. The Hazaras, who are predominantly Shi'a, are the third-largest ethnic group, living mainly in the central Afghan highlands, known as Hazarajat. After the fall of the Taliban many Hazara came to live in Kabul and Mazar Sharif. They speak a dialect of Persian known as Hazaragi. Some Hazaras are Sayids and believe they are the descendants of the Prophet Muhammad; there are also Sunni and Ismali Hazara minorities. Despite their religious diversity, Hazaras have become more united as one ethnic group since the 1992 civil war. The Uzbeks are the fourth-largest ethnic group. They have lived in Afghanistan for centuries and were ruled by their own emirs. Other Uzbeks migrated to Afghanistan after the expansion of the Tsarist Empire and during the Soviet expansion. They are mostly Sunni, live

in the north of Afghanistan and speaking their own Turkic language, although in the cities they also speak Dari. There are also many other smaller ethnic groups, cultures, and languages such as Turkmens, Nuristanis, Baluchis and others.

The Persian-speaking ethnic groups, as well as the Turkic minorities, live in the central and northern parts of the country. Although Kabul is traditionally a Persian-speaking city, it is now populated by members of all ethnic groups. What appears to be a widely fragmented tribal society is kept united through a common values system, namely, the religion of Islam (Nawid, 1999). The vast majority of Islam believers are Sunni (over 80%) while a minority adheres to Shia Islam, and religious/ethnic differences are further explored in the next chapter.

Although the word "Afghans" has been endorsed in the constitution and is intended to apply to everyone residing in the country, people nevertheless identify themselves by their ethnic affiliation and linguistic community. The 2004 Constitution (Article 16) endorses and protects this pluralism of ethnic and linguistic identity, counterbalancing the traditional dominance of the Pashtuns and the ethno-nationalist linguistic dominance of Pashto and Dari. This is one step towards freedom of the press in terms of language, regardless of ethnicity.

> "From amongst Pashto, Dari, Uzbeki, Turkmani, Baluchi, Pachaie, Nuristani, Pamiri and other current languages in the country, Pashto and Dari shall be the official languages of the state. In areas where the majority of the people speak in any one of Uzbeki, Turkmani, Pachaie, Nuristani, Baluchi or Pamiri languages, any of the aforementioned languages, in addition to Pashto and Dari, shall be the third official language, the usage of which shall be regulated by law. The state shall design and apply effective programs to foster and develop all languages of Afghanistan. Usage of all current languages in the country shall be free in press publications and mass media. Academic and national administrative terminology and usage in the country shall be preserved"

Table 4.1: Afghanistan's ethnolinguistic and religious communities

Ethnic Group	Language	Religious Sect	Estimated No.

Pashtun	Pashto	Sunni (a few Shiite)	6,5000,000
Tajik	Persian	Sunni (a few Shiite)	4,100,000
Hazara	Persian	Shia, Ismaili, some Sunni	1,780,000
Uzbek	Uzbeki	Sunni	1,100,000
Aimaq	Persian with some Turkish	Sunni	800,000
Farsiwan	Persian	Shia	600,000
Brahui	Brahui (Darvidian)	Sunni	200,000
Turkmen	Turkmani	Sunni	200,000
Baluch	Baluchi	Sunni	100,000
Nuristani	Kafiri	Sunni	100,000
Hindu	Persian & Pashto; mother tongue is Hindi or Punjabi	Hinduism	20,000
Sikh	Persian & Pashto; mother tongue is Hindi or Punjabi	Sikhism	10,000
Jews*	Persian (Judeo-Persian); mother tongue is Hebrew	Judaism	5,000
Pamiri	Indo-Iranian dialect	Sunni & Ismaili	1,000-5,000
Kohistani	Dardic dialect	Sunni	1,000-5,000
Gujar	Indo-European (Pashto)	Sunni	1,000-5,000
Qirghiz	Turkic	Sunni	1,000-5,000
Jat	Indo-European (Pashto)	Sunni	100-500
Arab	Arabic & Persian	Sunni	100-500
Mongol	Persian with some Mongol	Sunni	100-500

Source. Canfield (1986, p.78)[18]

[18] The Jews came to Afghanistan from Mashed, Iran, and settled in Herat, Balkh and Kabul. From 1948, a majority emigrated to the USA and Israel. Incidents of harassment by Islamic militants and fear of further hostile actions caused a large number of Hindus and Sikhs to leave the country

According to Emadi (2002, p.2) "the country is fragmented not only by ethnolinguistic and religious differences but also on the basis of affiliation to different tribes and regions". Among 'Afghans', solidarity is mainly based on ethnic group rather than on being an 'Afghan' as a common identity. Goodson (2001, p. 140) concludes that "Afghanistan has never been a homogeneous nation but rather a collection of disparate groups divided along ethnic, linguistic, religious and racial lines and forced together by the vagaries of geopolitics." Ethnicity has been perhaps the most important contextual factor shaping Afghanistan today, as throughout its history the ethnic mixture in Afghanistan has traditionally caused a high propensity for violence, often between ethnic groups, and subtribes. Ethnic differences, especially those between Sunni and Shia Muslims, have been the cause of many conflicts in Afghanistan, particularly after the collapse of the Communist regime. Warlords have fought against each other, vying for power and control over Afghanistan. Although ethnic groups in Afghanistan may show great solidarity when their country faces a foreign aggressor, "once the foreigners are gone, they return to the old disputes and fight each other again"[19].

Tribalism, regionalism, and conflict have persisted among various ethnic communities because of the country's physical (landlocked and mountainous) geography, and lack of adequate development projects in rural areas. The combination of both ethnic composition and tribal identities are defining elements in Afghan society and in its social and political structure. "Rural populations of Afghanistan have repeatedly exerted a decisive influence on public affairs" (Canfield, 1986, p.75). As Ahmed-Ghosh (2003) remarks, although there have been Kabul-based efforts to modernise Afghanistan, these have been largely thwarted by rural tribal powers. This geography and the rural-urban divide it has generated, have in turn been decisive in Afghanistan's history and current predicament. While, as anywhere in the world, the urban elite is interconnected with the wider world, and tends to be wealthier, liberal, and more cosmopolitan

during the civil war of 1992–1996 (Emadi, 2002, p.1). At present it cannot be determined how many Jews reside in Afghanistan.

[19] See Barfield, November 17th 2012 lecture on Tribal and Religious Identity in Afghanistan, University of Pittsburgh. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WF3Rkt42wPY and Ethnicity in Afghanistan https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UCVIl6_9jz8

than other segments of society, it cannot be seen as representative of the population as a whole. The rural-urban divide also underlay wide social disparities. Ayub et al. (2009), considering the role of social and economic status in Afghan society in relation to freedom and social behaviour**,** make the point that in the 1960s and 1970s, the country was stable and functioning. "Socio-economics played a critical role: in the 1960s and 1970s; families who were significantly richer or politically connected also espoused much freer social behaviour to a degree unprecedented in Afghanistan."

Pashtuns are the largest ethnolinguistic group in Afghanistan and dominate the south and east of the country, where they occupy the Afghan part of the 'Pashtun belt' and where the two most important Pashtun cities, Kandahar and Jalalabad, are located. They share the same norms and values as Pashtuns in north-west Pakistan and there is a great deal of solidarity between them (Rostami-Povey, 2009, p.4). The majority of the Afghan rulers have been ethnic Pashtun and they remain politically and culturally dominant. Shahrani (1986) states that, it was the sociology of Pashtun dominance over the other ethnic communities in the country that formed the very substance of political developments and state building in Afghanistan (p. 25).

Ethnic nationalism often prevailed over religious nationalism. According to Banuazizi and Weiner (1986, p.9), "It was Pashtun nationalism rather than Islam that was the centralising basis for political power in Afghanistan." This dominance, notwithstanding the pluri-cultural language of the 2004 Constitution, is preserved in its Article 20 which states, "The National anthem of Afghanistan shall be in Pashto with the mention of "God is Great" as well as the names of the tribes of Afghanistan".

The Pashtun ethnic group is itself fragmented in dozens of significant tribal groups, although two "super tribes," the Durrani and Ghilzai, have historically been among the most influential. These two tribes in turn are subdivided into hundreds of subtribes, each often in competition with the other. Finding a way to work with the various tribes and clans, which have historically opposed outsiders and many of which have opposed each other, has been called "beyond perception" for its "baffling complexity" (Council on Foreign Relations, 2008). This

has constituted a challenge not only for nation-building, but also for the multiple attempts in the last century to influence law, customs and social practices through Western-style legal reforms. As Banuazizi and Weiner (1986, p.8) note, "The various tribes and regional communities of Afghanistan have operated relatively independently of the authority of a central state whose writ has often extended outside of Kabul only to the most accessible territories and the weakest minority groups. The capacity of the Afghan state bureaucracy to extract resources, to deliver benefits, and to enforce the tribes has increased, has been largely with the aid of an external power—the British in the nineteenth and early part of the twentieth centuries, and the Soviets over the past three decades."

In Afghanistan, ethnicity is important in terms of identity, social class and rights, and the cultural values coming with it strongly adhered to. A notorious inter-ethnic rivalry during the Taliban era has been between the Sunni Pashtun and the Shiia Hazara. A significant number of people lost their lives in bloody incidents and reprisals in Mazar-i-Sharif and Bamyan. The Hazara have been oppressed throughout history and remain a tremendously deprived community (Rasanayagam, 2005, p.131). Economic conditions forced thousands to work in poorly paid jobs in the cities, particularly in Kabul, where the Iron Amir Abdur Rahman Khan (1880-1901) relocated them by force to serve as indentured serfs or household servants. According to Niamatullah Ibrahimi (2009, p.6) "everyone involved in the war was allowed to enslave the Hazaras and to seize their property as war booty. By imposing a one-tenth tax on the sale of Hazara slaves and a one-fifth tax on the seizure of their properties, his government effectively turned the Hazaras into subjects of a burgeoning slave trade." The Hazara were treated as inferior on racial and religious grounds, and up until the 1960s they were generally denied access to higher education or the higher ranks of the military and bureaucracy.[20] It has been suggested that the 2001 de-

[20] When I was in Afghanistan, living in a guest house compound, I noticed that the majority of cleaners were Hazara women. Through one of them, I found a child minder, a young Hazara woman, for my son. Many Hazara people work in low-paid jobs, as evidenced by my own expe-rience. When my son went to school, and a child minder was no longer needed, I tried to get her an office job.

struction of the two 5th-century Buddha statutes in Bamyan, monumental sculptures carved in a cliff and standing 55m and 38m high respectively, was not religiously motivated as commonly accepted, but an attempt by the Pashtun Taliban to destroy the cultural identity of the Hazara people.[21]

4.3 Culture, ethnicity, power and the status of Afghan women

The status of Afghan women has fluctuated throughout the history of Afghanistan. Afghan women have been constrained, to lesser or greater degrees, by the gender regimes, particularly cultural and religious, of the various political regimes. But this is two-way relationship. Ahmed-Ghosh (2003) also argues that the status of Afghan women has been “entwined” with historical, political, social, economic, and religious forces. Further, Afghanistan may be the only country in the world where leaders have been made and unmade by struggles relating to women’s status. Women’s status and agency is often central to contested cultural notions of nation, of religious identity and ethnic identity. In relation to religion, Peteet (1993, p. 53) notes that that women are "metaphors for the integrity of the Islamic community, expressing its purity in an idiom common to Muslim culture, honour and chastity of women". Thus, the status of Afghan women cannot be regarded in isolation from these other broader dynamics, or as some kind of epiphenomenon in the course of recent Afghan history.

In addition, these discourses and views on women are linked to the shifting national and ethnic identities of the country (Pourzan 1999, p.73). The extremely patriarchal interpretation of Islam, which makes the situation for Afghan women far worse, is rooted in a number of factors: literacy, rurality and ethnic customs.

The manager of the office, a Pashtun and a friend of mine, was looking for a national Afghan staff member who could do secretarial work. Despite my Hazara child minder speaking English in addition to Pashto and Dari and having studied at a university for her Bachelor’s Degree, she was rejected for the job. No reason was given.

See Hossein Sadre and Florence Gavage (2007)“Afghanistan, Messengers from a Dark Past,” (2007) part 1 and 2, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PTv-UdjCnDWE)

[21] See Hossein Sadre and Florence Gavage (2007)“Afghanistan, Messengers from a Dark Past,” (2007) part 1 and 2, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PTvUdjCnDWE)

According to Goodson (2001, p.17), "Afghanistan's Islam is basically a non-literate village Islam—a syncretic blending of basic Islamic beliefs with local practices such as those found in the Pashtunwali". Indeed, Islamic law (Sharia) – and customary law – have been the only justice systems available in rural areas, given that centralisation has more or less failed and people in the rural areas do not believe in the civil law justice system offered by the government. The entrenched character of the Afghan religious values system and the opposition of the periphery to the attempts of Kabul to centralize and modernise the country is linked to support for Pashtun ethno-nationalism and is one of the forces that enabled the Taliban to return to power in August 2021.

In general, under customary practice, women's agency is restricted to the private sphere. Women are not allowed to mix with men who are not from their immediate family. Women must be strictly controlled by men both physically and mentally. Fathers have absolute patriarchal power over their daughters and then, later in life, this power is transferred to their husbands. Family debts can be repaid by giving a daughter away and if women do not abide by the social norms, then punishment is severe and can even result in the killing of a woman through an "honour code." Moghadam (2003, p.120) notes how patriarchal societies distinguish the public arena from the private: "In the public sphere, power relations overwhelmingly involved male household-heads (patriarchs), and the private sphere was usually ruled formally by a patriarch. This arrangement left no basis for collective action by women. If women sought public influence, they had to go through patriarchs". Women with a public profile or role were treated as an exception, or honorary male, and often were able to access that role only via a male relative. Indeed, the institution of reserved seats for women in both Afghanistan and Pakistan resulted in male politicians attempting to use them for their own ends, placing female relatives in these seats as their proxies.

Traditionally, as in Western Christian culture, the public sphere has been for men and the private sphere for women. Moghadam (2002, p.19) points out that in recent generations, activism and change on the broader socio-economic scale have meant significant progress for Western women in their access to the full benefits of citizenship—including rights to public space, social participation, and their own sexuality. This shift stemmed from education, as women began to learn

to read and write. From roughly the 1920s through to the 1960s, the voting franchise was extended to women on equal terms to men across the world. Afghan women gained their rights and moderate access to education relatively early in history as mentioned earlier. However, at the end of the 20th century, the culturally ultra-conservative and traditionalist Mujahideen (1992–1994) and later on the Taliban (1994–2001), pushed their interpretation of Islam on to the Afghans, thereby drastically restricting the agency of women and undoing the previous opportunities offered to Afghan women.

Forms of patriarchy and expressions of ethnicity are intricately related. Ethnicity and its related cultural contribution have a far-reaching impact on women domestically and publicly. Kandiyoti (1988, p.275) connects patriarchy to class, caste, and ethnicity in her theory of the patriarchal bargain, proposing that these intersections might offer an important point of entry for identifying different forms of patriarchy. Ethnicity has a huge impact on the cultural norms governing Afghan women in two ways. One is via ethnic conflicts and wars. Another is via the Pashtuns, the dominant ethnic group that has ruled Afghanistan for so long and imposed its values and tribal norms such as 'Pashtunwali' on all Afghans. 'Pashtunwali', a Pashtun code of conduct based on honour and pride, revolves to a large extent around the role of women in society. Power in Afghanistan is in the hands of ethnic Pashtuns, and Pashtuns impose the most restrictive social norms against women. Where Pashtuns are a significant minority, some of their traditional norms and values are more similar to resemble those of the other ethnic groups more than those to those of the Pashtuns in the east of Afghanistan. Their concepts of honour and shame and male dominance, still apply, however, as does Pashtunwali does for the Pashtuns in east Afghanistan.

According to Pashtunwali, it is the absolute duty of men to protect the respectability of women and to protect the integrity of the homeland. This does not imply that women should stay passive. In Pashtun folklore, Malalai of Maiwand[22] is

[22] Malalai of Maiwand was a native of Khig, a tiny village on the edge of the Maiwand battlefield, and the daughter of a shepherd. Both her father and fiancé joined with Ayub's army in the attack on the British on 27 July 1880 (which some say was also her wedding day), and like many women, Malalai was there to help tend to the wounded and provide water and spare weapons. Eventually there came a point in the battle where the Afghan army, despite their superior numbers, started to lose morale and the tide seemed to be turning in favour of the British. Seeing

praised for her decisive role in winning the battle of Maiwand against the British in 1878–1880. The Pashtun ethnic charter is based on patrilineality. However, sub-ethnic groups within Pashtuns descend through matrilineality. Against this background, women, especially older women, are enabled to exercise power by practising Pashtunwali more strictly than men and being less ready to compromise when matters of honour of the family and community are at stake" (Rostami-Povey, 2007, p.4). This also amply demonstrates the mechanics of bargaining with extreme patriarchy: women seek to protect what agency they may be able to exert and protect, perhaps through age-related or family-related status, maternity and marriage, in exchange for upholding the same patriarchal system that restricts them to that limited space. In Chapter 6 examine the role of parents – both mothers and fathers – in fostering a sense of agency at a young age in the professional women that I interviewed. In that chapter I consider how those parents break – or uphold – their bargain with patriarchy and the cultural and ethnic contexts in which they may be rewarded or punished for upholding or violating social norms.

How, then, has this ethnic and cultural diversity, within the context of Pashtun dominance, affected prevalent notions about women's role in society? Tradition, customs and cultural norms, although serving social cohesiveness, are also a restraint on those who do not conform or challenge the power hierarchy. Tribal constructions in Afghanistan are notoriously conservative with a strong emphasis on the centrality of the male in the patriarchal society—to the detriment of women. There are commonalities between different religious and ethnic groups in relation to women's status and role, but also important differences that allow women greater or lesser degrees of autonomy and access to the public sphere. Many Pashtun women are regarded as conservative compared to the more liberal Hazara or Tajik women. My own interviews with professional women show that Hazara women place a greater value on education, the public sphere, and work than Pashtun women do. This cultural aspect to the thinking and behaviours of

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this, Malalai took off her veil and shouted out: "Young love! If you do not fall in the battle of Maiwand, by God, someone is saving you as a symbol of shame! She was killed in the battle. However, her name and bravery live forever in Afghan history and she is an inspiration to all Afghan women. (see: http://www.garenewing.co.uk/angloafghanwar/biography/malalai.php)

professional Afghan women thus has some ethnic basis. When I questioned my interviewees on the reasons why Afghan women find it difficult to become successful, the majority pointed to culture and tradition. One said, "The culture is very weak. In Afghan custom, women have to rely on men. And whatever men say, women have to follow. There is a very high illiteracy rate among women. They can't fight for their education. This is the problem." (Interviewee Ms. Sita, UNODC) Breaking through these barrier demands not only a strong personal resolve but also support, often from the male members of the family. "As a female working like this in a society like Afghanistan, here nobody wants women to improve themselves," my interviewee Ms. Hanifah (Judge, Primary Children and Family Court) asserted. Her words seem to be a sad truism, often repeated in a variety of expressions by interviewees.

My interviewee Mrs. Fahima identifies Afghan tradition as the principal challenge to women wishing to go beyond their culturally determined roles: "From my childhood until now, the problem has been Afghan tradition". Mrs. Fahima hopes that her own professional success sets an example to Afghan society. However, she added that women who are not successful like her are being pressured by their families not to take up responsibilities outside the home. Having been indoctrinated that “good women” should not raise their voices, they prefer to remain silent. She encourages people to resist these obstructive cultural beliefs and norms. Likewise, interviewee Ms. Farzana explains: “It is Afghan tradition. You should not send your girls to school. Education is for boys. My parents said this is their right to get education. People laughed. They said, ‘What? sending your daughters to school? Why? At the age of 13 and 14, she should get married. This is her responsibility’" (Interviewee Ms. Farzana, businesswoman and politician). The word “tradition” is invoked over and over again to justify patriarchal practices, yet as Hobsbawn and Ranger note, “tradition” is hardly a stable, neutral category, when traditional practices undergo constant re-invention and contestation as well as cultural reproduction.

4.4 Ethnicity and culture in the context of geopolitics

These contested arenas of custom and tradition are never just a localised matter in Afghanistan, as the countries regions and tribes have always been central to much broader geopolitical contests. As noted above, the status of women has also come to be by actors both internal and external to Afghanistan as totemic of control and dominance of the national identity as well. The diverse linguistic, cultural, and ethnic identities in Afghanistan have been formed and reconstructed as a consequence of broader historical processes involving local and regional wars and colonial intervention. Ethnic conflicts have predominantly been the result of ethnicised politics manipulated by leaders and foreign invaders (Rosami-Povey, 2007, p.5).

Foreign occupations from the 1880s onwards have kept the Afghan State weak, obstructing Afghan state formation and the nation-building process, and given a free pass to tribalism, patronage, and feudalism. Both elements, the nature of the tribal society and the attempts of state formation interrupted by foreign interventions, need to be explored further if we are to understand how Afghan women became 'invisible' in their society. Thus a reading of women's status within these multiple layers of ethnicity and culture is inextricably connected to the way that outsiders have also framed those readings. Women in Afghanistan are victims not only of a traditional values system but equally of tensions between the central state and its periphery, and even of the wider geopolitical context. Kandiyoti (2009, p. 158) sees a connection between the status of Afghan women and how cultural and tribal leaders have used the position of women as a tool to mobilize resistance against the central authority: "the history of women's rights in Afghanistan has often been linked to a tug-war between centralizing state elites, Islamic *ulema* (Muslim scholarly bodies) resisting the encroachments of the state into their rightful territory, and a rural and tribal periphery intent on safeguarding its autonomy". Afghan women are caught in a power game derived from the local elites' wish to retain their power, along with their discontent at the pull towards greater control and state-building exerted by the central authority. Ayub et al. (2009, p11) notes it has been uncomfortable "for observers to acknowledge, perhaps, is that the Taliban's vision for social order was not entirely alien to large segments of Afghan society. Castigating the Taliban as the primary offenders of women's rights in Afghanistan is unhelpful and misleading, as it fails to confront

the deeper social forces that produce and reinforce patriarchal norms that predate the Taliban movement".

Afghanistan was one of the few places in the world where the Western mass media have not "penetrated to a significant degree" (Marsden, 1998, p. 99). Keeping "the West" out and protecting women from its influences is certain one of the reasons for the rigidity and ultra-conservatism of Taliban gender policies. The persistent Taliban insurgency that brought them back to power in Afghanistan enjoyed supports mainly from Pashtuns, although some Pashtuns reject that claim. Bright (2012) explains that support for the insurgents is "heavily tied to ethnicity". Pashtuns are unpopular with other ethnic groups. "Some rural Pashtuns view the insurgents—especially the Taliban—as the lesser of two evils when compared with the Afghan government". Bright further explains how ethnic Pashtuns regard the Taliban: "One of the most important things to an Afghan, especially in the context of the last 30 years of open warfare, is personal security," said Dupree. "The central government and to a degree NATO/Coalition forces have failed in this regard. The Taliban, in the view of ordinary Pashtuns, is the only entity able to impose law and order" (Bright, 9 April 2012).

Many consider tribalism, religion, and feudalism as the principal obstacles towards achievement of gender-based equality (Dupree 1984, p.307; Pourzand 1999, p.75; Emadi 2002, p.13). Emadi (2002) wrote that policies intended to reform and modernise Afghanistan since the country's independence from the British in 1919, and thereby to end gender-based inequalities, have often been resisted by tribal leaders, clerics, and feudal landlords (p.13). Nonetheless, in this analysis of the situation in Afghanistan, he does not refer to the toppling of the Socialist/Communist regime—which actively favoured the advancement of women—by fundamentalist Mujahideen supported by a U.S./Saudi Arabian coalition, even though this action would set the clock back on women's agency by a century.

My argument, in this thesis, goes one step further. It is correct that domestic traditional practices and belief systems have played a significant role in hindering the advancement of women, but so too has foreign interference within Afghanistan. With gender rights having come to the fore in the international discourse,

the clash between local cultures and gender equality has also become visible. This clash is said to be probably the most intractable aspect of the confrontation between cultural claims and the principle of universal human rights. One must not approach an analysis of the situation of women in Afghanistan simply through the ideological lens of pre- and post-Taliban nor as part of an essential dogma to validate Islam integrity. It needs to be seen in the larger historical and political context of Afghanistan, including tensions between the centre and the periphery, and between domestic and international geopolitics. Only such a broad perspective can ensure that women will be seen as integral to the rebuilding of the Afghan nation.

4.5 Conclusion

According to Moghadam (1997, p.76) the issue of women's rights in Afghanistan has historically been constrained by (1) the patriarchal nature of gender and social relations that are deeply embedded in traditional communities; and (2) a weak central state that has been unable to implement modernisation programmes and goals because of tribalism and feudalism. Ethnicity impacts Afghan women in two ways: first, via ethnic conflicts and wars, and second, through the imposition of values and tribal norms, such as the Pashtunwali, on all Afghans by the dominant ruling group over a long period of time. The varying ethnic hemispheres and cultural values, together with the family background and social class of women, are closely related factors in the gender norms impacting professional women in Afghanistan. Yet, not all cultures and traditions are organised in an equally and homogeneously patriarchal manner, so the agency of women is not unavoidably or necessarily severely restricted. Within these identities, gender norms are not set in stone; they have evolved in the context of social struggles. Afghan history is characterised as much by conflicts arising from ethnic identities as by inter-ethnic relations through marriage which demonstrate very different principles of coexistence, harmony, tolerance, and pride in diversity.

Afghan history is a case in point, with the control of women at different stages having wavered between progressive and conservative policies. Throughout the history of Afghanistan, many rulers have sought to modernize the country and

have made large-scale efforts to achieve progress for women. These moments of momentary progress were often followed by a fierce conservative backlash. The reasons for the push and pull factors of Afghan women's status and progress are varied. I have explored in this chapter how ethnicity and culture shape gender relations in Afghanistan. Indeed, where gender and ethno-nationalism are concerned, women and their place in society can be perceived as a metaphor for the integrity and values of society as a whole. The following chapters explore interrelated aspects, namely religion, and the role of the family.

Chapter 5 - Religion and Gender Norms in Afghanistan

When it comes to religion, interpretation is everything.
When it comes to politics, everything is interpretation[23]

This chapter addresses the way in which religious belief, and its expression through social institutions, has shaped the possibilities and opportunities for women to develop public identities outside the home, as professionals and working women. The topic of Islam and women's agency, in Afghanistan and elsewhere, is potentially very extensive, given the wide-ranging literature on the topic. However, the chapter focuses on the main debates within Afghanistan, and how Islam has been interpreted by different political and ethnic groups as part of the contestation for control of the country and its national identity, and how this contestation has in turn had strongly gendered elements to it. Gender relations lie at the heart of how a society is organised, so when religion is considered, alongside other cultural elements, as explored in the previous chapter, as central to social and national identity, then inevitably women, their rights and their agency, become a matter of fierce political and social debate. This chapter outlines the intersections of religious belief with movements towards modernisation and secularisation, and counter-movements of traditionalism and religious fundamentalism, that seek to make women hostages to imagined patriarchal tradition. It also sets the scene for the following chapters on family, employment and education. In this chapter we see how with professional women in Afghanistan have had to navigate and negotiate their identities as Muslims and as women in the public sphere.

5.1 The Politics of Islam in Afghanistan

The complexities of Afghanistan and its contemporary religious setting arise from a history which itself was complex and during which religion has played a

[23] Sally Armstrong (2002) is the author of "Veiled Threat: The hidden power of the women of Afghanistan". New York: Four Walls Eight Windows.

major role throughout the various eras of the country's political circumstances. The word Afghan has been used to describe the ethnically dominant Pashtuns, but in fact, the land of the Afghans was populated by different ethnic groups and was never unified. Rulers overlooked small, powerful and remote monarchies. This ethnic diversity, reinforced by the topography of the country, resulted in religious diversity too within Islam. Before the establishment of Islam, religious practices in Afghanistan (the land of the Afghans) included Zoroastrianism, Surya worship, Paganism, Hinduism and Buddhism. Islam was introduced between the 7th and 10th century with the conquest of the Arabs, becoming the dominant religion in 642 BCE when Islamic armies defeated the Sassanians at Nahavand (near modern Hamadan, Iran) and tried to take Afghan territory. As world powers would later experience, this was not a simple feat. Cities submitted to the new Arab powers only to rise again in revolt and hastily return to their old beliefs once the armies had withdrawn. It was only by the 9th and 10th century that the land of the Afghans witnessed the rise of numerous Islamic dynasties, one of the earliest being the Tahirids of Korasan, a kingdom that included Balkh and Herat (Gohari, 1999, p.3). In the remote Hindu Kush, however, the region of Kaffirstan, currently the province Nuristan, did not convert to Islam until the 19th century.

Islam is the world's fastest-growing religion and the second largest religious faith in the world with an estimated 1.2 billion followers. It is a monotheistic religion based on revelations received by the Prophet Muhammad in the seventh century, which were later recorded in the Quran—Islam's sacred text. The word itself means "self-surrender to the will of God" and as a religion is defined by a core set of beliefs and practice that affect all aspects of social life, from the private sphere of the family to politics, culture and law: "Islam is '*din wa dawla*' (church and state [Arabic]): both a system of individual faith and conduct, and a comprehensive guide for the organization of society and state. Islam has an action-orientated worldview that encompasses social, cultural and political elements, including religious and secular reasoning" (Galloway, 2014, p.26).

Its values, beliefs and practices are codified in Sharia (Shari'a/Shari'ah) or Islamic law, a set of regulations, principles and values from which legislation and law are drawn. Sharia is regarded as eternal. Although Sharia refers to classical Muslim

law, the word itself means “definition of practice”. Sharia determines “how certain aspects of everyday life are to be practiced according to the model provided by the canon” (Barlas, 2002, p 70). Many rulers in Afghanistan have used Sharia law for the purposes of the administration of justice. Even when there was an existing statutory law in place, judgment as to people’s behaviour, morality and their criminality, has often relied on Sharia, in a situation of legal pluralism that also encompasses tribal law.[24]

Understanding Sharia is complicated by the existing in Islam of two different primary sects, the Sunni and the Shi’ite, and within the sects there are 72 recognized schools of thought (Armstrong, 2002, p.61).[25] As with many religions that started as a unifying force, history and geopolitical contexts have resulted in schisms with a variety of interpretations of Islam doctrine. Their interpretation and practices are, equally, also intertwined with local customs and belief systems which produce differences in interpretation of law and doctrine. Sunni Islam is separated into four main schools of jurisprudence, namely, Hanafi, Maliki, Shafi'i, Hanbali. These schools are named after Abu Hanifa, Malik ibn Anas, al-Shafi'i, and Ahmad ibn Hanbal, respectively. Shia Islam, on the other hand, is separated into three major sects: Twelvers, Ismailis, and Zaydis. The Taliban religious strain of Islam belief is rooted in the Deobandi brand of Islam which originated in India, at the Darul Uloom Deoband seminary founded in 1866, as an anti-colonial movement against the British (Frayer, 8 September 2021). This school of thought adheres to orthodox Islamism, and insists that following Sunni Islamic law, or sharia, is the path of salvation. It is fundamental in wishing to revive Islamic practices that date back to the time of the Prophet Muhammad in the seventh century. Additionally it posits global jihad as a sacred duty to protect Muslims across the world, and is anti-pluralists, as it opposes any and all non-Islamic ideas.[26] This

[24] This article sustains that point Aziz Hakimi & Masooma Sa’adat (2020) Legal reform or erasure of history? The politics of moral crimes in Afghanistan, Central Asian Survey, 39:2, 255-271, DOI: 10.1080/02634937.2019.1707510

[25] According to Pew Research Centre, Muslim population was estimated at 1.8 billion in 2015. See http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/04/05/christians-remain-worlds-largest-religious-group-but-they-are-declining-in-europe/

[26] Rana, S. and Ganguly, S. (25 August 2021) “Taliban’s religious ideology – Deobandi Islam – has roots in colonial India”, The Conversation, https://theconversation.com/talibans-religious-ideology-deobandi-islam-has-roots-in-colonial-india-166323 Accessed 22 September 2021.

fundamentalist strain was propagated in the Madrassas along the Pakistan border where the Talib (student) received education based on the Deobandi doctrine, which rejected any reinterpretation of the canon law. Therefore, the minority Shi'a Muslim school is considered heretical (Ashraf, 2012, p.9).

In addition, interpretation of the meaning and application of Sharia is also influenced by with the customary practices within Pushtanwali, the "code of life" applied by the dominant ethnic group of Pashtuns. Afghanistan practises legal heterogeneity, namely, laws that must be followed by the citizens, but that come from different sources such as Islamic law, constitutional law, and customary Pashtunwali law. Sometimes, legal practitioners such as judges, would argue that the law they apply is Sharia law, although the rules to which they are referring could well be Pashtunwali. As Afghanistan is still largely tribal and the state is too weak to implement the civil law across the country, many of the country's legal practitioners employ mixtures of Sharia and customary law, while calling it Islamic law. In Afghanistan Islamic jurisprudence has coexisted with secular law since 1925 which is when the King Amanullah monarchy instituted a criminal code that overlap with customary and tribal codes (Singh, 2015, p. 356).

As noted, consecutive Afghan rulers and regimes have moved between attempts at modernisation and secularisation, periods in which Islamic law was enshrined as part of the official national identity, in a complex relationship with the power dynamics among the ethnic groups. This created shifting contexts of legal pluralism, as Islamic law, customary law and more Western-style statutory law were combined, overlapped, competed and conflicted. Women's rights, voice and agency were affected constantly by the dynamics of this legal pluralism, not just as a confusing set of constraints, but also offering alternative ways to claim their rights within both the public and private sphere, and with which, to some extent, they can bargain.

King Abdur Rahman Khan (1880–1901) was the first Afghan ruler to use Islam for state-building, decreeing that all national laws must comply with Islamic law. Elevating Sharia law over the Pashtunwali customary laws followed by the dominant Afghan ethnic group, the king sought the backing of the Ulama (religious

leadership), drafting them into the state bureaucracy and simultaneously weakening their religious leadership. However, King Abdur Rahman Khan's successors turned towards secularization. (See in Chapter 3 for more details).

Such changes to the legal frameworks of the country were highly political and understood as such. For instance, when King Amanullah Khan (1919–1929) tried to introduce reforms and uplifting the women's status, this was seen by many to be an imposition of Western mores on Afghanistan and ended up with the forced abdication of the King. This resurgence of Islam as a strong political movement served as a warning for subsequent rulers who took care to underline the compatibility of Islam with modernization as discussed in Chapter 3.

The relationship between religious law and statutory law was articulated through Afghanistan's various constitutions. The 1931 Constitution made Hanafi Sharia the state religion; the 1964 Constitution prescribed that the state should conduct its religious rituals according to the Hanafi Sharia School; the 1977 Constitution declared Islam the religion of Afghanistan, but made no mention of Hanafi Sharia. This omission from the governing principles of Afghanistan was carefully crafted in terms of gradually moving towards a more secular state, a process of modernization including the advancement of women. By 1978, the communist and Soviet-backed People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) was in power and openly expressing its antipathy for the religious establishment. As detailed elsewhere in thesis, the attempts to emancipate women continued unabated although remained challenged in practice in the periphery outside of the urban centres.

Contests of status – and interpretation - of Islam in the country was intricately intertwined with both the internal politics of the country, which included ethnic competition, ideological contests, and the influence of external powers also seeking to exert control within Afghanistan. In the late 1970s, a nascent Islamist Movement, that had its roots in the grounds of Kabul University, blossomed into a national revolt. Islam again moved from the wings of politics to centre stage. Recruiting from university faculties and from secondary schools in cities such as Mazari Sharif and Herat, some of the campus professors and students became the leaders of the Mujahideen rebels of the 1980s. To back up a communist government under pressures, the Soviets invaded Afghanistan in 1979. While

the rebellion against the Kabul government was broader than only Islamists, with landowners and other opposition forces joining in, Islam became central to uniting the opposition against communist ideology.

Mujahideen groups operated from Pakistan with the American and its ally Saudi Arabia's support, and foreign radical Muslims joined the anti-communist opposition. The Mujahideen leadership reverted back to conservative traditionalism instead of opting for a modern Islam-based political system. When the Soviets departed, President Najibullah tried to reach out to the Islamic opposition, altering laws and symbols, but this was deemed too late and not enough and in April 1992 the fully fledged Islamic State of Afghanistan came into being.

The Islamic Mujahideen, once in power, forfeited the trust they once enjoyed and threw the country in civil war, resulting in impunity, warlordism, corruption, harassment, extortion, kidnapping, burglary, hijacking and acts dishonouring women. In 1994, a group called the Taliban vowed to cleanse the nation of warlords and criminals, bringing back a sense of security and stability to the country. The tool to this end was to establish a "pure" Islamic government subject to their own strict interpretations of Sharia law. Many Taliban were young, and had been educated in Pakistani madrassas (religious schools).

In September 1996 the Taliban captured Kabul and by 2001 they ruled over most of Afghanistan. Its rise went almost unchallenged; their "justice" included public executions of murderers, stoning for adultery, amputation for theft, a ban on all forms of gambling, prohibition of music and videos, proscriptions pictures of humans and animals, and an embargo on women's voices over the radio. Women were to remain as invisible as possible, behind the veil, in purdah in their homes, and banned from work or study outside their homes. (Historical events and political regimes are discussed in detail in chapter 3).

History took another turn when after the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the WTC Towers in New York, Washington build up an alliance to invade Afghanistan in 2001 with the blessing of the UN Security Council. To mobilize public support for this invasion, the narrative was constructed as the need to liberate women from their barbaric treatment by the Taliban, and its radical fundamentalist interpretation of Islam, was deployed as a motive, one seen as flimsy by many (Khattak, 2002, p

18). Were women bombed to be liberated? In just one month, the USA "dropped over half a million tons of bombs—approximately 20 kilograms of high explosive" for every man, woman and child in the country (Ibid.). Washington invaded Afghanistan through bombs, bullets, and money. Tribal allies were corrupted; the old and exiled Mujahideen bought to return. The use of slush funds continued throughout with the Commander's Emergency Response Programme (CERP), worth hundreds of millions of dollars, to be used at discretion by the local commander. In 2008 the Economist described the American commanders as using money like bullets.[27]

After the Taliban was removed from power, the Bonn Agreement was signed in December 2001. The Agreement led to power-sharing between a coalition of militias dominated by the Northern Alliance (reflecting minority ethnic groups) and the international community (Kandiyoti, 2007, p.506). In its wake, international donor agencies flew in Kabul, many of promising to "improve" the lives of Afghan women by freeing them from Islamic practices such as such *purdah* and the wearing of the *burqa*.[28]

On the keystones of this renewed modernisation attempt was the production of a new constitution in 2004, adopted by the Afghan Constitutional *Loya Jirga* or Grand Assembly. In view of the previous attempts and setbacks to modernize the state and move the emancipation of women forward, did the 2004 Constitution have a better chance to succeed? Kandiyoti was sceptical and noted that the allies were, in essence, attempting to fasttrack women's rights in a society where there was, as yet, no stable political settlement between the aid-dependent government of Afghanistan and the opposition groups like jihadi factions. The latter remained staunchly committed to a conservative interpretation of the Sharia and had little interest in improving the status of women. If anything, the country's recent history indicated extreme swings between the aim in becoming part of the world community and the insular conservative application of Sharia (Kandiyoti, 2007, p. 507). Therefore it is no surprise that the 2004 Constitution,

[27] See "Afghanistan: A war of money as well as bullets", The Economist, May 22, 2018. https://www.economist.com/node/11402695

[28] Purdah is the custom to remain out of view from non-related men by remaining in a special part of the house or by covering their faces and bodies when moving outside the house.

contained within it the contradictions and tensions of the moment. Like its predecessors, the new constitution declared not judge that Afghan identity and law were inseparable from the tenets of Islam, but also that Islam was to be the highest source of authority and law in situation of legal pluralism. Article 3 of the 2004 Constitution states: No law shall contravene the tenets and provisions of the holy religion of Islam in Afghanistan.

Yet, the 2004 Constitution also included the principles of gender equality, with Article 22 stating: “Any kind of discrimination and distinction between citizens of Afghanistan shall be forbidden. The citizens of Afghanistan, man and woman, have equal rights and duties before the law”. Further statutory laws were then put in place to protect women and further women’s emancipation. Yet, they have not achieved the lofty ambitions the Western community had in mind. The legislation did not serve Afghan women much in practice due to the application of Sharia law in practice, whether warranted by the context or not (Hakimi & Sa’adat, 2020; Singh, 2019).

5.2 Islam in Afghanistan and the position of women

In modern women’s studies, Islam has become a central subject. The main theme of many books and papers about gender and Islam – many of them researched and written by women’s rights activists, feminists, and scholars – has been whether Islam is the actual problem as the root cause of gender inequality and oppression. Although most commentaries on gender and politics in the Middle East assign a central place to Islam, “there is little agreement about the analytic weight it carries in accounting for the subordination of women or the role it plays in relation to women’s rights” (Kandiyoti, 1991, p.9).

As mentioned earlier, Islam is hardly uniform in its interpretation through a multiplicity of recognised, and unrecognised, schools of thought. As a result, “the emphasis on personal interpretation of religious doctrine has often meant that Islam is “translated” into a confounding mix of piety and ferocity that is nowhere more evident than in the lives of women and girls” (Armstrong, 2002, p.62). By using

the Quran, the Hadith, and the life histories of prominent women in the early period of Muslim history as sources, conservatives confirmed that existing gender asymmetries are divinely ordained, while feminists discerned possibilities for a more progressive politics of gender based on the egalitarian ideals of early Islam. Kandiyoti (1991) argues that “these exegetical exercises mainly showed that, for both feminists and anti-feminists, Islamic doctrine continued to provide the only legitimate discourse within which to debate women’s rights” (p.9).

It would be impossible to explore each of these schools of Islamic interpretation as these pertain to gender issues. Although Islam has often been invoked to justify abuse of women, there are alternative perspectives all of which are pertinent to the themes of the following chapters and to the kinds of life opportunities that my professional women interviewees were able to pursue. In Islam’s early years, women played important roles, not least in the personal life of the Prophet Mohammad. At the Battle of the Camel (656 BCE), the Prophet Muhammad's wife Āʿisha led the army to fight against the fourth caliph Ali. Although she lost the battle, she was the commander-in-chief of the army. The Quran, Hadiths and Sharia Law do not account for the lowly status of women. The latter may be attributed to “older cultural practices of southern and western Asia” (Dupree, n.d., p.2). The contemporary Islamic scholar Dr. Jamal Badawi opposes radicalism and instead promotes a moderate view on Islam. As regards family relations, the female has the right to accept or reject marriage proposals. Her consent is a prerequisite to the validity of the marital contract. A forced marriage may be annulled if the female so wishes. The husband is responsible for the maintenance, protection and overall leadership of the family within the framework of consultation and kindness. The mutuality and complementarity of husband and wife does not mean subservience by either party to the other. Whilst the laws of inheritance afford the male twice the inheritance of a female, they afford women greater financial guarantees than men. Males inherit more but are financially responsible for their female relatives (Quran 4:7). Financial security is ensured for women as they are entitled to receive marital gifts without limit and to keep present and future properties and income for their own security, even after marriage. The basic right to personal possession of property applies equally to males and females. Most specifically, the Shari’a (Islamic Law) recognized the full property rights of women

before and after marriage. The key to proper dress and behavior for females and males alike is modesty. The Quran does not mention seclusion of women or covering the face in a burqa.[29] In a liberal interpretation Quran does not encourage, allow or condone family violence or physical abuse under any circumstance. Both genders are entitled to equality before the law and courts of law and justice is genderless. The common belief is that a woman's testimony is worth one half of a man's testimony is erroneous. Divorce is a last resort, permissible but not encouraged. Although the practice of polygamy was common in Biblical times, no text in the Quran explicitly specifies either monogamy or polygamy as the norm, and demographic data indicates strongly that monogamy is the norm and polygamy the exception. Indeed, Islam was the only Abrahamic religion that explicitly addressed polygamy, in the Quran (4:3), and restricted its practice in terms of the number of wives permitted. He also argues that there is no decree in Islam that forbids women from seeking employment although Islam regards a woman's role in society as a mother and wife as her most sacred and essential one. Similarly, education is not only a right but also a responsibility for all males and females. The general rule in political and social life is participation and collaboration of males and females in public affairs and there is no text in the Quran that precludes women from any position of leadership, except in leading prayer; women, however, may lead other women in prayer.

5.3 Islam, Statutory Law and Custom

Thus, Afghan women's life opportunities are shaped by variable interpretations of Islamic teachings, combined with local customs and norms, and family dynamics, as will be seen in the next chapter. Statutory law is the other element in the mix and could, potentially, mitigate the impact of religious and customary law. The 2004 constitution stipulates in its very first article that 'Afghanistan is an independent, unitary, and indivisible Islamic republican state'. Article 3 however states that "No law shall contravene the tenets and provisions of the holy religion

[29]Badawi, J. Dr. (2002) Gender Equity in Islam: Basic Principles, in 1999, Armstrong, S. (2002), "Veiled Threat: The Hidden Power of the Women of Afghanistan". New York: Four Walls Eight Windows.

of Islam in Afghanistan." With exception of the 1980 Constitution, this is a recurring statement but equally problematic if not spelled out what is meant with the "tenets and provisions of the holy religion". Article 130 of the Constitution of 2004 aims to resolve this by noting that only "If there is no provision in the Constitution or other laws", the courts can "rule in a way that attains justice in the best manner."[30]

The Chief Justice since clarified that Afghanistan's legal system is a mixed one consisting of Islamic law and of state-enacted legislation (Lau, 2010, p.2)[31]. Afghanistan's courts thus have been applying statutory, Islamic and customary law. Before a dispute is resolved, one party may ask the other whether he wants to settle the conflict "Sharia-" or "Pashto-wise"[32]. The Taliban's interpretation of Islamic law comes from "the Deobandi strand of Hanafi jurisprudence" and is thus far more conservative or orthodox. As explained in other parts of this thesis, the Pashto option refers to communal mediation mechanisms, very often used to settle issues in relationship to gender and based on the Pashtunwali or 'code of life".

However, there is another more profound challenge to apply statutory law through a formal justice centre. The central government in Afghanistan has been largely unable to implement the rule of law or a legal system capable of guaranteeing basic rights not only for women but also for the general public (Lau, 2010, p.3). In Afghanistan, formal legal and judicial institutions barely exist partly due to the central government's issues with legitimacy. First and foremost, courts are understaffed and ill-equipped. Secondly, judges, lawyers, and educational institutions have no access to applicable statutes and associated legal materials (ibid).

In addition, Afghanistan's prolonged civil war has brought with it the destruction or disappearance of judicial records, land titles, registers and even basic law texts. In practice, this results in disputes often being settled within jirgas or shuras (councils of tribal or village elders). Even if the dispute does reach a formal

[30]https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Afghanistan_2004.pdf?lang=en
[31] http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/28366/1/Lau_LSERO_version.pdf

[32]International Legal Foundation (2004). The customary Law of Afghanistan https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/file/ilf_customary_law_afghanistan.pdf

court, it oftentimes opt to apply Islamic law and not the provisions of the Constitution or the applicable statutory laws (Lau, 2010, p.3).

As then Deputy President and Chief Operating Officer from International Crisis Group (ICG), Nick Grono, stated in 2011, Afghanistan's justice system is in a catastrophic state of disrepair. Most Afghans still have little or no access to judicial institutions. Judicial institutions have withered to near non-existence and the lack of justice has destabilised the country. Many courts are inoperable and those that do function are understaffed (Grono, 2011).[33]

Moreover, "The strong presidential system adopted under the 2004 constitution has exacerbated the weakness of judicial institutions. The lack of a clearly defined arbiter of the constitution has undercut the authority of the Supreme Court and transformed the court into a puppet of President Karzai. He has adeptly exploited the Court's relative weakness to blunt challenges from rivals and circumscribe the powers of other branches of government. The president has often turned to the court to settle political disputes, substantially weakening perceptions of its independence. For instance, he successfully used the Supreme Court to block parliament's efforts to override presidential vetoes and assert its powers" (Grono, 2011).

Basiouni and Rothenberg see the roots of this weakness also historical due to the weak central state not being able to impose its legitimacy in the periphery: "Afghanistan's judicial institutions have never operated at a high level of functioning, capacity or coverage throughout the nation. The Soviet domination of the 1980s and the ensuing multi-year conflict led to a profound delegitimization of the state and a loss of any possible earlier gains in legitimizing the rule of law. Following the fall of the Taliban regime, the country's rule of law institutions were in an especially poor situation". (Basiouni and Rothenberg, 2020, p.21)[34]

In absence of efficiency, lacking nationwide coverage and susceptible to corruption, Afghan rule of law carries with it a problem of low legitimacy along the public

[33]https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-asia/afghanistan/rule-law-and-justice-system-afghanistan
[34]https://www.siracusainstitute.org/app/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/need-for-rule-of-law-in-Afghanistan.pdf

at large. (Bassiouni and Rothenberg, 2020, p. 19). In contrast, swift and oftentimes harsh judgements instilled through the jirgas dominated by the Taliban have gained in popularity especially in the rural areas. Where the central state failed, the Taliban succeeded gaining much legitimacy out of this. The failure to roll out an efficient and independent justice system might have contributed to the fall of the Ghani government by the Taliban in August 2021.

Remarkable is this distinction made between “Sharia” (Islam) and “Pashto” (Pashtunwali). What is meant with Sharia is the statutory law, itself a mix of evolved Islam law influenced by international norms and values post-2001. Hence, Afghan statutory law is not similar to the Western Code Napoleon, although both are expressions of their local realities. Besides this, the customary Pashtun law remains an alternative option. Hamid Khan (2015, p.1) points to the Afghan mix of customary tribal law, primarily derived from Pashtunwali, blending with Islamic legal traditions and their more universal application. Khan states that although people believe Islamic Law to have a supreme legal status, in reality customary law is often applied over Islamic Law to maintain community consensus. “This consensus is often not between equals but is shaped by the relative authority of the persons resolving the dispute” (Khan, 2015, p.1). He argues further that a major outcome of applying customary law is the marginalization of Afghan women” despite the fact that Islamic legal precepts confer individual rights on women, particularly in matters of family, inheritance, and marriage law. These precepts are not extended to women under Pashtunwali (ibid).

I was able to interview Afghan Islamic Lawyer, Mohammad Raees Noorani, who had this to say: “all three Laws are practised in Afghanistan; Constitutional law is the mother law for all laws, rules and regulations, and policies and procedures. Islamic law is practised in all courts, and all codes for courts and judges are developed based on the method/rules of Islam”. He actually saw no significant break in jurisprudence before and after 2001: “There is no difference between the Taliban regime and the current government. The only discrepancy is that most Islamic rules are on hold (not being practised- during the Western backed regimes era) such as cutting off the hand of thieves who take personal property or stoning

to death a married man/woman if they entertain an illicit sexual relationship". International norms might have curbed some of the most visible cruelties, but the essence of customary jurisprudence has resisted change.

5.4 Islamic Law (Sharia Law) and Patriarchy in Afghanistan

Lacking a uniformed interpretation, Islam has become hugely politicised and often erupts in violence as between the Sunni and Shia strains, with the latter being considered heretics by the former in the Deobandi brand of Islam embraced by the Pakistani madrassas and the Afghan Taliban. The Pashtunwali customs in turn strongly influenced Afghan Sharia or Islam jurisprudence, making it confusing, even for the Afghan legal institutions, to distinguish between statutory, Islam and customary law. The perception of what is proper for a Muslim woman is a cultural and/or political choice not a religious one. For example, with the rise of Islamic radicalism at the beginning of 1990s "the pendulum for Muslim women swung the other way again" Goodwin (1995, p.31). Once more they were hidden under veils, an elitist fashion item worn in Persia to distinguish the aristocracy from the masses, and which has since moved in and out of fashion. One interviewee Ms. Hanifah analysed the rule of the Taliban in terms of extreme cultural patriarchy, which contradicted the protective doctrines of Islam: "the Taliban religion is not normal Islam, but the angry face of Islam. Taliban and Mujahideen claimed to be fighting aggressively and aggression, for the kind of patriarchy they represent, means controlling women. Treating women badly and disciplining them at their will is, for them, Islam. Reading English books is anti-Islam. Dealing with foreigners is anti-Islam. Keeping women away from the public sphere is anti-Islam. Keeping women in burqas is anti-Islam. Keeping women in a seclusion and fear is Islam. The darker the place for women, the better it is for men. All in the name of Islam".

Another interviewee Ms. Mahnaz (age 32 and of Tajik ethnicity), earned a bachelor's degree and worked as a reporter at the BBC. Her story is very similar to the previous one in terms of the shock experienced when the Taliban took power: "I was tailoring at home. I was 14 at that time. I heard some bad things about the Taliban, killing and beating women. During the Taliban period, I had to wear a

burqa. I felt like I was in the darkest place. I can't explain my feelings. No rights. We were not like humans. We were not treated like women."

My interviewees have been obliged, their whole lives, to position their sense of identity in relationship to these competing sources and interpretations of social organisation. They have also had to bargain with this aspect of patriarchy. On the one hand an overarching identity as a good Muslim is key to social acceptance and respectability. On the other hand they had to decide which interpretations of Islam they could conform to, with the consequences that that entails. Ms. Minoo asserted that she, as a Muslim, agreed with Sharia law. The female politician Fawzia Koofi took the same position. However, another interviewee Ms. Farzana, businesswoman and politician, was critical of illiterate people focussing exclusively on Sharia law in order to propagate a particular interpretation: "People here misuse the Sharia law. Because of that, the girls are not allowed to go to school." She did not want to dodge the problems imposed on her in the name of religion and religious law but rather considered it her duty to fight against what she sees as an ignorant mentality. Ms. Farzana explained how she understood rights in Islam: "In Islam, every person has three general responsibilities. To work for (1) our own rights; (2) other people's rights; and (3) Almighty Allah's rights. There are three commands in Islam. (1) We have to educate ourselves, to have a good facility, and whatever we need. (2) We have to serve the people. (3) We have to pray to God, Prophet and Holy Quran." Under these circumstances, she claims, "I am Muslim". She reproached males in general and modern-day Taliban specifically, for abusing Islamic as a divinely inspired guide on how to treat women. Rejecting the taboos and harmful traditions being practised under the guise of Islam, she wanted to bring these in the open. "This is my duty. To bring them out of darkness. We have to see the light." Her goal was to improve her society; her hope is even to run for president one day (Interviewee Ms. Farzana, 2013). The consensus among my interviewees was that a lack of education and the ensuing low literacy lay at the root of the problem.

Hence, few of my interviewees had problems with Islam and Sharia law itself, rather they objected to the local misinterpretation given to Islam and Sharia law.

Interviewee Ms. Pari, a 28-year-old, Tajik, and single woman, explained: “Religion is not the problem; the people who control the religion are the problem.” She added, "Women are much more respected than men in Islam. But we are not practising Islam. That's why we are facing problems. Men are cutting off their wives’ heads. The main reason is a lack of education. They don't know how to treat women. That is the problem. The future for women is very dangerous, especially in villages. There, men treat their women like animals." For her then, the expression of extreme patriarchy, which regarded women as completely lacking in agency and rights, was to be located into local cultures, not in religious doctrine.

They were especially outraged about the Taliban’s assertion that they were the only true interpreters of Islam. Interviewee MP Ms. Hanifah (age 49 and of Tajik ethnicity) recalled “I was a Judge at Kabul’s Supreme Court. There was no other female judge during that time. Then the Taliban arrived. They were the angry face of Islam. The Mujahideen were fighting for Islam, but the Taliban was fighting even harder, more aggressively, more extremist. At that time, I had to wear a burqa. It was an extremely difficult period of my life. It was a dangerous situation for me. All the schools were closed. I was only able to draw one month’s salary and then I had to leave my job. When I was sitting at home, I tried to start training courses for girls. I myself was doing English courses. I have a bad memory of that time. We were putting on burqas and going to courses. The only thing I can remember from that time is putting on the burqa. No pants, only long dresses with a burqa.”

Interview MP Ms. Suraya commented on the how central the control of women was to the Taliban and their political and religious strategy of power. “When the Taliban came to power, they attacked women. You may have seen the pictures. According to the Taliban's thinking, this is Islam. Actually, it's against Islam. When you see a woman in public office, with an education and working, you have to remember that everything was forbidden to women during Taliban time. They had no human rights. The Taliban knew nothing about human rights.”

The extremism of the Taliban created in many of my interviewees a determination to resist, both on a personal level and more collective level. It also made them

consider how they could model “Afghan values” to a younger generation. Ms. Suraya observed “The Taliban was not the main reason women were treated badly, but our treatment by the Taliban brought us to the position we are in today. So, we need to be role models for other women.” She saw her role as a professional woman as one of asserting and securing an alternative set of values based in “real Islam”. She declared “The Taliban killed our opportunities. Because of that I want to gain more knowledge. I want to participate even more in society. The Taliban’s values are not the root values of our society.”

All of these professional women were interested, to some degree, in how society could be changed and many of them, like Ms Hanifah, engaged in “everyday acts of resistance” such as teaching girls clandestinely, in an attempt to preserve the educational capital that they had fought so hard acquire. Ms. Minoo discussed the mix of culture, education and Islam: “This culture is difficult to change. The most difficult part is education. 70 percent of the population are illiterate and don’t know the facts about Islam. Women are talking about their rights. They don't know exactly what their rights are.” She ended: “It would be helpful for the entire society if they allowed their daughters and sisters to be educated for 7 or 12 grades”.

Resistance to the Taliban’s fundamentalist rule was also dangerous. Mrs. Hanifah recalled a painful incident: “One day, I was walking in the street and I didn't see that the Taliban vehicle passed by me. They saw that I was wearing pants under my burqa, I wanted to jump to the stream nearby. After that, a man called me from behind. Be careful sister, the Taliban are coming. I tried to look backwards, but the Taliban were close and beat me with a rubber stick and cables. I tried to shout but I couldn't. An old man there told me that sisters don't shout; don't say anything. Keep going. I could not say anything. I went home. I told my father. This is not our country, we cannot do anything here, let's leave the country. Of course, my brothers were also afraid whenever there was a knock at our door. We all were so afraid that the Taliban would enter the house”. It was not just women’s clothing that attracted the ire of the religious police, but also any the education of girls and women. Ms Hanifah related: “I studied English courses. One day, the Taliban came into our class. We knew in advance that we had to change our English books to Islamic books, but my teacher forgot to clean the

board. The Taliban saw that English letters were written on the board. There were 15 of us girls that time. The Taliban kicked us until nightfall. They warned us never again to participate in the English class and they closed it. We had to accept whatever they did to us. We went home in the late evening. I saw my mother crying. My brothers and my father were punished by the Taliban. They stopped my father in a street and asked him to recite some *Sura* from the Quran. After that, we went to Pakistan. We were there for one year."

Some were concerned not just to educate women about their rights under Islam, but also to assert women's rights to act in the public sphere and to influence law and jurisprudence, and how it was interpreted and applied. One interviewee, Ms. Anar, a teacher and also the Head of Appeal Juvenile Court and Head of the Afghan Women Judges Association, addressed the Taliban's view that Islam prohibits women from being in public life, and particularly from working in public places. She herself had been fired from her job. "When the Taliban came to Afghanistan, the first thing they did was fire all female judges. When I got fired from my job, I went to Pakistan for two years. I was a teacher in Ariana High School (Afghan School in Pakistan) on legal topics and Islamic ideology/Jurisprudence." Once the Taliban was ousted in 2001 she got her job back. "With the collapse of the Taliban restoring my position, I was nominated as Head of Primary Juvenile Court, Kabul. I was a judge for five years there, after the collapse of the Taliban." However, she did not give up on her model role as teacher: "In my spare time, I was lecturing in girls/boys' high schools on rights of women in Islam, comparing the Afghan Constitution and International Convention as well as the Declaration of Human Rights."

5.5 The post-Taliban period (2001- 2021)

Once the Taliban were toppled the situation improved dramatically for many women, such as Ms. Hanifah (2013), who were able to recover their public identities and begin to influence policy and law, as well. She related "I am a member of civil society. I am invited to many meetings. People respect me. Also, I participate in meetings of the Human Rights Independent Commission. I attended many law-making meetings. We have made many laws, such as the family law for Sunni, the family law for Shia. I was also the representative of the Supreme

Court regarding the law on children who lost their family. The election law is still in Parliament and has not passed yet. I attended International Conferences. One was in New York in 2011. Beijing, Plus 15, the Netherlands in 2009, UN 1325, Islamic Conference in Turkey 2013".

On the other hand, the post-2001 period was also dominated by the actions of Western actors promoting a particular version of women's emancipation. Historically this tug-of-war over women's agency has characterised the twentieth century in Afghanistan Kandiyoti situate the gender issues as a victim of the antagonism between an oppressed Islam and the colonial Christendom. Domination and ongoing dependence on the West brought about cultural resistance among Muslims that centred on women and the family. Women and family in turn "came to represent the ultimate and inviolable repository of Muslim identity" (Kandiyoti (1991, p.7).Therefore, the West's interest in liberating oppressed Muslim women, together with the feminism they sponsored, was tantamount in many Muslims' minds to cultural imperialism. Local collaborators would thus be tainted with "inauthenticity, if not outright betrayal" (Kandiyoti, 1991, p.7). "Islam has been a consistent vehicle for popular classes to express their alienation from 'Westernized' elites" (Kandiyoti, 1991, p.8). The return of the Taliban in August 2021 seems to confirm this view.

Armstrong (2002, p 62) raised the question "Can religious leaders—sometimes mullahs who cannot read and write—lead a people forward in the twenty first century?" This is a crucial issue, because, as noted in a later chapter in this thesis, the education roll-out has been more successful in the urban centres compared to the less accessible periphery. Illiteracy is thus prominent in the rural areas, especially among women. A consequence of this economic and educational gap between urban and rural is that Afghan women living in the periphery and largely illiterate, feel little affinity with the elite urban women, educated and working. They do not necessarily sense that these privileged can speak for them or represent them. Besides, the benefits of the progress in women emancipation has not necessarily reached them in the rural areas and, if it does, they are rarely able to exercise these rights. Extreme patriarchy is still the social norm in the periphery and few among their male relatives would favour access to education

and/or jobs (Allen and Felbab-Brown, 2020)[35]. It is not that these rural women would not sympathize with improved gender conditions, yet the prime preoccupation for them is to regain security and end conflict, halting the bloodshed killing their fathers, brothers and sons, necessitating internal displacement or refugee status across the borders, and ensuring a stable livelihood for their families. “Instead of economic, social, and political empowerment, Afghan women in rural areas – where an estimated 76 percent of the country’s women live – experience the devastation of bloody and intensifying fighting between the Taliban and government forces and local militias”(Allen and Felbab-Brown, 2020). For many women, the bargain they struck for greater stability and security was to embrace the Taliban to end the civil war between warring factions of the Mujahideen between 1992-96. This bargain resulted in the more extremist patriarchal and fundamentalist rule of the Taliban. The cycle was repeated in 2021.

5.6 Conclusion

Religion is easily manipulated by political movements and, in turn, the role of women in society lies at the heart of competing political and religious ideologies. The anti-colonial Deobandi strain of Islam heavily influenced the philosophy of the Taliban finding a fertile ground in the Pashtunwali. We pointed to the fact that, as Kandiyoti (1991, p13) mentioned, countries that are highly dependent on foreign aid become entangled with the foreign policies of their donors. In Afghanistan’s case, the dependence on the border regions of Pakistan as a refuge and on oil-rich Saudi Arabia as a significant donor, abided the seclusion of women. A pity eventually that the other big sponsor of the Mujahideen, Washington, had only anti-communism to share.

My fieldwork submits that the women interviewed are of the opinion that they have been used by an interpretation of Islam deceiving their pride as a Muslim. They equally feel as a tool by the imperialist agenda proclaiming “the liberation of Muslim women”. The real problem, lies in the dishonesty of those “oppressing”

[35] Allen and Felbab-Brown (2020). *The fate of women’s rights in Afghanistan.* Brooking Institute. https://www.brookings.edu/essay/the-fate-of-womens-rights-in-afghanistan/

and those claiming to be “liberators” of women. It is not the Islam in se, but “Patriarchy” by Afghan males and “Patronising” by the West, which are the true challenges they face. In essence, women remained pawns on a geopolitical chessboard and more recently, of a clash of civilizations.

Chapter 6 - Family, Marriage, and Violence Against Women

"A woman is best either in the house or in the grave." (Pashtun saying)

This chapter analyses how the life trajectories of professional women in Afghanistan are influenced by the most intimate and personal of the gender regimes laid out in Walby's schema: those that operate with the family structure in which they are brought up. Family structure and the gender norms that are produced and reproduced within each individual family are, of course, shaped – but not determined – by external factors, such as religious affiliation, ethnic identification, class, location and many other variables. In turn the gender norms adopted by individual families, which may be at odds with those expected by the wider social groupings to which they are affiliated, are expressed in expectations for their daughters around marriage, sexuality, childbearing and reproduction, and the acceptability of violence within domestic and family relationships.

This chapter is therefore concerned with the operational dimension of patriarchy that Connell terms "**cathexis**", that is, the dynamics at play within the personal, private, intimate and emotional domain of relationship. Those emotional dimensions of inter-personal relations may be empowering to girls or women, or may keep them in a state of fear of violence that damages their agency. This chapter therefore explores how the professional and public identities, and personal lives, of the professional women interviewed were shaped by their own families, by these emotional relations, and by wider social expectations about their roles and functions in relation to the cultural norms of family and reproduction.

6.1 Family influence on women in public life

Families affect the life trajectories of their members in many complex ways, not least related to the diverse kinds of tangible and intangible forms of resources and capital available within the family, such as wealth, social connections and

educational level, and the social – and gendered - expectations of the different members of the family. Many studies of women who rise to leadership positions in public and political life do so because of family expectations and family connections to public life, making it far more likely that women of a certain social class would enter the professional and public sphere.[36] Female political leaders in highly patriarchal societies, such as Benazir Bhutto, Aung San Suu Kyi, Corazon Aquino, Chandrika Kumaratunga, Tanaka Makiko, Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo, and Indira Gandhi, attained their position not just because they were seen as proxies for the eminent men to whom they are related, but also because they had enjoyed many of the privileges and resources also accorded to men in that family, such as university education, often at elite international institutions (Iwanaga, 2008, p. 39). In addition, their ability to embrace public and professional success was founded on their families' positive expectations of them, even just as representatives of a dynasty. These women attain "a high societal status that results in publicly attributed competence and legitimacy to lead" (Iwanaga, 2008, p.39). This elite-based public presumption of ability, enables women to transcend the accepted roles and behaviours prescribed by society. Elite females in South and Southeast Asia are thus "allotted a different set of acceptable behaviours and available space for agency from their female peers from other strata of society" (Ibid.)

This pattern also held true in Afghanistan as the country's elite began to modernise. After the new constitution was promulgated in 1964 women began to participate in politics and some women from upper and middle-class backgrounds were given cabinet posts (Emadi 2002, p 85). Years later, Fawzia Koofi, Afghan author and a prominent female MP, wrote in her personal memoir, *The Favoured Daughter: One Woman's Fight to Lead Afghanistan into the Future*, referred to her privileged upbringing and family connections to politics: "Before my father and I became members of parliament, my father's father, Azamshah, was a community leader and tribal elder" (Koofi, 2012, p.6). Tribal elders were among the local elite,

[36] See for example Jalalzai, F. (2013) Shattered, Cracked or Firmly Intact? Women and the Executive Glass Ceiling Worldwide. Oxford University Press.

seated in ‘jirgas’ or the traditional meeting of leaders making decisions. In Afghanistan, as elsewhere, family connections to local or national political and societal elite could lead to leadership roles, for women as well as for men. Even after democracy was instated after the 2001 toppling of the Taliban, upbringing, family connections and class remained a significant element in accessing public jobs and profile for women.

That said, while female participation in public life and politics was actively promoted after 2001, the chance of working-class women’s participation in politics was still slim. After the 1964 Constitution, working-class women participated in elections on a very limited scale (Emadi 2002, p.85). The 2004 Constitution also gave women the formal right to participate in politics but many practical restrictions remained for working-class women that left them with fewer opportunities. One of the key elements in assisting women to participate in public and political life and in employment is education, where family attitudes can be very influential, as the next section shows.

6.2 Parental attitudes to girls’ education

Access to education and a liberal view of girls’ educational and employment perspectives, are defined to a large extent by the family, especially the role of the father. Afghan girls frequently find themselves mainly the subordinates of the family and its patriarch, as well as of their culture. These family attitudes combine with the material conditions of access to education, and broader cultural norms, which are explored in greater depth in the next chapter. With the vast majority of Afghans poor and illiterate, few understand the fruits of education, having to make a trade-off between labour for the kids or the indirect costs of education. Especially in rural areas, there are fewer educational institutions for girls than for boys, and insecurity compounds the problem of access. Despite progress made over recent years, a majority of Afghan girls will never attend school. They are destined to stay at home, first to help with house chores to the benefitting their own family members and, once married, helping their husbands’ family members. Human

Rights Watch estimated that in 2017, an estimated two-thirds of Afghan girls were not attending school.[37] Only a few thousand make it to tertiary education.

While by law every Afghan has access to education and residing in urban area facilitates access to school institutions, it is relative wealth that allows parents to make trade-offs between education or working at home, sending their boys and/or girls to school and incurring higher indirect school costs, and, above all, transcending traditional values. Many of my interviewees — even those who are from the rural or remote areas — had the good fortune to be able to rely on families with a solid financial or educational background, not typical for the average Afghan family. These professional women had become successful on their own terms in Afghanistan, mainly due to support from family members, particularly parents and/or a husband. This gave them the courage to fight for their educational rights and for the freedom to work. "My family is a very bright family. We believe opportunities must be equal for men and women" (Interviewee Judge Mrs. Anar, Head of Appeal Court/Juvenile Court).

Family support for women's empowerment starts with their parents and their attitudes. Below an overview of the family backgrounds of my interviewees, all of them working and successful professionals. The table outlines the educational and employment history of both parents, indicating from a social capital and sociological perspective, how these parents were more prone to holding a positive view of their daughter's education.

Table 6.1: Family background of the interview participants

Name of the participants	Family Background
Ms. Minoo, Legal Officer, UNODC	Ms. Minoo's father studied Engineering in France for 7 years. He worked in the military during the reign of King Zaheer Shah then later became the Head of Managing and Telecommunications. Her mother is a high school

[37] Human Rights Watch (October 17, 2017) "I Won't Be a Doctor, and One Day You'll Be Sick" - Girls' Access to Education in Afghanistan. Available at: https://www.hrw.org/report/2017/10/17/i-wont-be-doctor-and-one-day-youll-be-sick/girls-access-education-afghanistan (Accessed: 22 June 2021)

	graduate and was a teacher during the Soviet regime. Their main family income was provided by her mother during the Soviet rule while her father was jobless.
Ms. Sita, National Project Associate, UNODC	Ms. Sita's father received a Master of Law and worked as a Judge in the Supreme Court. Her mother was exceptional among the mothers of my participants, having received a Bachelor's degree in Literature and working as a School Vice-Principle in Kabul.
Ms. Roshan, National Project Associate, UNODC.	Ms. Roshan is a National Project Associate. Her father received a BSc. in Agriculture from Kabul University and a MSc in Agriculture from the Netherlands. He worked as a project associate with the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) and in the agricultural sector until his retirement. Her mother received a BA degree and is a school teacher.
Ms. Shokoh, Programme Officer, Women for Afghan Women.	Ms. Shokoh is a Program Officer for the Women for Afghan Women organization. Her father received a 12th grade education and is a businessman. Her mother received a 9th grade education and is a nurse. They are an educated, middle-class family.
Ms. Kobra, Gender Research Assistant, UN-WOMEN	Ms. Kobra is a Gender Research Assistant at UN-WOMEN. Her father received a 12th grade education and is a shopkeeper. Her mother received a 15th grade education and was a Head of Midwives.
Mrs. Farnaz, Wxxxx News Agency, CEO and Founder	Ms. Farnaz was raised in a middle-class family. Her father went to military college and was an army officer. Her mother has no formal education and looks after their home.
Ms. Mahnaz, BBC reporter	Ms. Mahnaz is a BBC reporter. Her father received a bachelor's degree and worked as journalist and later as

	Professor and manager of a private school. Her mother received a bachelor's degree and she is a teacher.
Ms. Sabira, Actress, film director, producer	Ms. Sabira's father was a teacher and her mother was a home-maker. She did not provide many details about her family.
Ms. Pari, translator	Ms. Pari's father is a retired army general and later worked as a supervisor in a mining company. Her mother worked in a school canteen in Pakistan, as the family received no support from the father.
Ms. Farzana, a carpet company owner and politician	Ms. Farzana's parents are not educated but became successful entrepreneurs. Her father bought books and taught her to read during the Taliban period. Both parents supported her in every way they could to become an educated and successful young woman. She did not, however, detail her mother's education or job.
Mrs. Hanifah, MP, Farah province	MP Mrs Hanifah's father was a graduate from a military school as a mechanical engineer. As a military officer he served under King Zaheer Shah until Dr. Najibullah's time. He resigned when the Mujahideen came into power. Her mother has no formal education and looked after their home.
Ms. Suraya, MP, Ghani province	MP Suraya's father earned a grade 12 education and owned a thriving business. Her mother was educated through primary school and is a housewife.
Mrs. Fazela, MP, Kabul province	Mrs. Fazela is a widow. Her family is among the elite but, to her own saying, do not belong to the upper echelons. Her father received an education from the Military Academy. Her mother is a housekeeper. They are wealthy landlords with large landholdings and many animals.
Mrs. Rasa, former MPH from	Her father is a teacher who is not interested in politics at

Daikundi and MP from Uruzgan province	all but supported her. Her great-grandfather and grandfather were famous politicians, so she was raised in a political family. They are also wealthy. She is the only one in her generation who is interested in politics.
Mrs. Anar, Judge, Head of Appeal Court/Juvenile Court	Mrs. Anar's father received a 12th grade education. According to her, it is equivalent to today's graduate level. He worked for the Ministry of Finance in a Directorate position. The last position he had was co-director of road-building. Her mother has no formal education and looked after the family home.
Ms. Husnia, Judge, Primary Children and Family Court	Ms. Husina's father earned a bachelor's degree in finance from Iran. He previously worked as a manager in the Ministry of Education and now has a construction company of his own. Her mother was educated through grade 8 and she looked after the family.
Mrs. Fahima, Judge, Head of Legal Dept. Ministry of Women's Affairs	Mrs. Fahima was born to a wealthy family. Her father earned his PhD from Germany as a pharmacist and speaks more than 5 languages. He is a professor in one of the universities and a pharmacy owner. Her mother is an educated home keeper.
Dr. Hasinah, Head of the Healthcare Financing Department of MoPH	Dr. Hasinah's father received a BA in Literature and an MA in Philosophy from Russia. He was a Professor at Kabul University and later became a businessman. Her mother is a teacher and school principal who later decided to become a home keeper.
Dr. Khadeeja, Director, Ghazanfar Institute	Dr. Khadeeja's father is an engineer. Her mother received a primary education and became a home keeper. Her husband is a flight engineer. Her parents had financial problems and struggled to provide for her medical education

of Health Science of the MoPH.	they believed she deserved.
Dr. Shola, Human Rights Commissioner	Dr. Shola's father received an economics degree from Kabul University and was the Governor of Herat. Her mother received a primary education and is a home keeper. Her husband is a teacher. Soraya is from an economically middle-class family.
Mrs. Zahra, Commander and Female Prison Director	Mrs. Zahra's father is a businessman, a wealthy landowner and farmer. Her mother is a home keeper who received no formal education. Her husband is a Military University graduate and a military officer.

With few exceptions, these data indicate the privileged status and related material and social resources that these successful professional families bestowed on their daughters. Given the patriarchal structure of Afghan society, it is fathers who are more likely to have a higher level of education than the mother, to work outside the home, and to have high status employments. On the one hand, sociological and psychological studies of the family suggest that mothers are the primary role model for girl children, hence the investment by international organisations in girls' education in order to create a positive inter-generational transmission of social expectations and educational capital. However, within the patriarchal family, expectations about girls and boys social roles are strongly determined by the father. The father-daughter relationship becomes very important when the father explicitly counters and contradicts the patriarchal norms in wider society.[38] The effects of paternal approval of education and aspiration affects self-esteem and thus later life choices. The case of Malala Youfsafzai, from the Pakistani province of Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa, over the border from Afghanistan but sharing many of the characteristics of rural Pashtun culture, is a case in point: her father was a school teacher and strongly supported her in her own education and public

[38] In Nielsen.L (2012) Father–Daughter Relationships: Contemporary Research and Issues. Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group 711 Third Avenue New York.

campaign for girls' education before she was shot by the Taliban in 2012. The 2015 documentary about her explicitly refers to her father's influence in its title *He Named Me Malala.* He, in turn, references her in his memoir *Let Her Fly*.

As we can see from the life histories of the interviewees, summarised in the table above, their fathers included high government officials, university professors, journalists, businessmen and wealthy landowners. Quite a few were raised in military families, with their fathers having benefitted from one of the sole sources of social mobility in an economically deprived country such as Afghanistan, the army. A few of the fathers had the opportunity to study abroad and had had a cross-cultural experience of women's education and emancipation. All of my interviewees praised their parents for supporting them, but acknowledged that paternal support was key, given the social power than fathers possess to endorse and enforce, or counter, the wider patriarchal norms in society.

There is also a clear class element to this ability to violate patriarchal norms as it is easier for upper-middle-class males to break with social tradition to educate their daughters and/or wives, and this is confirmed by the profile of males related to interviewees in this study. Poor people, who are the majority and the most vulnerable sector in society, cannot afford to break the social rules, as they have fewer life options and mobility. Despite the diverse backgrounds of my interviewees, who faced many hardships as refugees or victims of war, a common denominator was that one of their parents (in most cases, the father) was educated and/or financially well-off.

However, this is not to suggest that mothers do not play an important role in supporting young women's aspirations to study and work. In a few cases, participants' mothers had earned university degrees. For example, Dr. Hasinah's mother was a teacher and school principal. Within the shifting family dynamics, mothers sometimes have to take on traditionally male roles, thus modelling to women that this is socially acceptable. For instance, Ms. Minoo's mother also worked as a teacher and was the main income provider when her father was unemployed. In addition, mothers may act as counterweights to paternal disapproval of girls' educational access. The mothers of Ms. Pari, Ms. Sita, Ms. Kobra struggled and fought to get their daughters educated. "My family, my parents are

educated and supported to get me education. My mom was the one who wanted me to go to university." (Interviewee Ms. Kobra, UNWOMEN). Despite the patriarchal structure of the traditional family, mothers retain and maintain some decision-making power within the private sphere, as this forms part of the patriarchal bargain. Thus Ms. Sita was able, with her mother's support, to pursue her studies despite her father's unwillingness to support her. Ms. Sita's mother gained a Bachelor's degree in Literature and worked as a school vice-principal in Kabul. This educational status, the result of earlier periods of modernisation and female access to education, gave her both an identity and a form of capital – educational capital – that empowered her to empower her daughter, in turn.

6.3 Marriage, sexuality and traditional values

In Afghan culture, the family supersedes the individual in importance. Individuals are assumed to put their family's interests before their own and loyalty to the family is the cornerstone of its social value system. On top of the family hierarchy stands the eldest male who takes the decisions for the entire household and usually controls the family economics. An Afghan household is intergenerational and consist of the patriarch, his spouse, their sons and spouses, the unmarried daughters, and the young children. This family structure is common throughout Afghanistan although it might vary between ethnicity, religion and wealth.

The gender regime of the family is thus expressed through a series of relationships and norms around marriage and the hierarchical relationship between the family and the individuals within it. Marriages are mostly prearranged and Afghan girls can marry at 16, or at 15 with permission from their father or a judge. UNICEF estimates that 17 percent of Afghan girls marry before their 15th birthday.[39] Often, young women can exert very little agency in this process, which is often seen as a transaction between families. Ellis (2000, p.142) notes that while the bride is asked three times during the marriage ceremony if she agrees to the marriage, saying no creates several real problems, including disgrace to the family. Girls

[39] https://www.unicef.org/afghanistan/education

are strictly forbidden to engage in premarital relationships physically or emotionally.

There are several reasons for an arranged marriage at an early age. Rahimi (1991) rationalises this as a tradition “Among those people who are mostly uneducated and are unaware of the means and methods of birth control”. He argues that this custom “developed to control the population growth in a meagre habitat which cannot support a dense population. This practice also helps prevent promiscuous behaviour and the possibility of venereal diseases, especially, among youth. The attempts of parents to marry their daughters and sons at an early age is meant to prohibit premarital sexual relationships” (Rahimi, 1991, p.12). The social concept of honour also plays a role, as “promiscuous behaviour”, particularly by women, is understood as dishonour befalling the family. Given highly patriarchal and traditionalist attitudes in many Afghan communities, in which control of women’s mobility and appearance in public places, including the workplace, is seen as intimately linked to control of their sexuality and thus of the family’s honour, women’s professional identities and private lives can be at odds. One of my interviewees noted that a family had shown interest in her when she was a young professional woman. They duly inquired what kind of work she was engaged in. When the suitor’s family heard that she was working in the same premises as foreigners and males, albeit within a United Nations setting, they lost all interest to marry their son with the female UN staff member.

Power by establishing blood relationships between families is another reason, as is managing family size, by reducing the number of mouths to feed, especially those unlikely to bring in revenue. Girls are considered as having significantly lower chances for employment outside the house than their male siblings. Girls are seen as non-income generating and an economic burden to be shifted on to a husband as early as possible. “Why tend flowers meant for someone else’s garden?” (Ayub et al. 2009, p.13).

On the other hand, marrying off a girl is financially rewarding for her family and a coping mechanism for poverty. Part of the cultural disrespect for women, which also enables violence, relates to their reduction to an economic commodity. The groom’s family has to pay a dowry for the bride to her family. The girl’s family

receives an amount of money, jewellery or property, the value of which may vary and largely depends upon economic and social class of the groom's family. The constitution of a dowry can differ from one region to another, from monetary to in kind, such as with cows, bulls, sheep, goats, and furniture (Emadi, 2002, p.40).

While the tradition of a dowry is not exclusive to Afghanistan, the "bride-price" system has evolved through poverty and deprivation. A marriage is a significant social and economic contract, a business deal between the patriarchs of the two families, and a means of managing social relations between men (Emadi 2002). It is also an "asymmetrical mode" of marriage (Tapper, 1991, p.142). The Durrani, for example, refer to marrying off a female as a "sale" and of the *walwar* as a "price", just like an economic transaction (Ibid.). Unlike other types of good, the woman can only change hands once for money. Negotiations over arranged marriages in rural Afghanistan can be protracted pending starting with whether to accept the marriage offer. *Walwar* payments are usually instalments paid over several years but must be completed before the wedding itself, "when the bride leaves her natal home with her trousseau to join her husband" (Tapper, 1991, p.142). In the 1970s the *walwar* among the eastern Pashtuns ranged from Afs 50,000-100,000 (USD 1000-2000) besides the cost borne by the groom for a wedding party bestowing honour on both families. If the marriage was between cousins, then the bride price declined significantly (Barfield, 2003, p.18). The future husband sometimes may also promise to support the family-in-law in the long term (UNAMA, 2010, p.39).[40] It may also take a man many years to save enough for the bride price, so he may be much older than the young woman when or before he can afford to marry, thus increasing the incidence of child marriage and marriage with a large age imbalance, which inevitably disempowers the wife (Ellis 2000, p141). This indebtedness may also be increased by social and community pressure to put on lavish wedding celebrations, indicating status while honouring the Afghan tradition of hospitality (Muzhary, 2016). In the latter situation, the couple starts their marriage time with a significant financial loss and much anxiety

[40] UNAMA- United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan. UNAMA is a political mission that provides political good offices in Afghanistan; works with and supports the government; supports the process of peace and reconciliation; monitors and promotes human rights and the protection of civilians in armed conflict; promotes good governance; and encourages regional cooperation.

(UNAMA, 2010, p.26). Even Afghans themselves view the high bride price families pay to marry their sons as a harmful traditional practice (Ibid.).

Marriage simply transfers ownership of, and responsibility for, the girl or woman from her biological family to her in-laws. The amount of dowry is supposed to be compensation for the girl's care and upbringing before her marriage (Emadi, 2005, p.174). In turn, the newly wed girl moves to the household of her husband, becoming a childbearer, helping with household chores and collectively raising the children with the other families residing in the household.

Thus the girl-child is viewed as an economic asset firstly to their birth family, and then to the family into which they marry (Ellis, 2000, p. 41), which explains why child marriages are still practised widely. It is not unheard of for girls to get "engaged" even before they are born (Ellis 2000, p.142). The marriage of girls also forms part of the cultural system of repaying debts, financial or otherwise, between families. When farmers are indebted, for instance due to a bad harvest, daughters may be one of the sole "assets" remaining. In 2013, the New York Times covered a story about village elders settling a dispute on an outstanding debt of USD 2,500 that resulted in the family's patriarch offering his six-year-old daughter to the creditor's family. This traditional practice is called *Baad* (or *baad dalan*).

This tradition of marrying girls out for status or financial gain has some serious negative consequences in terms of the family power dynamics that it generates. Those surveyed by UNAMA understood that it led to forced and underage marriages, selling of girls, and a high level of domestic violence–as men take out frustration at being in debt or having to work for years to pay off loans, on their wives. It also results in the commodification of women and girls within Afghan society, turning marriage into a transaction where girls are effectively sold to the highest bidder (UNAMA, 2010, pp. 25- 26).[41]

[41] UNAMA (2010) http://www.afghan-web.com/woman/harmful_traditions.pdf

There is widespread agreement among writers, scholars and feminist activists that the practice of paying a bride price contravenes Islam (Paksu, n.d.)[42]. Moreover, in Islam, women are neither the property of their families nor are women to be reduced to mere commodities spent at the convenience of their fathers, husbands or in-laws. In Islam, women must agree on their own marriage and in which term they want to be involved in the marriage. According to UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan, the bride price may have the following consequences "Although high bride price is not specifically illegal under national, international or Sharia law, a number of human rights consequences emanate from this practice. Persons interviewed by UNAMA HR in many provinces of Afghanistan view the high bride price families pay to marry their sons as a harmful traditional practice. They said that in the context of poverty, it leads to forced and underage marriages, selling of girls, and a high level of domestic violence – as men take out frustration at being in debt or having to work for years to pay off loans, on their wives " (UNAMA, 2010, p. 26).

However, the statutory criminalisation of child marriage had little impact, partly because neither birth nor marriage are routinely registered. The practice of "child brides" was legally forbidden under the Communist regime through its ordinance of 1978, which raised the minimum age of marriage to sixteen, and lowered the allowable bride price to a nominal sum. While enforcement of this law was not only extremely difficult but equally resented in the rural periphery, it was abolished by the hands of the US-supported anti-communist "freedom fighters" who triggered the fall of Najiubullah in 1992 and started a destructive civil war.

In addition, the insecurity arising from three decades of war has actually increased the incidence of child marriage for girls, as parents fear that the risk of the honour of young girls getting tainted has increased, thus reducing the dowry significantly. An early marriage contract mitigates this threat – or at least shifts the burden to the family-in-law.

[42]Paksu, M. (n.d.) Questions on Islam. Available at: https://questionsonislam.com/article/money-taken-under-name-mahr-dowry-islam-same-bride-price-what-criterion-mahr (Accessed 22.11.2020)

Ms. Roshan (interviewee working for UNODC) reflected on how patriarchs continue to rule the family, despite attempts at modernising attitudes. “In Paktia province, because of bride price, 9-year-old girls are getting married. We still have this culture. Our government (Karzai regime) can't fight against it. It is the patriarchal power; the father and the other males have superpower. They can decide for all the females. Girls cannot decide on their own marriage. Men hold such enormous power.”

6.4 The Significance of Marriage and Marital Status

These practices in relation to marriage, where women can easily become commodified, make marrying a double-edged decision and a key element of the bargain that women must decide to make with patriarchy. On the one hand, in a patriarchal society married women are simultaneously more socially respected but also potentially more socially constrained through the family norms of obedience and submission to the husband and other male relatives. On the one hand, Afghan society, having male protection provides also basic security. On the other, as already noted, many of my informants had remained single in order to be able to undertake an education and/or to be a professional even though single women are disrespected and prone to insult. Deciding not to marry is thus a huge decision. Whilst not marrying is unthinkable for the majority of Afghan women, belonging to the middle-class or upper-middle-class permits those women an independence and exposure to other norms and values than the restrictive traditional ones.

However, for those women who do marry, the attitudes of their husbands are every bit as important as those of their fathers. Many also extended praise to their spouses for supporting their careers. Even in liberal Afghan families, males still decide the life direction of females and, if they are fortunate, they are supported by their husbands. But, as with the fathers, as noted above, support for wives’ professional identities and lives is to violate predominant traditional norms.

Thus, women’s agency can be hindered or helped by the men in their families. The widow and the divorcee both required the support of other male family members to develop their own careers. For MP Ms. Suraya noted "The most important

thing in my life is my family. It is very important to acknowledge that my family supported me" (Interviewee MP Ms. Suraya, Ghazni Province). A fellow MP also has plenty of stories to tell in this regard. Her background is as rich as recent Afghan history. Mrs Hanifah has never left the country. Her grandfather was a wealthy landlord and their lands were distributed during the socialist revolution. Her family faced many hardships, starting in the Communist era. Her husband was a medical student during the Taliban period. She helped her family to earn a living as well as supporting her husband's medical studies by doing different jobs under different regimes. This earned her deep respect from her husband and, in return, when she began her political career, her husband gave her help and support. "My husband helped me with my campaign. My husband was the only assistant for my campaign. I didn't give my body, nor my money, no vote buying, no big promises" (Interviewee MP Ms. Hanifah, Farah Province)

The husband's actual or future support is echoed incessantly. Some interviewees were married but their careers were largely supported by their husbands and in-laws' families. Judge Mrs. Fahima in the Ministry of Women's Affairs observed that the husband she married in 2002 was "very supportive". Regarding her own marital status, Police Chief Commander Mrs. Zahra explained, "I am happy to be an Afghan woman. It is difficult. We need family permission to do something. If my family is against what I want to do, then I can't do it. I married first. Then, I became a police officer. My husband supported me. With his permission, I am here" (Ms. Zahra, Police Chief Commander, Female Prison). She was able to access education and a career firstly thanks to her father's support and then later her husband's support. On the other hand, there are, of course, husbands who do not support their wives' ambitions as professional women, seeing this as a threat to their dominance in the household. One interviewee, Mrs. Rasa, an MP previously from Daikundi and then later from Uruzgan, divorced her husband because of her ambition as a politician, not receiving support from her partner instead trying to undermine her political career in many ugly ways.

The cathexis between husband and wife is clearly very important for women's empowerment and agency. To some women, the tradition of arranged marriage, which does not, of course, precluding the development of feelings of support and love between the partners, is not enough to guarantee such support. Some

women prefer the Western notion of the love match. Many of my interviewees, belonging to the educated middle and middle-upper class, were able to claim that right. Mrs. Farnaz, winner of multiple awards as a journalist and CEO of the news agency, broke with tradition. She remarks about her husband: "Now my husband is also a journalist. He also supported me. We have a love marriage, not an arranged one. We met and we decided to marry. We really have a good marriage. What I most wanted is that trust and respect from my husband. My mother-in-law family also supported me. They know the value of my achievement every time I fought" (Mrs. Farnaz, CEO, Wxxx News Agency). The luxury of choice to marry for love is granted to few Afghans. However, that option is still not open to most women: Fawzia Koofi describes how, in her parent's mountain village, marriage was for family, tradition, culture, and obedience, all of which were considered more important than individual happiness. "Love was something no one was expected to need or to feel," she writes. "Love only causes trouble. People believed unquestioning duty was where happiness lay" (Koofi, 2012, p 5)

The Afghan marriage system does not prioritise human feelings. Female sexuality is unimportant place to explore. For Afghans, female sexuality is still regarded as both dangerous and untrustworthy. Since marriages are for practical reasons rather than love, the man can decide whether to remain in one marriage and take another wife, which is allowed culturally and by Islamic law in Afghanistan. A man can divorce without his wife's consent. There is no reciprocity. Women are expected to live with the life given to them. Divorce is a taboo for women in Afghan society, even for middle-class families where the female requesting divorce is and remains a rarity. Therefore, usually, women marry for life for cultural and practical reasons. However, the same attitude does not apply to men in Afghan culture, who may change their individual marital status.

It was striking how many of my interviewees were single women, with one widow and one divorced woman among my participants. Many studies of women in politics and business find that women often experience greater autonomy and agency once they are outside, whether by choice or circumstance, the patriarchal structure of marriage with all its expectations about women, reproductive care and subordination to the needs of husband and children. As males are dominant and make decisions with respect to the lives of their daughters, sisters and wives,

as can be seen from the following table, the majority of my participants remained single, fearing that their future husband and his family would not allow them to become further educated or to work.

Table 6.2: Interviewees and their marital status

Marital Status	Number	Percentage %
Single	14	66.66
Married	4	19.04
Divorced	1	4.76
Widow	1	4.76
Not known	1	4.76

Interviewee Ms. Mahnaz, a BBC World Service Reporter for a Persian TV programme, was among those who were still single at the time of our interview. In the interview she voiced her challenges and problems with her family regarding her job, her education and the marriage. Her father had supported her to become a reporter, breaking with the patriarchal norms that women should not work outside the home or have a public profile. On the other hand, her mother was worried about her stepping completely outside the cultural norms and exposing her to social rejection and possible violence. “I have a problem with my family, a little bit. They are trying to engage me with a man over a year now. I said I don't have a plan to marry now. I tried to apply for my Masters. My mom said it’s her final decision now. She said if you already have chosen someone, it's okay and get engaged. Otherwise, I will take a decision for you”.

Her mother was worried that her daughter’s work and life in Kabul were not alluring to a potential partner and would finally leave her single and childless as working women are disliked if not entirely rejected by many Afghan men and culturally at odds with society. Her mother was thus concerned that **she was making the wrong “bargain with patriarchy” by not seeking out the protection of a husband**. She was at that point, pressing Ms Mahnaz to marry someone so that she could have protection and so that the mother did not need to worry as much for

the future of her daughter. Ms. Mahnaz added: “It's a deadline. Because I respect my mom. I have no freedom in everything. Working here is possible because I earn the trust of my family. For that reason, I don't want to hurt my mother. Sometimes, I am thinking of marrying someone who would support me. This is the rule for my marriage. I want to have a child. I would like to be a mom. For that reason, I want to marry. But I am so afraid about my job”. Ms Mahnaz herself did not think she needed any protection but out of respect for her mother, she was thinking of marrying someone sooner or later. Both women were trying, in their way, to bargain with Afghan patriarchy by deciding which norms and expectations could be broken in pursuit of further personal autonomy and professional fulfilment, and which norms should be followed for reasons of self-protection. In the case of marriage, from Ms Mahnaz’s point of view, it was not simply about conforming and seeking protection but also about finding a life partner who would support her in her public, professional identity, as well as in personal fulfilment.

She was not the only interviewee to express ambivalence about marriage and what it would entail in relation to her ability to pursue her professional ambitions. The MP Ms. Suraya from Ghazi Province was from a middle-class family and whilst she presented herself as very shy and traditional, her ideas and work were not. She too was still single. Like many other participants, she feared that a future husband would not support her aim for more education. "I am single now. My aim is to continue my education. I am worried that my future husband will disturb my education. That's my main concern and I remained single." (Interviewee MP Ms. Suraya, Ghazi Province). Similarly, Ms. Minoo who worked as a Legal Advisor at UNODC, articulated the trade-offs between competing personal values and norms as follows: "the higher you climb, the more you don’t want to marry. I am still single. I am Muslim. I believe in Almighty. We, three sisters, are single." (Ms. Minoo, Legal Advisor, UNODC)

6.5 Violence against women

Underpinning the regulation and enforcement of gender norms and the gender regimes of the private and public sphere is the potential use of violence that society permits against women. These forms of violence may be both indirect and

direct. Kandiyoti (2007) postulated that women's human rights in Afghanistan are routinely violated, based on single but also partly overlapping and mutually reinforcing sets of influences. Poverty, displacement, insecurity and conflict have eroded the cushioning effects of family ties and obligations. Thus, the gender biases inherent in the kinship practices of various ethnic communities have been heightened over time[43] (p.511). She added that the dynamics of gendered disadvantage, the erosion of local livelihoods, the criminalisation of the economy and insecurity at the hands of armed groups and factions, though analytically distinct phenomena, combine to produce extreme forms of female vulnerability" (Kandiyoti, 2007, p.511). My interviewee Ms. Pari commented on this heightened vulnerability "In three decades of war- the status of women has changed. For some it is an opportunity to get educated. For most living in the countryside, women's status has been even more declined. Most girls make carpets to earn money. They didn't get education. Most boys are uneducated too. Most of our youngsters are uneducated. Wars cause them to be an uneducated generation. There is no time, no money to educate them. This is very negative for our country".

Decades of warfare resulted in violence that became part of day-to-day lives, now also entrenched into family life. UNFPA estimated that up to 87.2 per cent of women have experienced at least one form of physical, sexual or psychological violence, or forced marriage. More than 60 per cent of women experience multiple forms of violence.[44] In most cases these women are abused by the people they love and trust the most – their families. Shelters have been established to provide protection and legal help. Nevertheless, the needs are much higher than the offers of help. For most women no option exists but to return to abusive homes. In this context, some are turning to drastic measures such as suicide to end their suffering.[45]

[43] Kandiyoti, D. (2007). Between the Hammer and the Anvil: Post-Conflict Reconstruction, Islam and Women's Rights. Third World Quarterly, Vol. 28. No. 3. Pp. 503-517

[44] United Nations Population Fund, "Afghanistan State of the Youth Report 2014", p. 6. Available from http://countryoffice.unfpa.org/filemanager/files/afghanistan/2014/reports/unfpasoayreportv333e.pdf.

[45] See, 101 East (July 3, 2015). - Afghanistan: No Country for Women. Al Jazeera. Available at: https://contentsales.aljazeera.net/101-east-afghanistan-no-country-women

Nonetheless, male violence towards women, verbal and/or physical, within the home cannot be accounted for simply by the normalisation of violence outside the home. It is also related to the commodification of women and girls within Afghan society through the dowries provided at marriage, mentioned above. Once married the economic value of females declines, and without legal recourse to divorce, she has little escape if the situation turns abusive.

There are umpteen media reports and documentaries about abuses and violence committed by Afghan men against Afghan women.[46] Take for instance Al Jazeera's *Afghanistan: No Country for Women – 101 East* (broadcast on July 3, 2015)[47] depicting the different forms of abuse of women in Afghanistan, *Dark Flowers: The Story of Self-immolation in Afghanistan*, a documentary about women who prefer to burn themselves alive rather than face further domestic abuse, or Siba Shakib's *Afghanistan, where God only comes to weep*, depicting the story of an Afghan woman forced into a marriage to pay off her brother's gambling debts. Zarghuna Kargar's *Dear Zari: the secret lives of the women of Afghanistan* describes the abuse a child bride had to go through, first as a settlement through marriage between families to end a family feud and later living as a widow shunned by society.[48]

These stories are not just extremely upsetting in themselves: they also constitute part of the Western framing and representation of Afghanistan as a country of chaotic and primordial violence required Western intervention. As with the totem of the burqua, violence against women outside the West is all too easily deployed in the service of 'white men saving brown women from brown men', and thus fit

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[46] US political establishment's newspaper of record (Auken, 2019), The New York Times' war propaganda- https://www.nytimes.com/2001/10/20/opinion/the-ground-war-begins.html and the many other articles can be found online, including Editorial piece of November 24, 2001, "Liberating the Women of Afghanistan"- "America did not go to war in Afghanistan so that women there could once again feel the sun on their faces, but the reclaimed freedom of Afghan women is a collateral benefit that Americans can celebrate. After five years of Taliban rule, women in Afghanistan are uncovering their faces, looking for jobs, walking happily with female friends on the street and even hosting a news show on Afghan television." https://www.nytimes.com/2001/11/24/opinion/liberating-the-women-of-afghanistan.html

[47] Dark Flowers: The Story of Self-immolation in Afghanistan, HAWCA, first broadcase Oct 3, 2011, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1x8_-GMvWwU; Al Jazeera, Afghanistan: No Country for Women - 101 East, published on Jul 3, 2015. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZkanAs-KGFg,

[48] See, https://www.ohchr.org/documents/press/vaw_report_7july09.pdf

the “liberation” narrative mobilised for the 2001 intervention in Afghanistan. Quoting Anna Badkhen (2012): “Western politicians, generals and do-gooders cite women’s rights as a key benefit of keeping the Taliban out.”[49] It is not to diminish the reprehensible abuses against women but context is required in which the structural violence of the last few decades is properly acknowledged. This is a context in which families were dislocated and displaced, husbands and sons killed, and women left as widows, exposed to multiple forms of vulnerability and violence, through the geopolitical games played out in Afghanistan by regional and international powers.

6.6 Regulation of Violence Against Women in Afghanistan

The regulation of violence against women in Afghanistan must thus be understood also within these geo-political and historical contexts of waves of modernisation and of Western pressure to adopt international norms.

The UN Declaration arising from the Committee on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) defines "violence against women" as “any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or private life”. The Afghan government signed the CEDAW on 14 August 1980, but, because of serious armed regional conflicts, the Convention was not ratified until 2003.

However, implementing relevant international norms on violence against women is very challenging in a cultural context that include communities that adhere to extreme patriarchy. According to Galtung (1990) “‘Cultural violence’ is any aspect of a culture used to legitimize violence in its direct or structural form. From the cultural relativism perspective, violence against women or direct/cultural and

[49] Anna Badkhen (September 24, 2012) “What Afghan Women Want - In Afghanistan’s harsh rural regions, the West’s legacy is merely more scars”, In These Times. Available at: https://inthesetimes.com/article/what-afghan-women-want (Accessed 1 August 2020)

structural violence are considered acceptable if they are justified by culture, tradition and/or religion. Women often have little or no say in determining the rules enforced in the name of religion or cultural practices.

Domestic and public violence against women can occur at any time regardless of socio-economic status. A statistical report of the Ministry of Women's Affairs (MOWA), from 2010, described the multiple dimensions of violence against women (VAW). It notes that VAW is committed that domestic violence was the most prevalent form of violence in Afghanistan that it affected women of all ages, but it often began at an early age, which may result in a lifetime of abuse without respite. It is committed mainly by men, but women against women violence also occurs. For instance, violence may be committed by mothers-in law because the son's wife has not met the household's needs in terms of doing housework, or is not able to deliver a baby boy.

Violence against women is also sustained by illiteracy, lack of awareness of women's rights, conservative traditions and customary practices, misinterpretation of religious rules, and lack of religious awareness and social beliefs (Ministry of Women's Affairs, 2010, p.1). There are many forms of violence against women including, forced marriage, and "honour killings" where a woman is stoned to death or due to the circumstances forced towards self-immolation. To these can be added the violence associated with child marriage, giving away of daughters to settle disputes, and polygamy.

Clearly there is a very blurry line between customary practice and religious belief in explaining the prevalence and social acceptability of these multiple forms of violence against women. One of my interviewees, Ms. Minoo, a Legal Officer from UNODC, explained that she accepts Sharia Law as she is a Muslim. In her view, however, social problems like violence against women arise from a lack of formal education and a lack of understanding of the teachings of Islam. In her opinion, the customary rules applied in Afghanistan are a travesty of what true Islam prescribes. A mixture of Pushtanwali, the "code of life" for the ethnic majority Pashtun, and a local interpretation of Islam instilled the subordination of Afghan women in men. The Pashtunwali is based on three tenets: honour (nang), revenge (badal) and hospitality (melmastia). Females are to conduct themselves in

the spirit of sacrifice and kindness. "Honour, dignity and chastity" are traits prescribed for women and girls. The male concept of "honour" instead relates to the "possession of honour" and therefore bound to protect the virtue and honour of their female relatives.[50]

Important in this application of customary law and distinct from statutory law, is the concept of "moral crimes". Since the toppling of the Taliban in 2001, an estimated 300 and 600 women have been incarcerated annually in Afghan prisons on the ground of "moral crimes".[51] These include disobedience towards the patriarch or husband, running away from home, or *zina* – sexual intercourse between a man and a woman not married to each other. However, the "intention" to commit sexual intercourse outside of marriage (zina) or attempted zina is sufficient to be considered a "moral crime". Running away is neither a crime under Afghan statutory law nor under Sharia law and authorities oftentimes uses zina to charge women and girls who run away, especially when they seek refuge in a house of a non-family member.[52] Running away towards a police station or recognized authorities is not zina, but authorities easily judge the female as being 'disobedient' and would return her to the family she ran from.[53] This double standard is also witnessed with forced and underage marriage and domestic violence rarely prosecuted by the formal judiciary.[54] Instead, as women are perceived to be the custodians of a family's "honour", they are seen as "dishonouring" their

[50] National Inquiry report on Factors and causes of Rape and Honor Killing in Afghanistan, Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC), August 26, 2015, p. 9.
[51] Aziz Hakimi, Torunn Wimpelmann, "Missing from the picture: Men imprisoned for 'moral crimes' in Afghanistan", CMI Insight, 2018. https://www.cmi.no/publications/6551-missing-from-the-picture
[52] "Report of the Special Rapporteur on violence against women, its causes and consequences, Rashida Manjoo. Addendum Mission to Afghanistan", UN General Assembly, A/HRC/29/27/Add.3, May 12, 2015. p. 6.
[53] Aziz Hakimi, Torunn Wimpelmann, "Missing from the picture: Men imprisoned for 'moral crimes' in Afghanistan", CMI Insight, 2018. https://www.cmi.no/publications/6551-missing-from-the-picture
[54] "I Had To Run Away"- The Imprisonment of Women and Girls for "Moral Crimes" in Afghanistan< Human Rights Watch, March 2012, ISBN: 1-56432-877-5.

families when subjected to sexual violence. Rape, punishable by statutory law, will thus rarely be invoked seen that it is the rape victim bearing the shame.[55]

The hundreds of women annually incarcerated in a formal prison setting might await a better fate than the thousands who face the informal and unreported punishment for committing a "moral crime". Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC, 2015) tell us, "According to traditions and cultural norms, women and girls who became victims of sexual assaults are considered the cause of shame and disgracefulness in the family and in the tribe. Their presence in the community can cause further continuation of shame and scandal. Therefore, the killing of the woman is considered as restoration of respect and removing of shamefulness and humiliation from the family and tribe."[56] Worse, the Penal Code allows a reduction punishment of an honour killing to a common crime, as "Defending the Honour" is considered a mitigating terms.

Table 6.3: Types of violence and abuse, threats, and causes of such problems.

Domestic Violence and Abuse	Many cases are unreported, but this is clearly a rampant problem in Afghanistan. Out of desperation, many girls and women resort to self-immolation.
"Honour killing"	Sociocultural and religious norms embody the notion of family honour in the female of the household. Any perceived violation of the family honour (defined subjectively) might result in killing.

[55] "Report of the Special Rapporteur on violence against women, its causes and consequences, Rashida Manjoo. Addendum Mission to Afghanistan", UN General Assembly, A/HRC/29/27/Add.3, May 12, 2015. P. 7. ALL NEED TO BE IN HARVARD

[56] National Inquiry report on Factors and causes of Rape and Honor Killing in Afghanistan, Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC), August 26, 2015, p. 4.

Rape and gang rape	Rape was not a crime according to the Afghan penal code until the Elimination of Violence Against Women (EVAW) law will come into force. Warlords are known for gang rape. Perpetrators often go free. Rape victims often get thrown in prison because accusations of rape are interpreted in the *Zina* (adultery) context of Islamic law and, as such, require four witnesses. Many female rape victims are in prison.
Threats & intimidation by men	Women human rights activists, journalists, police officers and politicians have been killed. Many continue to receive threats, even from some members of parliament. Often too, their children/families are threatened.
Failures of the justice system & law enforcement	Judges and prosecutors in Afghanistan are mainly men, and many are hostile and demanding towards women. Article 130 of the Afghan Constitution allows judges to substitute Sharia Law for crimes not addressed in Afghan criminal law. There is a socio-cultural stigma for girls and women in going to the police for help, as police are mainly male and untrained in dealing with women's issues. Sexual harassment and assault by police are common, and women are often told to return to their abusive homes.
Traditional practice & customs	Settlement for a crime – an "exchange" – giving a girl for marriage as a compensation for a crime.

Attack on girls' school & on students & teachers	Fire, bombings, poisonous gas, and acid attacks are not uncommon. "Night letters" threatening teachers and students' parents are also common. Murdering and threatening teachers are part of the trend. Other tactics targeting girls' schools include arson; mines/explosives; grenade and rocket attacks; shooting; looting; and cutting off the ears of teachers, students, and school employees.

Source: RAWA, Nov 12, 2012

Based on information gathered from August 2014 to February 2015 in 18 of Afghanistan's 34 provinces, the UN collected information on the situation of 110 women (96 adults, 14 minors) who reported forms of violence perpetrated against them between August 2014 and February 2015 through either mediation or court adjudication.[57] These forms of violence were all criminalised under the Elimination of Violence Against Women (EVAW) law. The table below sets out the cases reported in terms of their proportion and demonstrates the wide

Table 6.4: Number of cases by type of violence criminalised under the EVAW law

Type of violence	No. of complaints	Percentage of all Registered complaints
Battery and laceration	66	45%
Abuse, humiliation, intimidation	20	14%
Harassment /persecution	9	6%

[57] "Justice through the Eyes of Afghan Women: Cases of Violence against Women Addressed through Mediation and Court Adjudication", UNAMA and UN OHCHR, Kabul, Afghanistan, April 2015, p. 15.

Prevention of the right to marry or choose own husband	7	5%
Prevention of right to education, travel and access to health services	7	5%
Deprivation of inheritance	6	4%
Forced marriage	5	3%
Enforced prostitution	5	3%
Marriage before the legal age	4	3%
Forced isolation	4	3%
Baad (Giving a woman as restitution for murder, rape or another crime to achieve peace and harmony between families)	4	3%
Forcing into suicide or using poisonous or other dangerous substances on a woman	3	2%
Selling and buying women for the purpose or under pretext of marriage	2	1%
Denial of right to personal property	2	1%
Denial of relationship	2	1%
Men marrying more than one wife without observing the provision of Article 86 of Civil	2	1%

Code		
Grand Total	148	100%

Source: UNAMA and UN OHCHR

Explaining the above data, Kanalstein (2015, p15) noted that most women interviewed (67 per cent) had lodged a complaint with the authorities only after experiencing multiple incidents of violence. As survey of UNAMA indicated, the economic dependency of the female to the male breadwinner does not leave her too many options.[58] Women are not in a position to complain about their circumstances, including violence, because to do so would see them cut off from their means of financial support, which could have serious consequences for the whole family. Moreover, in the exceptional case that a perpetrator of violence is imprisoned, his economic dependents will lose his financial support (Kanalstein, 2015, p. 32). Hence, the situation remains largely underreported.

Of the 150 alleged abusers, almost all were well-known to survivors and in 94 percent of the cases, relatives were the abusers. Twenty alleged incidents of violence indicated that survivors' mothers, mothers-in-law, sisters, and sisters-in-law, constituted 13 per cent of the alleged perpetrators. This highlights, yet again, the complexity of family relationships and their attendant cathexis, for women's possibility of agency. Patriarchy is a system and a social structure that is reproduced by both men and women who have to find a way to live within it, and to bargain with its system of social rewards and sanctions. Thus, female relatives may choose to enforce patriarchal norms on other women, as well as themselves, fearing the violent consequences of rebellion against the system and the loss of immediate rewards and protections for obeying its strictures.

My interviewees were acutely aware of the vulnerability of women in their own country, and of the lack of autonomy most women had to challenge day-to-day violence if they were not supported by family members. Interviewee Ms. Kobra, (UNWOMEN) appreciated the huge gap for women emancipation between those

[58] "Justice through the Eyes of Afghan Women: Cases of Violence against Women Addressed through Mediation and Court Adjudication", UNAMA and UN OHCHR, Kabul, Afghanistan, April 2015, p. 15.

few privileged and the majority of poor and uneducated. She explained: “Dignity and honour for Afghan women should be given to women. Now Violence against Women (VAW) numbers are increasing day by day and time by time. Many women are killed by their husbands. There are many stories like this. Many husbands don't know how to make a living. Poverty, lack of education and can't make their lives better. There is no dignity for women here. They don't honour their wives. In their mind, wives should serve as the servants.”

Another interviewee, Ms. Shokoh (Women for Afghan Women, NGO), had direct experience of supporting female victims of male violence through the criminal justice system. She obtained a bachelor’s degree in law taking the fate of the less privileged to heart. As noted above, violence against women takes many forms, both in the private and the public sphere. The hostility towards women having a professional identity and a voice had resulted in intimidation and threats towards working women. Ms. Shokoh noted “When I was a defence lawyer, one case concerned the abuse of a 6-year-old girl. I received death threats. They knew that I was able to win this case. Therefore, they threatened me. I am not afraid of these threats. If I am afraid, I can't work. Criminals are dangerous people. I am not afraid of them. I should not be afraid”. (Interviewee Ms. Shokoh, Programme Officer, Women for Afghan Women). There are many reports[59] have been reported that since the Taliban are the second time in power (since 15 August 2021), women judges are now under attack and in hiding soon after the Taliban takeover.

More broadly this social violence against women affects women attempting to change gender norms. Interviewee Ms. Sabira, an actress, film director and producer, is a single woman. She is the first woman to have registered a film company, which she owns. She spoke about the challenges in the film industry. “Of course, it is difficult in Afghanistan to work like this. I tried to set up a play on women rights but such a script is still taboo. But a women’s rights script is not

[59]https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-58742581
https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/10/18/afghanistan-female-judges-hiding-taliban-takeover
https://www.independent.co.uk/asia/south-asia/afghanistan-female-judges-hiding-taliban-b1916563.html

acceptable here". She made it clear that people perceived her as a bad influence on society. She explained: "Afghanistan is a very religious society. Our society is very closed. Women cannot play on the stage." For her role as an actress, particularly acting on the stage and being in public view, she had been threatened multiple times: "I received many death threats. But we should work against threats for a better society." (Interviewee Ms. Sabira, Actress, film director and producer). Since the return of the Taliban in August 2021, this multi-layered violence against professional women in the public sphere has increased dramatically.

6.7. Conclusion

This chapter investigates family influence on women in public life. No institution is as important in Afghanistan as the traditional family structure with its very prescribed roles to its members. In Afghan culture, the family supersedes the individual in importance. Individuals are assumed to put their family's interests before their own and loyalty to the family is the cornerstone of its social value system. On top of the family hierarchy stands the eldest male who takes the decisions for the entire household and usually controls the family economics. An Afghan household is intergenerational and consist of the patriarch, his spouse, their sons and spouses, the unmarried daughters, and the young children. Gender relations and marriage reflects this strong grading between family and individual.

Discussing the Afghan family structure points to Walby's patriarchal structure as it concerns culture, household production, paid employment, sexuality, and violence. For instance, the professional and public identities, and personal lives, of the professional women interviewed were shaped by their own families, by these emotional relations, and by wider social expectations about their roles and functions in relation to the cultural norms of family and reproduction.

This chapter also highlights while female participation in public life and politics was actively promoted after 2001, it was mostly urban women of well-connected elite families or middle-upper class who benefitted from this. The impediments imposed through traditional values next to practical restrictions excluded the vast majority of Afghan females from the reform.

An added complication was that warfare, insecurity and conflict, pressured the social security networks and deprived the country of sustainable economic growth. As Kandiyoti (2007, p.511) explained, the dynamics of gendered disadvantage, the erosion of local livelihoods, the criminalisation of the economy and insecurity at the hands of armed groups and factions, combine to produce extreme forms of female vulnerability.

Gender regime, family, marriage, and violence against women is a cultural phenomenon but to be appreciated in the Afghan context of destabilization and falling back on conservative norms and values in absence of functional alternatives. The mixture of Pashtanwali, the “code of life”, and a local interpretation of Islam, is what is familiar to the poor and uneducated, the displaced and the violated. Healing the broken bodies and broken minds will be part of a long process towards the emancipation of women. Demonising Afghan men alone is not the solution.

Chapter 7 - Gender and Educational Opportunities for Professional Afghan women

From the tenth to the nineteenth century, Afghanistan had a rich culture and advanced education

(Kamgar 2002; Husham 2015; Afiza Yazdani)[60].

7.1 Introduction

As noted in Chapter One, a key component of a 'professional' identity is that of specific education, skills and capacities, beyond simply the ability to earn a living and exercise a degree of autonomy and agency. For the women that I interviewed, a professional identity was also connected with other people's recognition of them as having a skill and knowledge base. Therefore education is a key component to women's engagement in the labour market, at a levels, but particularly at a higher level of social status. This chapter therefore considers the changing access that Afghan women and girls have had to education and professional employment and identities, taking, as always, a historical sociological perspectives. The chapter examines how different political regimes have shaped both access to, and the content of, education and how this has affected women's opportunities to become professionals. It explores the opportunities and barriers to access to education for women, and how the professional women I interviewed gained their access to education.

7.2 Modernization of the Afghan nation-state and girls' education

Globally, two-thirds of those who lack access to education are girls and women. Sixty-five million girls never even start school, and an estimated 100 million do not complete primary education. More than 542 million women are illiterate,

[60]http://www.infactispax.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/V14.2-Yazdani.pdf

many as a result of inadequate or incomplete schooling. Lack of literacy is generally associated with poverty and discrimination (Aikman and Unterhalter, 2005, p.1). Conversely, education is regarded as a key human capability that unlocks the door to many human functionings. For women, it is regarded either as an intrinsic good, as something that will increase their status and agency, or instrumentally, as a good that will enable them to perform broader social functions, such as caring better for children, or accessing livelihood options with which to sustain their families. Either way, education for women and girls has been regarded, globally, as one of the keystones of modernisation. It was seen both an indicator of national 'modern-ness' as well as a means to get women into formal sector employment and the professions.

Thus, an essential part of the Western effort towards emancipation of Afghan women focussed on education for girls. However, this was not novel given that female education had always received attention in Afghanistan's striving toward modernization since its independence in 1919. Education was always an important element among the shifting concepts of gendered nationalism, ethnicity, religion, class and other social divisions that have long formed part of the battleground around nation-building. Indeed, education for girls was regarded as particularly central to the tussle between modernisers and their broader secularisation agenda, and religious traditionalists, who did not want women's social role to change. Education is a key gender regime within any gender order, whatever the variety of patriarchy in place, because of its clear relationship with women's voice, status and autonomy.

According to the former Chairman of Independent High Commission of Education for Afghanistan, modern education in Afghanistan was introduced in the early 1900s and moved forward in the 1920s (Samady, 2013, p.3).

Amir Abdur Rahman (1844-1901) opened schools for aristocracy, bureaucracy and army, also Ghulam Bachagan (page boys) were trained to loyally serve the court of Amir (Khan and Amin, 2015, p.1)

According to Roozbeh Shirazi (2007) "Habibullah (1901-1919) was able to capitalise on the unity, peace, and stability inherited from his father's reign which allowed him to focus on education and other socio-economic needs of the country.

Habibullah was able to further consolidate the power of the monarchy by bringing education under the control of the government and away from the mullahs" (p.23).

Habibullah Khan (r.1901-1919) had tried to depart from traditional Muslim School System, encouraged foundation of the Lycee Habibia, in 1903. Secondary education in Habibia School comprised ten-year academic cycle, subdivided into: Ibtada'iyah, primary, four-year; Rushdiyah, middle, three- year; and Maktab-e-Mutawasetah, secondary, three- year. (Khan and Amin, 2015, p.3)

Khan and Amin (2015) writes, "A modest Public Library was established too during Habibullah (1901-1919) reign. Learning of Pashtu, Turkish, English and Urdu languages was encouraged officially. At elementary school pupils studied Islamic studies, local languages (Dari and Pashtu), mathematics, geography, and calligraphy. The curriculum of lower-secondary included Islamic studies, local languages, history, geography, foreign language (English, Urdu, or Turkish), drawing, hygiene, and systems of numerical notation.At higher-secondary school curriculum consisted of Islamic studies, local languages, history, geography, algebra, trigonometry, geometry, physics, herbalism, chemistry, and English (Khan and Amin, 2015,p.3).

Later elementary branches of Habibia School were founded in six other districts of Kabul. Ultimately the enrollment reached 1,534 students with 55 teachers. This school significantly impacted subsequent generations of intellectuals and scholars at Kabul.
The rise of anti-imperialist and nationalist sentiment in India had also affected Afghan thinking since a large number of Indian Muslims taught at Habibia School. (Sarfraz Khan and Noor Ul Amin, 2015, p.3).

Another writer Roozbeh Shirazi (2007) writes, "Primary schooling was established in Kabul in 1909. Teaching subjects were fundamentals of Islamic religion. Quran, theology, *tafseer* (commentary on the Quran), reading, writing, arithmetic, civic, calligraphy, geometry and Persian. Arithmetic was taught using two textbooks compiled by the Council of Public Instruction" (p.24). King Habibullah (1091-1919) was the one who have laid the foundation for secular education in Afghanistan which was to develop parallel to, rather than totally supplant, the traditional Islamic education system (ibid).

When king Habibullah was assassinated in 1919, and his son king Amanullah (1919-1929) came into power and carried out the modernisation of the country, mainly in education sector. King Amanullah's (1919-1929) focus was the expansion of secondary education. However, he did not neglect primary education. 200 primary schools were started and he made school attendance mandatory for children of government employees in order to promote a good example for Afghan citizens. Education was available for all and it was free. It is crucial to note that the first school for girls had opened in Kabul in 1921. Estimates of total primary school enrollment were 40,000 for the entire country in 1928, with less than 800 of those students being girls. Education for girls was not without a challenge in many ways. Practical reasons of girls' attendance was restricted by several factors such as parental resistance to sending their daughters to school unsupervised, the long distance they would have to walk between their homes and the schools, as well as the dependence of many families on their daughters' contribution to the household. The other important factor was the introduction of secular subjects in schools, which was resisted by the mullahs and viewed with suspicion by the Afghan population. (Shirazi, 2007, p.25)

It should be noted that during the reign of King Amanullah Khan (1919-1929), the first Afghan Constitution was passed acknowledging the right to free education for all citizens of Afghanistan, including compulsory primary education. The first Ministry of Education was established and the number of high schools increased. German and French teachers were employed in high schools in Kabul, as were Afghan teachers. For the first time schools also opened outside the capital. The number of primary schools increased to 322. Hundreds of students were sent by the Ministry of Education to study in Russia, Italy, Germany and Turkey (Khwajanir, 2015, p.2). As stated earlier, the problem was the girls and education. Afghan scholars (Mullahs) believed that girls should only get education at home. This was the spiritual reason. Khwajanir (2015) writes:"In 1921 schools were opened for girls and some female students were sent to Turkey for education. The opening of schools for girls and female students being sent to Turkey by Amanullah Khan led to a reaction of the scholars (Mullahs) on the ground of that it is contrary to Sharia.

In 1922, the Ministry of Education was added and Prince Abdur Rahman was appointed as the country's first Minister of Education. In 1923 the scholars (Mullahs) requested from Amanullah Khan the closing of the girls' schools; because according to them, women can only be educated by their intimates in their own homes. It is not permitted for female students to study outside of their homes." (p.2). Thus, it was the king who wanted the girls to be educated like the other Islamic countries which are getting more advance with the educating girls. The king Amanullah tried to convince the Mullahs, who were not aware that there is no ruling in Islam that forbids women from studying. He showed them with examples from other Islamic countries such as India, Mecca, Medina, Egypt, Damascus and Baghdad. However, it was in vain. Hence, he closed the girls' schools for a while to calm them down. And then reopened them again. It was indeed, the opening of girl schools and sending girls to Turkey for education was one of the reasons led finally to the exile of King Amanullah Khan from Afghanistan in 1929" (Khwajanir, 2015, p.2).

According to Dupree (1984) Khan's education for girls and opening the schools for girls did not go uncontested. Clergy and tribal leaders contended that education for women would lead to the breakdown of the family and sexual anarchy, ultimately degrading women. Nothing less than the honour of the nation was at stake (Dupree 1984, 307).

Notwithstanding the fact that King Mohammed Nadir Shah (1929-1933) accommodated the opposition by rolling back many of the progressive programmes passed by his predecessor King Amanullah. Nadir Shah took a more calculated, conservative, a gradual approach to educational development and modernisation. He believed education to be premised on the good will traditions and institutions of the country, meaning that religious instruction was recognised as the most important part of education. Local control of the mosque schools was returned to the mullahs, and the mosque school curriculum continued virtually unaltered. (p.25)

Despite Nadir's conservative approach, he opened public libraries in Herat, Qandahar, and Mazar-i-sharif and reopened schools, but renamed all those named after Amanullah. The teaching of foreign language in government schools

was postponed. (Shirazi, 2007, p. 25). But students were sent abroad. A girls' school was opened as a speciality school for those who wished to study nursing and midwifery 2 years after Nadir took the throne, but academic secondary girls' education did not reappear until 20 years later. (ibid). The prestigious Kabul University was established under his reign in 1932. At its start no female students were allowed and it would take until 1950-51 before faculties for women were created in medicine, the sciences and humanities. (Weiner, M and Banuazizi,A. 1994, p.338).

Sally L. Kitch (2014) argues the legacy of Nadir Shah and effort of Amanullah's education for women as "Western powers touted Nadir Shah as a peacemaker and nation builder and approved of his cautious support for gender-based reforms and sidelined Amanullah supporters, disgruntled Pashtuns, resisters to foreign manipulations and disillusion nationalists and impatient modernist helped to spread rebel against him. (p.68)

Nadir Shah was assassinated in 1933. His son King Zahir Shah (1933-1973) came into power. According to Kitch (2014) "Zahir is remembered to this day for providing education for women, supporting the voluntary removal of the veil to end sex segregation, and framing his secular constitution of 1964 (p.68).

King Zahir Shah adhered to the education framework established by his father, but concentrated on increasing the quantity of schools and the quality of instruction.

Educational expansion occurred as a result of a national budget augmented by private donations and foreign aid, with the total number of primary school students enrolled rising from 60,000 in 1940 to 93,000 in 1945, and the number of teachers rising from 1990 in 1940 to 2564 in 1945. Instruction was provided in both Persian and Pashto languages, and in addition, schools around the country operated on different academic calendars (Shirazi, 2007, p.26). Schools in the northern, cooler regions held their academic recess during the cold winter months to eliminate the need to heat the classrooms. Schools in the warmer southern regions held their recess during the summer months due to the extremely hot summer temperatures. These practices also helped boost enrollment. (ibid)

However, Kitch argues that **“**Zahir Shah’s long reign had done little for social development outside of Kabul. Many considered that had had a pitiable record and failed to give the country any of the attributes of the modern centralised state” (Kitch, 2014, pp.68-69). Zahir Shah was overthrown in 1973 by his cousin Sadar Mohammed Daoud, who dissolved the monarchy.

According to Kitch (2014) “Afghan resistance to the PDPA resembled the widespread rejection of Amanullah’s democratic experiment a half century before, but PDPA reforms were considered even more radical than the kings” (p.70).

By the 1970s, females made up over 60 percent of the 10,000 students (Afghan Ministry of Higher Education, 2011). In the 1960s and 1970s, a significant push for education had taken place for general and higher education joined by political, social and economic reforms. A new ministry of Higher Education and Ideological Training was established in 1977 and all the higher education institutions and vocational institutes were placed under its administration. Previously, all the educational institutions including higher education were regulated by the Ministry of Education. In the late 1970s Afghanistan had a well-developed education system comprising over a million students then already including 20 percent girls in primary, secondary and higher education (Samady 2013, p.3).

According to Mohammad Kazem Shaib (2014) “During the Soviet occupation, Afghan women were a strong part of the academic and professional fabric of society; they studied and served as doctors, engineers, and professors.” (p. 12)

However, HTAC (2003) wrote “In 1978, the Soviet-dominated regime in Afghanistan launched a literacy campaign targeting mainly children and teenagers. From the beginning, the campaign, that was part of the communist political agenda, caused a significant backlash against education, particularly in rural areas, and led to distrust and widespread rejection of educational initiatives undertaken by the government. Afghans residing outside the control of the Kabul government or in refugee camps viewed secular education as a foreign object that contradicted

Islamic values. This perception mellowed over the years as many refugees observed the benefits of education, but the curricula developed for refugee children was highly politicized and filled with war messages" (HTAC, 2003)[61]

Although higher education for women was now within reach, only high- and middle-class families who were living in metropolitan areas could afford to join and move freely without any restrictions as there were a burqa or a male escort (Rostami-Povey, 2007, p. 11). The freedom of movement and access to education to enable relatively wide range of career choices did not extend to the poor rural women. (Ibid). Many educated Afghan women tried to persuade women, their fathers and husbands that women have the right to be educated. The most successful tactic was to refer to the Holly Quran pointing out that it did not advocate a hierarchy in which men were placed above women. Some men allowed their wives and daughters to be educated (Ibid. 12-13).

This positive trend did not endure. As political regimes in Afghanistan toppled and changed, from the Saur revolution in 1978 and the murder of the then President Mohammed Daoud Khan, there started a period of political volatility resulting in first the Soviet occupation, the 1992-1996 civil war among factions of the Mujahideen, and finally the arrival of the Taliban.

What about women's education under the Communist/soviet period?

In 1970 there were 347 individuals with Ph.D., M.A., and M.S. degrees, and 3,593 persons with diplomas in vocational and technical training. These intellectuals held leading positions within and outside the state apparatus and played important roles in formulating polices aimed at furthering accelerating modernization of the country" (p 8). According to Shorish (1998), in 1975 about 12,000 high school graduates competed for about 3,000 places at Kabul University. In 1977, the education infrastructure could not support the educational demands. It was not a case of education inflation; rather it was a result of faulty planning and structural inadequacies. In 1978, there were more than one million students in primary

[61] HTAC stands for Help the Afghan Children. It is an NGO and its Headquaters in the United States of America. This article was published on United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs- UNOCHA's webpage: https://reliefweb.int/report/afghanistan/history-educational-system-afghanistan

and secondary schools and other educational institutions in Afghanistan. There were 152,750 girls and 5,070 female teachers in primary schools. In an attempt to reduce pressure on both the education system and the labour market, the government instituted an examination, the Concord, at the end of the eighth grade (Samady, 2001, P.11). Emadi (2002) asserted “a majority of upper-middle-class intellectuals received a modern education at home, but a significant number studied at institutions of higher education abroad.

In April 1978, President Muhammad Daoud was ousted and Nur Muhammad Taraki, head of the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA), ascended the presidency. Being from the rural area himself, Taraki instituted Marxist style reforms, which emphasized literacy and educational opportunity expansion to farmers, rural dwellers, land reform and women’s rights. Again it created tension with those who had vested interested in maintaining the status quo (Sadat, 2004).

His Prime Minister, Hafizullah Amin, subsequently ousted President Nur Muhammad Taraki in September 1979, rose to power. President Amin, a teacher and a principal at one of the boarding high schools in Kabul, had previously been a PhD. candidate at Columbia University. This was no coincidence seen that Columbia University was one of the main providers of US educational support to Afghanistan before the Soviet invasion in 1979. Shirazi (2007) noted that the “Columbia University team worked closely with the Afghan Ministry of Education for 25 years to reform and “modernise” education in Afghanistan by concentrating its efforts on teacher training and curriculum development. However, Columbia University’s efforts were primarily directed toward boys’ schools and male teacher education”. (p.27)

President Amin proved ruthless. He executed and imprisoned intellectuals and technocrats from all over the political spectrum such as the royalists, religious elements, and rival leftist groups of society, but equally several of his former party members such as President Taraki or his sympathizers”. Needless to say that many opposed his reign and the Mujahidin reignited their call to jihad (holy war) which had started in 1973. The opposition against the regime of Amin strengthened and the Soviets faulted him for the growing rebellion. In December 1979

Soviet tanks rolled into Afghanistan, and President Amin was accused of being an agent of CIA and assassinated.

“Many of the educational materials and practices of this period reflected the bitter divisions and ideological rivalries of the conflict. In June 1978, the Faculty of Letters at the Kabul University underwent a dramatic curriculum and departmental revision. Russian advisors abolished Islamic course, such as History of Islamic Civilisation and History of Islamic Art. The Faculty of Theology was largely liquidated or dispersed among other faculties and what remained was greatly modified. The new curriculum of Theology omitted those suras (chapters) from the Quran dealing with the concept of jihad and stressed the compatibility of Islam and socialism. It also emphasised those suras which mainly deal with human equality and denounce racial segregation” (Shirazi, 2007, p. 28)

Sadat (2004) remarked that the educational system had already gradually been indoctrinated by the USSR since the 1950s due to its funding provided. This evidently was amplified after the Red Army invasion. He, however, contradicts Shirazi on religious education: “Dar-al-Olum, as well the Islamic Studies Department at the university, religious teaching in primary and secondary schools remained intact”. He does agree that religious madrassas and other learning centers became part of the modern educational system.

Robinson and Dixon (2013, p.115) confirm the significant role Soviet advisors and teachers played in the Ministry of Education and at Kabul University. He quotes estimates that in 1982, “no fewer than 140 Soviet specialists and 105 Russian language teachers taught at the university and Kabul technical colleges”.

Mehtarkhan Khwajamir (2016) notes the limitations of the Soviet supported education by remarking that this was foremost focussed on cities under control by the Kabul regime. “There was no formal education in many cities that were out of the central government’s control. About five million Afghan Refugees in Pakistan and Iran and those who opposed the central government have established some schools and tried to continue their own education. In Pakistan, refugees have established some universities besides schools”. (p.3)

This void was taken by U.S. which was as aggressive in inserting its ideology and ensured that its educational support complemented U.S. foreign policy goals. “From 1986 to 1992, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) underwrote the printing of explicitly violent Islamist textbooks for elementary school children that were primarily used by children attending religious schools in refugee camps and in Mujahideen controlled areas. (…) These textbooks instructed children about the letters of the alphabet, emphasising that “*alef* is for Allah, *jim* is for jihad, and *shin* is for Shakir, who conducts *jihad* with his sword. God becomes happy with the defeat of the Russians.” (Coulson, 2004, p.17 cited in Shirazi 2007, p. 29). This education could be rather explicit as Kalashnikov rifles, rocket-propelled grenades, and tanks were depicted in third and fifth grade textbooks. Fourth graders were tested in maths with a question on the speed of a round fired from a Kalashnikov rifle is 800 meters per second: “If a Russian at a distance of 3200 meters from a Mujahid, and that Mujahid aims at the Russian’s head, calculate how may seconds it will take for the bullet to strike the Russian’s forehead? (ibid). The use of these textbooks continued long after the withdrawal of the Soviet troops, helping to establish militant Islamist beliefs in Afghanistan.

In 1980, Babrak Karmal, became the country's fourth president (the third President under the Communist regime). Advances in education continued during his rule. In the 1980s, the government placed emphasis on adult education, literacy programs, higher education, and the other languages of Afghanistan. Part of the reforms included the creation of the Central Institute for the Retraining of Teachers in 1981 and one year later the Kabul Pedagogical Institute was founded. Figures from the 1980's show that about 1,000 licensed Afghan doctors graduated yearly, not including those on student visas in foreign countries. Academic exchanges were established with Eastern Bloc countries as the American and Western exchanges stopped. For instance, in 1978 many West German projects were taken over by East Germany until 1989. The Hotaki high school was built by East Germans.

In 1986, Dr. Muhammad Najibullah, former head of the Afghan intelligence agency, became the country's fifth president. That same year, a new university

was founded in Balkh. President Najibullah, a graduate of the school of medicine at Kabul University realized the need for higher education throughout the country by opening two new universities, the first in Herat (1988) and the second in Kandahar (1991). Albeit the regime was losing its fight against the mujahideen, it was making progress on the front of education and fighting illiteracy (Sadat, 2004)[62]. The enrollment in institutions of higher education increased at an annual rate of four percent with a total enrollment of 14,600 students in 1990, Kabul University had about 10,000 students (sixty percent female) and 620 teachers (Samady, 2001, P.72). "In 1991, there were 577 primary schools with an enrollment of 628,000 pupils including 212,000 girls. Enrollments in secondary education and higher education were 182,000 and 24,000 respectively" (Samady, 2001, p. 77).

Shirazi (2007) is critical on the quality of education provided and the caveats coming with it: “while education was expanding during the second half of the 20th century, there were indications that economic development, modernisation, and foreign aid were not improving the country’s economy or standard of living; Afghanistan became further indebted to its foreign creditors. The aim of the Afghan education system was to prepare Afghan youth for state jobs; it did not give its graduates alternate career paths or survival skills.” (p. 27)

After the Soviets withdrew, there were several years of civil war in Afghanistan, as competing groups struggled to assert control over the state. The destruction the war caused to Afghan infrastructure was immense. Between 70 and 80 percent of schools were destroyed, and many children did not receive schooling during the extended years of conflict or schooling on a consistent basis. The conflict also produced a massive exodus of 3 million Afghans displaced by conflict into neighbouring Iran and Pakistan Afghan children in Pakistan received education in refugee camps while Afghan children in Iran attended state-run schools, albeit with some difficulty in gaining admission to the Iranian schools. Stability would come to Afghanistan in the latter part of the 1990s with the rise of the Taliban, at at tremendous social costs. (p.29)

[62]https://reliefweb.int/report/afghanistan/history-education-afghanistan

During the Taliban time in 1999, the enrolment in primary education had dramatically scaled back to 811,500 children, of which only 7 percent were girls. Enrolment in secondary and higher education was limited and tertiary schooling was ineffective, even oftentimes interrupted by long periods of closure (Samady 2013, p.3). Before the Taliban, there had been fourteen institutions of higher education in Afghanistan. By 2001, the number had been reduced to seven (Abdulbaqi, 2009, p.103).

Due to the protracted war, insecurity and a malfunctioning economy, many qualified educators had left the country and hardly anyone returned to rebuild the country under the Taliban. Abdulbaqi explained that a "lack of teachers, outdated syllabi, non-availability of books, virtual detachment from the educational institutions of other countries, lack of educational and research environment and low salaries that were rarely paid on time were other challenges that the higher education institutes faced during the Taliban period and earlier during Mujahideen's period" (ibid).

7.3. Post-Taliban International Investment in female education

Starting 2001 after the toppling of the Taliban, the international community invested heavily in education in generic terms and education for girls specifically, in yet another attempt to 'modernise' and secularise Afghanistan. The 2004 Constitution was very explicit about the importance of education for the 'new' Afghanistan. Article 43 stated that (1) Education is the right of all citizens of Afghanistan, which shall be provided up to the level of the B.A. (lisâns), free of charge by the state. (2) The state is obliged to devise and implement effective programs for a balanced expansion of education all over Afghanistan, and to provide compulsory intermediate level education. (3) The state is also required to provide the opportunity to teach native languages in the areas where they are spoken. In particular, it recognised the importance of providing education to those who had historically been excluded for cultural reasons. Thus Article 44 stated that "The state shall devise and implement effective programs for balancing and promoting of education for women, improving of education of nomads and elimination of illiteracy in the country."

By 2020, more than three million girls enrolled in primary and secondary schools, and 62,000 females attended public universities.[63] The 2020 Human Development Report indicated that the expected years of schooling for an Afghan child rose from 2.6 years in 1990, to 8.1 years in 2005 and 10.2 by 2019. However, eradicating the huge gender inequalities in education access could not happen overnight. Just over 13 percent of adult women reached at least a secondary level of education compared to 36.9 percent of their male counterparts.[64]

With the international community opening the Afghan economy, multiple private schools and universities started operations. The top private university was the not-for-profit and co-educational American University of Afghanistan (AUAF) located in Kabul, close to the ruins of former Presidential Palace. Established in 2006 in Kabul with a grant provided by USAID, tellingly the university was founded with the idea of implementing an American higher education model. It offered both undergraduate and MBA programs to an approximate 1,700 full- and part-time students. Partnering with prominent universities in the USA, it produced several Fulbright Scholars.[65] Despite the subsidies from the US Government, its tuition fees of the American University were prohibitive for the average Afghan as were its values.

In 2013, the International Center for Afghan Women's Economic Development (ICAWED) was set up at the AUAF with a US grant and in 2018 a new dormitory inaugurated, funded by USAID and designed to house 200 female students[66]. Its ambitions were sky-high as announced on the website of Friends of AUAF: “The Center will serve to coordinate international and Afghan efforts to advance the role of women in the nation’s economy. It will promote collaboration on women’s

[63] See: “Promote”, USAID, September 24, 2021. https://www.usaid.gov/afghanistan/promote
[64] See: UNDP(Nov. 17, 2020)The Next Frontier: Human Development and the Anthropocene. Briefing note for countries on the 2020 Human Development Report: Afghanistan”, Human Development Report 2020,.
[65] http://www.aaicu.org/the-american-university-of-afghanistan-auaf/
[66] See: International Center for Afghan Women's Economic Development, September 11, 2011. https://www.federalgrants.com/International-Center-for-Afghan-Womens-Economic-Development-30830.html

economic empowerment with academic, business, and government partners."[67] A showcase of the US efforts of women emancipation in Afghanistan, the 5,500-square-meter building housed computer labs, video conference facilities, a radio broadcast studio, training and classrooms, research facilities, a business accelerator, a 200-seat auditorium, a cultural center, and the Laura Bush Library and Resource Center (VanWie, June 15, 2013).

Despite all these efforts to improve higher education, in present day Afghanistan it "remains a fragile area, hugely dependent upon foreign assistance, having meager resources and feeble infrastructure (Abdulbaqi, 2009, p. 99).

Abdulbaqi (2009) warns about the dependence on Foreign Assistance "Education in Afghanistan is completely dependent on foreign assistance which naturally has many disadvantages. Primarily, the foremost considerations of donors would be their own priorities and goals rather than the needs of the locals. However, it would be counterproductive if the aspirations of the denizens are not fulfilled in their own country. Another hitch in an aid driven system is that it is structurally vulnerable, given that it would go awry as soon funds dry out" (pp.112-113).

Therefore, Abdulbaqi (2009) recommended in his paper on "Higher Education in Afghanistan" that "keeping the ground realities in mind the Afghan government needs to reshape the imported systems and develop policies for reducing the dependence on foreign aid. Relying on the internal resources for running the system and setting the priorities and goals is the only viable solution to many such problems (p.113)

The then number three ranked private university, Bakthar University, was my employer for a period of time. It could not count on the same largesse as the American University and it chronically lacked resources. "In 2005, 3 million school children and 4 million high school students enrolled and 70,000 teachers returned to

[67] See: "Update on AUAF's International Center for Afghan Women's Economic Development", Friends of the American University in Afghanistan, 2012. https://friendsofauaf.org/news/update-on-auafs-international-center-for-afghan-womens-economic-development/

work. However, there are shortages of teachers, books, tables, chairs, papers and pencils, let alone other equipment. University courses have closed because of lack of teachers and equipment." (Rostami-Povey, 2007, p.65)

Importantly, the system of higher education being promoted was not in conformity with what many regarded as the traditional and religious value system of the country, not just because it was being funded by external actors but also because it actively promoted co-education, access for women, and a liberal, Western-style curriculum. This would always be an area of political contention, and so it proved when the Taliban returned to power in August 2021.

7.4. The interrupted education of professional women

Poverty and vicinity to educational institutions, but equally insecurity and patriarchy, a misguided interpretation of Islam, parental support, persistence and intellectual capacity, are among the factors that determine whether Afghan women are able to succeed educationally and later on professionally. The vast majority of the professionals I was able to interview came from a middle-class background benefitting from the financial resources, limited as these were, and a tolerant value system towards education for girls.

On the negative side was that the years of education for the interviewees were interrupted through insecurity, conflict and war. Haqmal, sketched the situation as follows: "the lack of security has not only been an impediment to development and rehabilitation in Afghanistan, it has also proved a serious obstacle to women's advancement. Many women and girls are unable to go to school, and some have been murdered or suffered physical and psychological violence in schools" (Haqmal, 2013, p. 221). A survey quoted by the Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack, indicated that even in 2018, security concerns and violence were the most commonly cited obstacles to girls' education (UNHCR and refworld, 2018). Skipping grades was thus rather normal as schools could be closed for periods of time, as parents moved with their kids across borders to find safety, or as the capacities among students and teachers was uneven due to all the above.

As successful as they are now in their own professional field, among my interviewees quite a few had had a discontinuous and interrupted educational experience, having had to skip grades. For instance Farzana, President of the Afghan Business Women Network as well as the Head of External Communications of the People's Islamic Unity Party, jumped from grade 10 to 12. Others who skipped grades were MP Mrs. Hanifa, Judge Mrs. Anar, Dr. Hasinah, and Ms. Kobra. Mrs. Hanifah explained**:** "I finished my education in 10 years. I was able to finish earlier than the others. Normally, school year is 12 years to complete. But I was very intelligent and thus I could jump to the higher class and finished the high school in 10 years' time." (Interviewee MP Mrs. Hanifah, Farah Province). A similar story for interviewee Judge Ms. Anar: "I entered the school when I was 5. A normal school term is 12 years. But I made it in 10 years. I graduated after 10 years of study."

One interviewee started working at a very young age for her parents' carpet company in Kabul. The company was established during the Taliban period while schools were closed. Her father insisted though to have his daughters educated and taught his girls at home. Even though she did not provide a detailed account of her study journey, when the schools opened, she explained, "Then, we both, my sister and me left the company and joined the high school in Kabul. We attended 8th grade. I jumped the grades. From 10th to 12th grade." (Interviewee Ms. Farzana, business woman and politician). In high school, she joined the university and studied law, graduating in 2012.

This broken and fragmented educational experience, in which young women were forced to play catch up and demonstrate considerable resilience, was influenced not just by regime change but also the pressures of conflict and exile. Interviewee Dr. Hasinah moved between Afghanistan and Pakistan affecting her studies: "I was awarded as best student in grade 1. When I was in grade 3, we moved back to Afghanistan. I passed the grade 4 exam. I got a class promotion and I started grade 5 instead. Grade 5, 6 and 7, I studied in Afghanistan. Then, we moved back to Pakistan. So, I studied in Pakistan for grade 7, 8 and 9. In grade 9, again I was promoted to grade 10. There is a system that you can jump if you are able. It was very challenging for me. But I did it." Similarly, interviewee Ms. Kobra jumped grade levels at an impressive pace. "Here, when we came

back, everything was so new to me. I went to school, class 9. I jumped to 9 without attending class 8. I was good and passed grade 9. I skipped grades again and jumped to grade 12. I got certificated after passing grade 12. It was very valuable for me." (Ms. Kobra, UNWOMEN). It is clear that these interviewees were able to cope with uncertain educational provision and even excel.

Indeed, that discontinuity may have offered opportunity as well as challenges for those in exile. Most Afghans were excluded from accessing education in Pakistan, where the system was largely private. Most were educated by international agencies such as UNICEF and different Pakistani and Afghan NGOs, or via the madrassas, the religious schools. (Rostami-Povey, 2007, p.89). Some of my interviewees got their education in Pakistan. Despite the many hardships, they faced in Pakistan as refugees, they returned to Afghanistan after the fall of the Taliban and ended up working in different international offices thanks to the education they had from Pakistan. International refugee agencies play a very important role in conflict situations in the education and empowerment of women, and often regard this as a priority for some of the reasons noted above: that women's literature is linked to child health outcomes, improved reproductive health, and, of course, the ability to choose and development an autonomous livelihood strategy. Whilst the Taliban made it near impossible for girls to study, these international actors provided the education that was key to professional pathways for many women. As the extensive literature on gender and conflict shows, crises and political discontinuities not only disrupt women's lives, they also offer new possibilities when displacement breaks down cultural norms and traditional gender roles.

7.5. Ethnicity and educational rights for women

As already noted, the ability of women and girls to develop their capacities through, for example, education is shaped by many factors, not least ethnic identity and culture, which continue to be very salient in Afghanistan. The commonalities of women's oppression such as subordination, exploitation and objectification are not sufficient on their own to understand exclusion. Such analysis "should

go together with race and ethnic identity, nationality, class and sexuality since they have become increasingly important in feminist work" (Bhopal, 1997, p24)

Afghanistan is still largely a tribal society, with ethnic groups and languages recognised within the 2004 Constitution. It is estimated that the population consists of Pashtun 42 per cent, Tajik 27 per cent, Hazara 9 per cent, Uzbek 9 per cent, Turkmen 3 per cent, Baluchi 2 per cent and other groups, such as the nomad Kuchis, making up the remaining 8 per cent.[68] A UNESCO paper published in 1991, at the time of the Communist-backed regime of Dr. Najibullah and just before the country fell into Mujahideen hands in 1992, noted how these ethnic divisions translated into very variable opportunities for women, even if they were educated. It noted that in the 1980s, women from certain ethnic groups rarely appeared in office work and public sector employment, because of local cultural interpretations of Islamic instructions and traditions. (Rahimi, 1991, p.56). Such discrimination still persists. During my work at an INGO in Afghanistan I saw how salient ethnicity continues to be even within urban workplaces. A young female Pashtun colleague was teased on the choice of her boyfriend, from the Hazara ethnicity. The Hazaras are of Asian descent, and look different from the "Aryan" Pashtun. When professional employment possibilities are shaped by macro factors such as racial discrimination, then girls' access to education will not be a straightforward pathway to professional working lives.

Nearly three decades later, a 2019 UNICEF report explored the equity profile for adolescent girls. It found that poverty was the main obstacle for school attendance throughout the country. Although school attendance is in principle free, the indirect costs such as school supplies, clothes and transportation can be prohibitive. In poor households with multiple children, decisions on school attendance will favour boys not solely due to tradition and religious beliefs but equally because of future employment opportunities. Whilst the report avoided explicit reference to the politically sensitive notion of ethnicity, it used location as a proxy.

[68] See: World Directory of Minorities and Indigenous Peoples – Afghanistan, Minority Rights Group International, June 2019. https://minorityrights.org/country/afghanistan/

It found that location played a significant role when explaining girls' school enrolment. The Southern provinces are dominantly Pashtun while, for instance, Tajiks, Uzbeks and Turkmens dominate in the North, whilst Interesting Tajiks are proportionally more present in the urban centres. Mapping relative income with school enrolment, it was evident that among the poor, provinces in the South and East have a lower proportion of children enrolled, compared to other provinces. Contrary to expectations, "some of the provinces with the highest secondary net attendance rates for girls are also amongst those with the highest poverty rates" (p.10). In contrast, "some provinces with the lowest secondary net attendance rates for girls are amongst those with the lowest poverty rates".[69] This implies that other factors than poverty are significant determinants whether adolescent girls enrol in school.

These other factors include social norms, tradition and religious beliefs in the Pashtun dominated Southern and Eastern provinces. According to the Afghanistan Central Statistical Office, 'family disapproval is one of the three main reasons why girls and boys aged 6-24 years discontinue schooling, and this problem is more common among girls than boys (31 per cent of girls versus only 1.5 per cent of boys)".[70]

In my own interview data of 21 informants, 13 informants were Tajik, four were Hazara, two were Pashtun, one was Uzbek, and one refused to identify her ethnic group, claiming only to be Afghan. The majority of my participants were educated and held public office positions. Among these 61.9% were Tajik, 19.04% were Hazara, 9.52% were Pashtun, 4.76% were Uzbek and 4.76% claimed to be ethnic Afghan women in public office.

Table 7.1: Educated professional Afghan women and their ethnicity

Ethnicity	Number	Percentage
Tajik	13	61.9%

[69] See: UNICEF (December 22, 2019) "Afghanistan, Education Equity Profile for Adolescent Girls", UN Girls' Education Initiative.
[70] See: Afghanistan Living Conditions Survey (ACLS) 2016-17. National Risk and Vulnerability Assessment, Central Statistics organisation, Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, May 07, 2018.

Hazara	4	19.04%
Pashtun	2	9.52%
Uzbek	1	4.76%
Not classified	1	4.76%

One interviewee, belonging to the Tajik community, regarded support for girls' education as dependent on ethnic group identity:, "We were living in Kabul Shashdarak town. That time people in our neighbourhood, girls — particularly Pashtun — were not sent to school" (Interviewee Judge Mrs. Fahima, Ministry of Women's Affairs).

However, another interviewee, who also originated from the Tajik ethnic group, disagreed. In her view, family and family support are far more determinant for access to education than ethnicity. She was very emphatic that what mattered was whether the family itself had experience of schooling. "If the family is educated, they will be broad-minded. Even in a Tajik family, they don't let their girls go for education or work". She also referred to pragmatic and logistical factors such as the geographical proximity to a school, which varied greatly by region. People who are living in the cities get open access to schools but people who live away from the cities, there are no schools" (Interviewee Ms. Pari, translator).

Besides being religious, the Afghan society binds itself with certain traditions and values. Some internal and external policymakers assume that Afghan society can be transformed into a westernized society by implementing co-education, organizing concerts and unnecessary intermingling of boys and girls, and changing dress codes. These approaches do not work in accordance with Afghan culture and society.

In this situation, the students attending these institutions will be despised by their fellow countrymen and the education system will cause a clash which is not in the interest of an already war-torn Afghanistan. In fact, if these policies keep people from sending their children, especially girls, from schools and universities, it

would leave the majority of the population uneducated and illiterate. The government, and international “caretakers” of the Afghan women, therefore, needs to remove the taint of notoriety of educational institutions, especially the higher educational institutions. Contrary, there is seemingly no way to counter these trends and activities because it would be viewed as working against the spirit of freedom and democracy. While the objections to these trends are harshly repressed, protests against this generally perceived un-Islamic atmosphere are still witnessed in Kabul

Even if such traditions do take roots in a couple of big cities, the society at large will resist it. The government needs to realize this ideological dimension and cater for the aspirations of the people in order to avoid further segmentation.

7.6. Conclusion

Afghanistan’s different governments influenced the education system in different ways, varying between conservative to more liberal modern western approaches, as
well as changes in the language of instruction. (Yazdani

This chapter explores some major factors such as cultural, ethnicity, economic, political, social and security factors affecting women and educational opportunities in Afghanistan. I have given specific matters in terms of education for the professional women who I interviewed with regards to their journey to getting the higher education.

A study of women and educational opportunities in Afghanistan would be highly significant at this crucial juncture of history. And until now, there is no stability and a tiny little progress of the past twenty years they gain is putting at risk now since there is no certainty, funding and aid economy has dried out. So, firstly, the financial level is threatened. Secondly, the policy level; Taliban’s education policy will be a big dodgy for Afghan women’s education. Now that the country is in the hands of Taliban, their educational policy is no guarantee that women will be allowed in education they desired despite Taliban leaders are promising that they won’t repeat the same mistakes of the past, they urged the universities to make a partition between male and female students. Gender segregation is assured

already. Thirdly, human resources such as teachers and educators will be in shortage of supply to continue educating Afghan women. Since 15 August, 2021 when the Taliban took over the country, many educated people tried to flee the country as soon as they can. Brain-drain will be a massive level with this second time Taliban regime. However, many people in Afghan education sector are hoping they will find a good reasonable ground to continue with the education they have gained and established over the last two decades.

In this chapter, I have examined the educational opportunities of Afghan women from the perspectives of ethnicity, family, socio-economic status and situation, where and how they obtain support from the family, and the type of challenges women experienced.

Undoubtedly, developing institutions in a country like Afghanistan where war has been a continuous way of life for years on end is an uphill task, yet the importance of education in general and higher education in particular demands complete mobilization of government machinery as it is an investment that the future generations will be able to build on. Therefore, the Afghan scholars, think tanks, educationists and academicians need to deliberate upon the overall dynamics of today's Afghanistan, current system and status of education in general and higher education in particular to devise a comprehensive education policy. Keeping in mind the contours of this policy, they need to develop a pragmatic and concrete action plan so that the people working for the cause of education reach a clear understanding of educational goals and steps to be taken. This exercise will give the whole nation a sense of direction. The policy should also guide the government towards to taking revolutionary steps, allocate most of its resources for this department, and utilize the available resources wisely. Last but not least, nothing constructive can be fully realized as long as Afghanistan is in a state of war and education is no exception. Therefore, it is necessary to bring the war to an end and establish peace on a solid foundation so that growth and development of the educational system can be focused.

History of foreign occupation of Afghanistan reveals the fact that development of any sector, let alone the education sector, is not possible without lasting peace which can only be attained if the external forces withdraw from the country.

‘No freedom for Afghan women’, as stated by my interviewee Ms. Sita, reflects the Afghan situation. It is clear that gender freedom to all is not within reach as well as no security and certainty. Even the progress made by those successful in public life is hard to attain and comes at a heavy cost. Professional success for Afghan women is an exception- an aberration, not the rule. For instance, the simplest of issues, mixing with men in a working place, is seriously frowned upon.

Not only is Afghan society male-dominated, but an extreme form of patriarchy is exercised. How significant are the ethnicity, family and socio-economic status of family for women in order to get access to education and public life? In essence, the fate of women depends on how their father sees fit, and once married, how the husband sees fit. Traditions, customs, and cultural limitations are restrictive factors, keeping women out of public life and restrained within the private sphere.

In this traditional value-system, it takes a patriarch to defeat patriarch-ism. If an enlightened father and later husband allows, determined women can benefit from an education and even work in the public eye. Ethnicity, economics, and location are factors abetting these decisions. For instance, there are significant differences in how the female agency is valued among for instance Pashtun or Turkmen or Hazara ethnic groups.

Subsequently, urban versus rural is another variable influencing the status of women. Urban areas are more exposed to cosmopolitan thoughts, if not only through better access to education, whereas the rural areas, located in the periphery and not benefitting from the same exposure, tend to abide by traditional norms.

In addition to that, education demands money and poor households cannot afford to send their daughters to school for an extended duration. Instead, girls are for many poor families an investment in a very contrasting manner – not in education but in a ‘bride price’ when selling her off for marriage. This evidently is a very different story for the more affluent. A rich and well-educated family

has greater will and capacity - even vision – to support a girls' education and, later on, their work in professional fields. No surprise then that many of successful women in public life are originating from at least middle-class households.

Yet taking the mitigating factors in account, it demands hard work, perseverance and sacrifice for any of these successful women to row against the traditional tide. One only can hope that this time in history, they are trendsetters sustaining the reforms initiated several times before, each previously ending in failure

Chapter 8 - Gender, Economy, Labour Market and the Public Sphere in Afghanistan

World Bank statistics show that, until 2015, the female labour force participation rate in Afghanistan was hovering below 16 percent - one of the lowest in the world.[71] The Stockholm International Peace Research Institute notes the far-reaching implications for the country's wellbeing of the limited participation of half of the eligible working population in Afghanistan's economy and calls it a missed opportunity "for socioeconomic inclusivity, for poverty reduction, as well as for overall growth and productivity" (SIPRI, 2015 p.38).[72] It cites the sobering estimate from UN Women that only 5 per cent of businesses in Afghanistan are female-owned.

This chapter examines the factors, over time that have shaped women's access to the labour market and to broader public participation in Afghanistan. At different points in the last few decades women have either been highly constrained in their capacity to set up their own businesses, seek employment and take part in public life, or seen opportunities open up for them in the more liberalising periods. Economic and public participation is a core element of the gender orders that have been established under different political regimes. Thus the chapter begins by outlining the gender norms conditioning women's access to the labour market and economic activity under those different political regimes. It also examines women's more general access to the public sphere, because it is this acceptance of women's agency beyond the private, closed sphere of the home that enables them to access education and employment, and develop a professional identity as independent actors.

8.1. Women's involvement in the economy during the monarchy (1880-1973)

[71] https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.TLF.CACT.FE.ZS?contextual=min&end=2019&locations=AF&start=1990&view=chart

[72] Richard Ghiasy, Jiayi Zhou and Henrik Hallgren, 'Afghanistan's Private Sector: Status and Way Forward', SIPRI Publications, October 2015

Economic modernisation started with the reign of King Abdur Rahman Khan (1880-1901). There are few reliable statistics on women's participation in the Afghan economy from this époque and data are largely anecdotal. The Queen, Bobo Jan, was a liberal woman who challenged the traditional and cultural norms and practices of her time, for example by appearing in public without a veil. While her acts were considered rebellious in traditional circles, she could count on the support of her husband. More importantly, her influence on her husband changed the landscape of the general perception of Afghan women, their position in the society and their agency in public life. As such, she was a role model of the liberation movement of Afghan women.

Another iconic figure of modernisation for Afghan women was Queen Soraya, the spouse of Ghazi Amanullah Khan, the sovereign of Afghanistan from 1919 until his abdication in 1929, first as Emir and after 1926 as King. Both of these queens also engaged in political discussion alongside their husbands and accompanied them in their missions to other nations, carrying out a high-profile role in the public sphere (Nabi-Amanullah, 2012, p.6). Both royal spouses presented themselves modern and stylish in public, although an open question remains as to whether ordinary women of their time could risk doing the same. As Ishani Desai (2018) remarks, "Even with political will, these policies are often insufficient to change deeply embedded gender stereotypes—such is the reality for Afghanistan."[73]

According to Keddie (2007, p. 117)), after the forced abdication of the reformist King Amanullah in 1929, it was not until the 1950s that reforms were attempted again, with a moderately reformed marriage law. King Nadir Shah (1929-1933) and his successor son, King Zahir Shah (1933-1973) showed little to no interest in the fate of women. Nancy Dupree (1981, p.2) noted that 'for the next 30 years, under Nadir Shah and his son Zahir Shah, until 1959, women continued to remain in seclusion and wore the chadari (veil)"

[73]Ishani Desai and Li Li, 'Analyzing Female Labor Force Participation In Afghanistan – Identifying the Key Barriers that Prevent Women from Entering the Labor Force', Women's Policy Journal, Women in Post-Conflict Governance, Nov. 2018, p. 34-39. https://wpj.hkspublications.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/23/2018/11/DesaiLi.pdf

Traditional gender norms prescribed that men are expected to be the primary or sole earner and providers for the family. “Prevailing norms, including men’s biased attitude towards the role of women in the family and in society, have resulted in a weak legal framework, low autonomy, and low mobility for women”. (Ishani Desai and Li Li, 2018, p.37).

Due to these societal impediments and the undervalued economic and social contribution of ordinary women and their involvement in national economy, little historic literature or records are available. Historians have depicted the period as one of investing in the modernization of women’s rights, but with no attention or acknowledgement of the contribution of women to this liberalization. The focus has been primarily on the men, like Amanullah's modernisation processes that included the emancipation of women (including removing the veil), compulsory education, some coeducational schools, monogamy, and women dressing in Western style especially within Kabul. Governance and effective policy were crucial in shaping opportunities for women yet the agency and experience of women themselves has been overlooked.

8.2. The rule of Daoud Khan as Prime Minister (1953 – 1963) and President (1973 – 1978)

While the early Kings, within their efforts to unify and modernize the Afghan State, pushed a reformist agenda promoting women rights and an equal gender order, the last two royal sovereigns did not actively pursue this. The big step forward came under the governance of Daoud Khan. First as Prime Minister and later as President, disposing his uncle King Mohammed Zahir Shah in bloodless revolt in July 1973, Daoud led the country and its economy during the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s until his assassination in 1978. During Daoud’s stewardship, Afghanistan was seen as a progressive state and women enjoyed freedom and modernity, especially in the urban centres. John Blake (2009) describes in how the 1970s, Afghan women could be seen out in the public sphere, famously wearing miniskirts in the streets of Kabul, which was seen as so cosmopolitan that it was known as the ‘Paris of Central Asia’” . In the 1960s, 1970s, and even 1980s, the beautiful mountain terrain was on the hippie trail and brought through the country many foreigners, including young women who

modelled a certain form of emancipation and independence. Skaine (2007, p. 11) notes the impact of this modernisation and secularisation on women's access to the public sphere and public space: "in the 1960s and 1970s, middle- and upper-class women in Kabul had access to education and employment and moved freely around the city without chaddari and mahram".

Western educated, Daoud aimed to navigate the geopolitical rivalry between the Soviet Union and the USA steering the country as a member of the Non-Alignment Movement. During the 1973 coup against King Zahir Shah, the rhetoric became populist and had alarmed the USA. As a reaction, the CIA set up at least one training camp, in Attock, Pakistan, for training a potential force of opposition guerrillas under the leadership of Gulbuddin Hikmatyar (Stork, 1980, p.25). Both strategy and the name Hikmatyar would reappear with a vengeance in future years.

Daoud was an ardent Pashtun nationalist, bringing him repeatedly in conflict with neighbouring Pakistan, a close ally of Washington, and an autocrat who had neither patience for the traditional conservative views of the Afghans, nor for the liberal expression of opinion aired during the prime-ministership of Shah Mahmud, his predecessor (Rasanayagam, 2005, p.27). Despite these characteristics he was determined to move Afghanistan's economic and social development forward. When Daoud took over as prime minister, Afghanistan lacked not only the necessary social structure and institutions for modern economic activities but also the requisite managerial and technical capabilities and was in need of external economic and military assistance. Dupree (1979, p.37) remarks that from 1953 to 1963, under King Mohammed Zahir Shah, Daoud brought about rapid change as prime minister, especially in the development of the country's economic infrastructure and in certain social institutions.

With the objective of transforming agrarian Afghanistan into a modern nation, Daoud pushed forward multiple economic and social reforms. The period was characterised by consistent development and modernisation. This rapid progress also benefitted women, with significant effect in the urban areas (Burki, 2013, p.109).

Encouraged by the new openness educated urban women began to call for gender equality and job opportunities for women. Daoud encouraged women's emancipation through greater participation of women in the public sphere (Burki, 2013, p.108).

The historian Louis Dupree noted that “1957 saw women work on the Radio Afghanistan staff, in the factories, in other workplaces, accompany their husband to oversea- posts, compose a delegation to a conference of Asian women in Ceylon, and in 1958 a woman delegate represented Afghanistan in the United Nations" (cited in Skaine, 2002, p.15). By the 1960s and 1970s, it was not any longer uncommon to see women serving as ministers and heads of organizations (Skaine, 2002, p.16), as the gender regimes in the areas of formal employment and state service became more egalitarian.

This trend continued when Daoud Khan ousted his cousin, King Mohammed Zahir Shah, in 1973 and became President of Afghanistan (1973-1978). He forbade child marriage, declared the dowry to be the property of the wife, established a family court headed by a female judge, and recruited women into the police and armed forces (Skaine, 2002, p.15). Women had been given the right to vote in the 1964 constitution and Daoud saw their votes as an important element of his support. Thus he promoted their involvement in politics as well as in economy. Following the change to the constitution three women were elected as members of parliament, while three were elected to the senate, whilst in the late 1960s two women were given cabinet position. [74] In January 1977, four women were elected to the legislative assembly (Emadi, 2002, p.73).

Daoud Khan was not afraid of challenging traditional mullahs and he organised debates to demonstrate his cultural supremacy. Daoud sent Musa Sharif, an expert on Islam and graduate of the al-Azhar University in Cairo with a law degree from Columbia University, to challenge clerics. When the latter failed to provide the Quranic texts demanding that women's faces should be covered, Daoud felt vindicated, and his modernisation plan continued unabated. (Burki, 2013, p.109). The President organised a ceremony on Mother’s Day, June 14,

[74] https://content.ucpress.edu/chapters/11529.ch01.pdf

1977, to honour the most outstanding women who were widowed or abandoned, without education or outside support, and had managed to rear and educate several sons and daughters (Emadi, 2002, p.73).

However, not all measures had the impact aimed for. The marriage reform law in 1977 was little enforced. (Keddie, 2007, p.118). However, the fruits of Daoud's emancipatory work can still be felt today. Among my interviewees, three judges and one lawyer currently working as a legal advisor for the United Nations, began working during the Daoud administration. Daoud's regime demonstrated how Afghanistan was capable of treating professional women with the respect and freedom they deserved.

Many of the older generation in Afghanistan see pre-1979 as being the most peaceful era when there was slow and steady economic progress. Perhaps this really was the golden era for Afghans before the many years of war and destruction and the near-collapse of the state. "Many Afghans recall, however imperfectly, the pre-1978 era, when the country was at peace and the state-built factories, infrastructure, and other job-creating modern assets and distributed coupons to government workers. (The costs were largely borne by foreign aid)." (Fishstein and Amiryar, 2005, p.384) During the two decades from 1950 to 1970; the Soviets accounted for 50 percent of Afghanistan's aid (Jalalzai, 2003, p.65).

8.3. The rule of the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA)

The fall from power of Daoud in 1978 and the ascension of the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) government added Afghanistan firmly within the Soviet sphere but it did not end Daoud's earlier attempts gender equality and promotion of women's rights. The communist-oriented PDPA was established in January 1965 and had women's equality included in its political programme. Many of the older especially urban generation judge pre-1979 as the most peaceful era benefitting from slow but steady economic progress.

Although the PDPA was accused of being a failed revolution from above, it did try to raise the status of those in the lowest classes of society and direct them towards modernisation. The PDPA's women organization united a great number of democratic women around its platform and played a major role in bringing together the working women of Afghanistan. The then existing Women's Welfare Association was considered to be aloof from the real issues faced by Afghan women and run by aristocratic women for personal interests. (Dupree, 1981, p.7, cited in Rahimi, 1991, p.17).

A parallel Democratic Organization of Afghan Women to the PDPA had been set up in May 1965 (Keddie, 2007, p.118). Originally called the 'Khalq Organization of Afghanistan Women' (KOAW) it was soon after renamed the Women's Democratic Organization of Afghanistan (WDOA). This WDOA vocally supported the Russian invasion late 1979 (Skaine, 2002, p.17). Engaged in social and educational work it employed approximately 510 teachers and 60 supervisors and proposed to train 6,000 army soldiers to read and write within a year. (Emadi, 2002, p.100)

Once in power, the PDPA continued diligently to alter women's role in society, from being seen as having a solely reproductive function to being encouraged to productive members of society in the public sphere. It launched many reform programmes including a literacy campaign. In 1984 the state claimed that around 1,048,000 persons had learned to read and write in the first five years of the ‘democratic’ regime (Emadi, 2002, p.84).

8.4. Women’s emancipation under the Soviet Union occupation (1979-1989)

The leader of the Saur Revolution of 1978, Hafizullah Amin, was an Afghan communist politician and revolutionary. He co-founded the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan and, after the assassination of President Daoud Khan, ruled the country as General Secretary of the People's Democratic Party from September 1979 until his own murder in December 1979. Politically these were turbulent times. Already opposed by traditional clergy on the countryside, the harsh land reform amplified the animosity against the PDPA within the wealthy caste of

feudal land owners and mercantilists (Fishstein and Amiryar 2015). This building popular resistance in rural Afghanistan had the potential to endanger the stability of this new Soviet ally. It is assumed that the uncompromising Hafizullah Amin was murdered by those close to the Russian intelligence agency, the KGB. The Soviet tanks rolled into Afghanistan on December 24 1979 under the pretext of upholding the Soviet-Afghan Friendship Treaty concluded earlier in 1978.

Babrak Karmal became the new President of a pro-Soviet government, and his immediate task was to regain popular legitimacy of the PDPA by reaching out to the mounting resistance. Even the national flag's colours and design altered from the socialist's red colour and design, to an Islamic colour scheme. He retracted many controversial measures implemented by his predecessor by guaranteeing personal property and individual freedom, the conditional restoration of confiscated property, granting of concessions to religious leaders, and the release of some political prisoners. Karmal was to rule the country from 1979 to 1986.

In relation to the emancipation of women, the PDPA stayed on course. During his short reign Hafizullah Amin had appointed four women to the committee assigned to write a new constitution (Emadi, 2002, p.105). The post-Amin period continued appointments of women to key positions in the government, army and police. Kabul in the 1980s continued to be “a cosmopolitan city. Artists and hippies flocked to the capital. Women studied agriculture, engineering and business at the city’s university. Afghan women held government jobs.” There were female members of parliament; women drove cars, travelled and went on dates, without needing to ask a male guardian for permission[75]" (Lévesque, 2016).

The KOAW, renamed as the Women’s Democratic Organization of Afghanistan (WDOA), was the only women’s organisation that supported the Soviet invasion and worked to rally women in support of the Kabul regime (Emadi, 2002, p.106). WDOA’s strength was its convening power and by 1984, it had succeeded in

[75] Lévesque, L. (March 09, 2016). “From Afghanistan to Syria: Women’s Rights, War Propaganda and the CIA”. https://www.globalresearch.ca/from-afghanistan-to-syria-womens-rights-war-propaganda-and-the-cia/5329665

uniting approximately 30,000 women in 669 primary organisations throughout the country while also mobilizing ‘more than 80,000 country women in social production of whom 17,000 were trade union members.” (Emadi, 2002, p.107)

Rebranded again in 1986 as the All Afghanistan Women’s Council (AAWC) and a year later as Afghanistan Women Council (AWC), article 1 of its charter reads:

> “[It] is a mass social organization, which unites, in its ranks, on a voluntary basis, the women of different classes and strata of the society, all nationalities, tribes and ethnic groups residing in the country for realizing the requirements of the socio-economic development of women. The [AWC] shall carry its activities under the leadership of PDPA and under the National Front of the DRA [Democratic Republic of Afghanistan]. It is the active executor of the policy of the revolutionary state in solving the problems of women, and functions in all-embracing manner, for attracting the women to the process of work and the new life.” (Emadi, 2002, p.107)

Babrak Karmal stepped down as PDPA General Secretary in 1986, and was replaced by another Moscow favourite, PDPA Politburo Member Najibullah, also referred to as Dr. Najib. Meanwhile, the USA had stepped up its support to the rebellious Mujahideen operating from Pakistan and dragging the Soviet Union in a conflict it hardly could afford financially. In 1989, the Soviet troops left Afghanistan while providing economic and military support to the new Afghan leader. Under heavy domestic pressure, Najibullah promoted National Reconciliation, reviewing the Constitution and making Islam the official religion, abolishing the one-party system, inviting business people to return to Afghanistan, and engaging in a dialogue with the Mujahideen. It would prove too late and not enough to turn the negative economic and political tides. In 1992, Dr. Najib would suffer a similar fate a many of his predecessors, a violent death.

With regards to women’s emancipation, Najibullah stayed the same positive course as initiated by then President Daoud Khan and continued by the PDPA. He appointed two women to cabinet posts in May 1990 and the number of women in various branches of manufacturing and industrial enterprises also increased during this period. (Emadi, 2002, p.83). One of my participants (MP from Farah province, Mrs. Hanifah), considered the era of Najibullah as the best

in her memory. Najibullah helped the country grow by allowing the liberalisation of the economy and encouraging the private sector. Since President Daoud, women's emancipation and gender had progressed unevenly but steadily. "Under the PDPA rule, women had experienced unprecedented freedom that had advocated – at least conceptually – to a more egalitarian, and inclusive, role for the Afghan women within their physical sphere of influence" (Burki, 2011, p.54).

8.5 Women in the labour market

Under Communist and Soviet rule, the goal of social modernisation was pursued, which included encouraging women into the labour market, which succeeded to a degree with urban women.

ILO data show that women were active participants in the formal Afghan economy during the late 1970s, although they still accounted for less than 8% of the workforce (see Table 1). World Bank data estimate that from 1990 to 1994, women made up about 34 percent of the workforce, both formal and informal sector (Geneva: ILO, 1982, p.52. cited in Emadi, 2002, p.102).

By the end of the Soviet occupation, 84.5 percent of employed Afghan women worked in agriculture in 1990, compared to 63 percent for the males. However, the number of women in the manufacturing sector was higher than that of men: 12.9 percent of the women labour force was employed in industry (compared with 9.5 percent of the working men). Women appear to have been excluded from service occupations with a mere 2.6 percent of the 49 percent of women who worked employed in this sector, compared to 27.5 percent for the men. (Benard, Jones, et al., 2008, p.84).

That said, women became increasingly concentrated in certain areas of employment in the public sector. During the Soviet invasion, women in Kabul and a few other major cities worked as scientists, pharmacists, teachers, medical doctors and civil servants" (Skaine, 2007, p.11). However, during the 1980s, women increasingly entered the professions, becoming 70 percent of the country's teachers, 40 percent of its doctors, and half of its government workers (UNDP, 2004b). Shireen Khan Burki, (2011, p.54) notes that women's entrance into

teaching and medicine and “other traditionally male careers, such as law and engineering’ was ‘because many males had either joined the Mujahideen or had been conscripted into the Afghan National Army" (Burki, 2011, p.54). Nonetheless, although female teachers outnumbered the male teachers and they still accounted within for just 2.6 percent employed in the ‘service sector’.

Gender equality was very unevenly distributed with discrepancies on wages but more significantly with class and urban versus rural divides. Such professional employment opportunities for women were still relatively rare and limited to those with education and opportunities in the cities: “women (and men) working in these kinds of salaried jobs were an urban phenomenon in a rural country.” (Benard, Jones, et al. 2008, p.83).

Table 8.1: Structure of economically active population, 1979

	Total	Percentage	Males	Females
Agriculture	2,369,481	60.1	2,358,821	10,660
Mining and quarrying	59,339	1.5	57,492	1,847
Manufacturing	423,373	10.7	170,908	252,465
Electricity and Water	11,356	0.3	11,078	278
Construction	51,086	1.3	50,670	416
Wholesale trade, restaurants, hotels	137,860	3.5	135,242	2,618
Transportation	66,243	1.6	65,376	867
Major divisions	749,345	19.0	716,511	32,834
Seeking better jobs	77,510	2.0	66,057	11,453
Total	3,945,593	100.0	3,632,155	313,438

Source: International Labor Organization (ILO), Yearbook of Labour Statistics (Geneva: ILO, 1982), p.52. Cited in Emadi, 2002, p.102)

According to the International Labour Organization (ILO), in 1982, 60% of the registered economically active population worked in the agricultural sector with the vast majority being men.

Rural society in pre-war Afghanistan was tightly kin-based, with a gendered division of labour. Women had roles in household financial management, made contributions to agricultural tasks, and were responsible for a variety of work in the home, including childcare and cooking, that were not directly financially remunerated, although the women did share in overall family wealth (not necessarily equitably)" (Benard, Jones, et al, 2008, p.83). Rural women were responsible for harvesting certain crops, such as beans and cotton; for domestic food-supply management; and for determining how much of the harvest was to be kept for the family.

Although "women in pre-war Afghanistan were highly involved in a variety of economic activity" (Benard, Jones, et al, 2008, p.83), women's traditional economic activity tended to be in the informal sector, often in petty commodity production such as making Afghan rugs, as well as a variety of other handicrafts. However, even in this activity, women's work was still undervalued. It was not directly remunerated financially, and that when they did carry out paid work, they were likely to receive less money for it than were men doing the same or similar tasks (Benard, Jones, et al, p.83). While men did not participate in rug-making, which is generally gruelling and poorly paid, both men and women traditionally collected the wool for the rugs, yet women reportedly were paid less than men (Ibid).

The economic opportunities for women and men in this period were also shaped by wider geopolitics: the domestic situation in the Soviet bloc, the relationship between Afghanistan and the USSR and the USA's geopolitical response to the Soviet Union's involvement in Afghanistan.

The relationship between the USSR and Afghanistan during the time of Soviet influence was very much that of patron and client: "By the time the People's

Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) took power in a coup in April 1978, Afghanistan was the Soviet Union's third largest recipient of development aid (Fishstein and Amiryar, 2015, p.3). Thereafter, the PDPA strengthened the role of the state based on a socialist ideology of class struggle, the goal of which was for rural peasants to leave a backward and exploitative agriculture and join the industrial working class—despite the country's weak industrial sector" (Ibid. p. 3). As the Soviet Union's communist economy collapsed, so the the Afghan economy also struggled. The 1979 Soviet invasion and subsequent civil war totally disrupted Afghanistan's economic development. "Agricultural production declined, food shortages were reported, and industrial production stagnated except where natural gas production was concerned, as well as other industries considered essential by the Soviet Union" (Gohari, 1999, p,91).

War also took its toll on the country's economy. Zbigniew Brzezinski, President Jimmy Carter's National Security Advisor from 1977 to 1981, said in an interview with Le Nouvel Observateur (1998), "The day that the Soviets officially crossed the border, I wrote to President Carter, essentially: "We now have the opportunity of giving to the USSR its Vietnam War." MP Malalai Joya wrote, "Some people even say that United States wanted a civil war in Afghanistan (…) United States wanted them to fight each other and consumed the remaining weapons and ammunition" (Joya, 2009, p.30). Although many Afghans still remember the good old Soviet times, the cost of war came with a heavy price. According to Fishstein and Amiryar (2015), between one and two million Afghans died, and another five to six million were displaced (Ayub, Kouvo, and Sooka, 2009, p.10 cited in Fishstein and Amiryar, 2015).

In particular, US and Saudi financial and military support to the Afghan Mujahideen operating with impunity from Pakistan's territory, would set back Afghan movements toward towards modernisation, and had a baleful effect on women's rights and agency The "Freedom fighters" as Ronald Reagan would call them at the White House on Feb. 2, 1983,[76] would ultimately and literally destroy its

[76] https://eu.usatoday.com/story/news/factcheck/2021/08/25/fact-check-post-makes-false-claim-ronald-reagan-and-taliban/8244770002/

capital Kabul, plunging the country in chaos, banditism and warlordism. Progress on women emancipation, cynically a huge marketing tool to mobilize Western sentiment when invading Afghanistan in December 2001, was rapidly stalled and reversed. A traditional, and extreme, patriarchal gender order was instituted after both patrons, Moscow and Washington, had left the scene, their attempts at both colonial control of Afghanistan and top down modernisation of society in tatters.

8.6 Life under the Mujahideen and Taliban

Najibullah's government fell in 1992 to the Mujahideen, whose rule ended in 1996 when the Taliban took over. Both the Mujahideen and the Taliban had a controversial economic policy; the economy continued with its historically mixed orientation, although the reality is better characterised as "loot and plunder" under the Mujahideen and "neglect" under the Taliban. During this period, institutions and infrastructure continued to decay or were 'stripped for sale' in Pakistan (Fishstein and Amiryar, 2015, p.3).

For women, this created a very difficult situation in which their physical and social mobility was highly constrained and they had to find employment opportunities wherever they could. When the State failed to provide services, women turned to creativity and informality redundant with women taking on a variety of jobs even when they lacked any formal training or education. For example, MP Ms. Hanifah, who originates from Farah province, which neighbours Iran and has a multi-ethnic population of about 925,000: "My life is Afghanistan's history. I did not go anywhere during the civil war and the time of Taliban. I made my life in Afghanistan. Luckily I am still alive."

Ms. Hanifah never trained as a nurse, but it did not impede her from working as one and even, when the need called, acting as a surgeon, assisting her husband, who himself was an uncertified doctor since he had not yet completed his studies at the medical school. "My husband did not finish his studies due to financial problems in addition to our eldest son's birth. My husband had to earn money to support his parents' family and his own. His entire family was not working. My husband became a doctor without completing his medical degree.

We lived in the centre of Farah province, in a village, where no doctor wanted to go and work. So, my husband started there in the village as a medical doctor. I tried to help him as a nurse although I did not have the training."

Ms. Hanifah juggled far more skills than this to ensure that the couple could provide for the family, as a tailor, a nurse, a surgeon, a teacher, a wife, and a mother. The breakthrough came when she and her husband became pharmacy owners in Farah province. This brought in the necessary funds that allowed her husband to finish his medical studies. She explained: "That time, we didn't have the pharmacy. We bought some tablets, only a small number of drugs were available there. We tried to sell those drugs and accumulated some money. Then, when we got some money, I started to persuade my husband to finish his education. That was 17 years ago."

As her husband had to compete his medical degree under Taliban rule, she described the challenge of living under that extreme gender order: "When, the Taliban came into power, husband went to Kabul. Girls and boys were studying together in the medical faculty. My husband finished his studies and graduated in Kabul 15 years ago. The Taliban allowed those students who were still pending to finish their studies, but not the newcomers. Then boys and girls were no longer together. They had to study separately." It is interesting that the Taliban still allowed women to complete their medical studies and even more surprisingly in a mixed gender environment, only imposing their extreme gender ideology once the existing cohort had graduated, indicating a certain degree of pragmatism alongside their gender-ideological objectives.

Ms. Hanifah described the complexities of seeking and maintaining a livelihood during that period, as well as the intricacies of her attempts to remain active within more socially professional roles as a teacher and medical profession. During that time, having previously established a medical clinic, she added to this also the roles of being tailor and teacher. "During the Taliban's time, we had no money. I was a teacher. I was told by the Minister that I would be able to teach. During the Taliban period, the UN told the regime to pay for female teachers with the money they had given. I was working as a tailor too and I had a clinic. I worked as a surgeon myself. I had to give the money I earned to my

husband for his studies. Besides, we had two sons. My clinic treated the children and women, no others, because Taliban forbid us to treat people of the opposite sex".

This was a period of negotiation and compromise between the Taliban and external actors, one likely to be played out again now that the Taliban has returned to power in August 2021. The Taliban was then, and is now, in a very precarious financial position in relation to Afghanistan's economy. Although rhetorically it opposed aid dependency on foreign powers – whether Soviet, American or international bodies – the reality is that it need aid money to maintain core social services. Delivering those services will help it maintain its legitimacy among the population. Whilst the Taliban wanted to restrict women's involvement in public services and public sector employment, the reality was that the majority of trained teachers were women and could not be replaced overnight. Thus the UN had financial leverage that enabled women to remain – for a while – as paid educational professionals, maintaining this gendered space in the public sphere.

However, even with a salary from the UN through the government, it was still difficult to make ends meet. Ms. Hanifah recounts: "The Taliban regime experience was very bad. The Taliban and Mujahideen regimes were worse than any regime. All educated people were sitting at home without jobs and without food. I was doing these jobs and additionally, teaching the children. I was doing three jobs at the same time to get enough money to support my family. I was working day and night"

This life-story highlights how even middle-class Afghan women needed to work very long hours and be creative in devising economic coping mechanisms under unpredictable conditions of governance, where the gender regimes in place in labour and professional sectors were shifting rapidly and shaped by multiple forces and actors. It also highlights the multiple burdens that women take on, not just in providing for their family (traditionally seen as the mail breadwinner role), but also performing reproductive care activities, whether remunerated and professionally recognised (teaching children in school) or not. Many professional women were determined not to lose their skills overnight and to pass on

their experience of literacy, and the doors that that could open, to the younger generation. Thus ‘A great many women school and university teachers were engaged in teaching girls, young women and some boys in their neighbourhood” (Rostami-Povey, 2007, p.33).

Additionally it demonstrates women’s continuing agency in navigating economic opportunities in the formal and informal sectors, despite the very constraining gender regime put in place by the Taliban. Indeed, women were empowered during the hard times in specific ways as they were forced to respond to economic, political and cultural constraints: “Despite the horrors of war and violent conflict, some women in Afghanistan emerged from such times empowered. They became aware of their own capacities to organize and found ways to survive. Women’s secret organizations and networks in Afghanistan were the only functioning organizations trusted by the community” (Rostami-Povey (2007, p.32). Thus both individual women managed to retain their professional skills and contributed these to broader social resilience “Some women’s experiences of conflict resulted in their learning skills and obtaining social, economic and political exposure and strength. In effect, conflicts extended beyond the battlefield and into the domains of everyday life” (Rostami-Povey, 2007, p.33).

Poverty in Afghanistan is overwhelmingly the result of war and the collapse of economic activity over the last three decades, and has affected even middle-class and educated women. “They worked in their homes, teaching, knitting, sewing, producing and exchanging goods and services. Had they not done this, they would have been in the streets begging. Many poorer women with fewer skills were begging and some became sex workers. Networking and group solidarity enabled these women to survive and help other women who lived under extreme forms of poverty and possessed few skills, or who had lost their male head of household; many of these women had no choice but to become beggars or sex workers” (Rostami-Povey, 2007, p.32).

8.7 The State of the Afghan Economy

Today, Afghanistan is confronted by multiple challenges ranging from security, health, education to livelihoods. The daily question for the average Afghan

household is how to make ends meet. Due to their professional roles in the society, the majority of my informants represent the upper or upper-middle class relative to the Afghan context. Notwithstanding the obstacles they had to overcome as witnessed in their testimonies, they are relatively comfortable in the material sense. In comparison, most of the Afghans are unemployed, underemployed, or employed in the informal sector. Poverty is not only rampant, especially on the countryside, but also persistent. According to UNDP, after more than a decade of international aid, still 55.9 percent of the Afghan population are multi-dimensionally poor while an additional 18.1 percent are classified as vulnerable to multi-dimensional poverty.[77] This state of affairs goes beyond gender, affecting entire households. As my interviewee Ms. Roshan explained, "The biggest challenges are not only for women, but also for men. Men face challenges as well".

Afghanistan currently has an extremely low rate of female labour force participation. Figures (% of female population ages 15-64) had gone up though since 2000, from about 15% of the total workforce to 22.76 % in 2020.[78] According to Grace and Pain (2011) “The institutions of family and community are far from uniform in Afghanistan. One source of difference is that of economic class, and there are major differences to be found in the opportunities for and constraints on women in landed and landless households” (p.263). Not captured in official statistics quoted above are the women economically contributing in the informal space, or within unrecorded household revenue-seeking. This would foremost feature the rural lower income classes, yet one needs to be cautious when classifying class differences related to gender. Different areas in Afghan’s history do influence the job opportunities offered.

Benard andJones, et al., (2008) warned that all of these numbers must be considered suspect and notional, but do reflect some knowledgeable assessments of women's situation (p.84). Indeed the absence of credible data are partly due to the variety of governance and political regimes, partly to the weak institutions

[77] The Next Frontier: Human Development and the Anthropocene, Briefing note for countries on the 2020 Human Development Report – Afghanistan, Human Development Report 2020, November 11, 2020.
[78] https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.TLF.TOTL.FE.ZS?locations=AF

collecting data, and partly to the repeated cycle of conflict and warfare engulfing the country. Insecurity and instability resulted in destruction, loss of lives, livelihoods, morale, and in the movement of population be these internally displaced or refugees in neighbouring and other countries. One particular problem is very large contribution of the illicit sector to the Afghan economy.

No other economic sector has influenced the Afghan political economy as much as the illegal one. Among other aspects in the illegal economy such as illicit artisanal mining, smuggling of migrants, illegal trade of weapons, the cultivation and trade in opium is the most significant. Afghanistan accounts for well beyond 90% of the world's illicit opium cultivation and the total acreage increased sharply between 1994 to 2018. (UNODC, 2018, p.6)[79] The opium economy contributed to the country's GDP from 15 to 20 percent but was even more crucial when the formal economy was at rock bottom. In 2004, opium cultivation surged by as much as 64 per cent, pouring $ 2.8 billion in illicit revenue into the pockets of warlords and traffickers (Rostami-Povey, 2007, p. 55-56).

It has also had a profound influence on the economic incentive system. Afghanistan shifted from a system of diverse agriculture to a monocrop opium culture due to three decades of war, the breakup of the Soviet Union and the collapse of the Afghan state (Gibson, 2011, p.41). In time of warfare or insecurity and conflict, no other crop can boom as opium does. Farmers can obtain seeds and fertilizers delivered from the local traders and do not have to worry about markets since the same local traders pick up the opium at the farm gate. Local militia or warlords protect the cultivation and trade through direct involvement or indirectly by collecting agricultural taxes.

This is a legacy of "late cold war" with the USA turning a blind eye on drugs, gunrunning, and money laundering, as long as it serves the anti-communist agenda. The US-supported Mujahideen were partly funded by the drug profits, and once the Soviet-supported regime was toppled, the same warlords took over power in Kabul and took their economics of skimming the spoils of the war

[79] UNODC, Afghanistan Opium Survey (2018) https://www.unodc.org/documents/crop-monitoring/Afghanistan/Afghanistan_opium_survey_2018.pdf Accessed 01.12.2018

economy and the opium economy with them (Gibson 2011) This was repeated when many of these Mujahideen were brought back to power by the USA in 2001, being bought to topple the Taliban and chase out al Qaeda (Gibson, 2011, p.39).

While the opium economy offered no doubt a life-ine to the impoverished farmer households at a time where conflict and instability did not allow for many alternatives, it further eroded the traditional structures on the countryside, creating new lines of patronage. Bassiouni (2005) assessed the situation as follows: "The opium industry overshadows legal forms of agricultural production, fuels widespread corruption and provides increasing economic power to factional commanders and other local and regional leaders." (Cited in Kolhatkar and Ingalls, 2006, p.112)The resurgent opium economy also maintains the power of very traditionalist local actors: ‘Opium is crucial to the power of the warlords on whom foreign troops and the Afghan regime depend. Outside Kabul, the country is in the control of federation of local rulers, commanders and warlords, all reinforced by drug profits” (Rostami-Povey, 2007, pp.55-56).

The absence of a significant manufacturing sector or other off-farm income opportunities particularly affects rural Afghan women. It prevents them from working outside the home, instead confining their productive role largely to on-farm income opportunities, including agricultural crops and livestock. (Clemens, 2008, p. 409 and 416). Normally, in rural areas the gender division of labour in rural Afghan areas would have women and older girls working in the field, next to spending between 3 and 5 hours a day in preparing meals, washing up, cleaning house and caring for children (Boros and Mcleod, 2015, p. 14). In general, women play an important role in livestock production and processing of dairy products (UNODC, 2016, p. 51).

Rural women are also involved in the cultivation of opium poppies and the processing of the opium: “women actively participate in the various stages of opium cultivation and their labour has become crucial because of the intensive manual work required during the six-month growing cycle.” (Rostami-Povey, 2007, p.58), Opium cultivation is indeed labour-intensive work – far more so than

wheat – demanding all members of the household to contribute and even attracting seasonal workers. Opium production has reshaped women's traditional reproductive and productive labour. According to a 2016 UNODC survey conducted a survey in the opium cultivating areas. "The role of women in agricultural production is largely determined by the daily life in the household, the location of fields and reproductive and productive tasks that women undertake during the year." For instance, while women are often active in the opium fields to weed and lance the poppy flower bulbs, they are allowed to do so if the cultivation land is too far away. This might be due to a mix of cultural and security reasons but women also dislike working in the sun for too long, as it has an impact on their health and physical appearance. Women prefer to take on tasks closer to home, as pressing oil from poppy seeds or in preparing the opium gum for sale. (UNODC, 2016, p.53). In certain regions, women and men spent the same amount of time in the fields but in other parts of Afghanistan, in particular in the South where the bulk of the opium poppy cultivation is concentrated) women's work is restricted to the household. The females are instead involved in crop processing such a threshing, cleaning, drying, preserving.

When the 2016 UNODC survey enquired with the women on the motivations to engage in opium poppy cultivation, the reported reasons were a combination of the economic need to cover basic household expenditure, expenditures to improve living conditions, and the opportunity to do so. Mentioned were covering expenditures for food and home appliances, paying debt, children's weddings and education, as improving living conditions such as purchasing cars were mentioned. One survey participant mentioned the need to cover costs for the medical treatment of her daughter (p.52). Other reasons were avoiding homelessness and having males to be sent abroad to make a living.

The UNODC survey did also confirm that opium poppy provided the women and their families with a needed income since few economic opportunities or alternatives are available, such as alternative crops or off-farm employment. Rostami-Povey (2007) phrased it as follows: "If there was a genuine economic policy to help Afghan people, investment in the agricultural sector could have be-

come a viable alternative to the opium economy. But there is no incentive for internal or international investment in rural infrastructure" (p.56) Economic needs or absence of viable alternatives brought the women to the opium poppy fields. Interesting too, although not necessarily specific to opium poppy cultivation, some women gain full authority over the money gained to spend for their daily needs (UNODC, 2016, p.53). In these limited cases, opium poppy gives them qualified agency.

However, there are many downsides to the opium economy. Aside from the way that it distorts the national economy, drug addiction is rampant. While most people suffering from drug problems are male, accidental addiction is for instance relatively high among carpet weavers, near all female, who require long hours of seated tedious work. Back problems are common and offset by opium use. (Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission, 2008, p. 9). Females have less opportunity to access treatment and are often heavier stigmatised (Abadi et al., 2012, p. 163). A 2008 survey indicated that Afghan women spend most of their times inside their houses with a focus on household chores. With limited external contacts, it is more likely that female problems users are exposed to drugs by close family members. The presence of one or more drug users in the family augments the chances of addiction for the rest of the family especially if the drug user in the family is the husband. It also does decreases the likelihood of successfully quitting of harmful habit. (Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission, 2008, p.11). Addiction is also the result of unequal distribution of healthcare services. Poorer families with limited access to healthcare tend to live in remoter areas and/or have a lower income. In the absence of reliable or affordable prescription drugs, opium is often used to relieve pain.

With the return of the Taliban to power in August 2021, it is very unlikely that the importance of the illicit sector in propping up the Afghan economy will cease. Whilst it is a huge generator of revenue in the country and sustains the consumption economy in which Afghan business women had been engaging, it is less likely to fund the fragile public sector and the professional jobs that had

been on offer there to women, within the pragmatism and ideological preferences of the Taliban.

8.8. Women's opportunities under the aid and development economy (2001-2021)

In the last two decades the Afghan economy has also been shaped by an aid economy due to the involvement of the USA, other Western powers and international organisations. According to Dollar and Pritchett (1998), since its inception (post-World War II), foreign aid had dualistic objectives that were potentially in conflict. The first objective was to promote long-term growth and reduce poverty in developing countries that, in turn, would benefit developed countries from trading with developing countries as they grow. The second objective was to promote donor countries' short-term political and strategic interests. Free money rarely exists. Kandiyoti (1991, p13) remarks that countries that are highly dependent on foreign aid become entangled with the foreign policies of their donors.

Few countries have benefited as much from donor largesse as Afghanistan did in the last two decades. Bryd (2018, p. 3 & p. 8) argues that the fiscal gap, caused by little public revenue, could only be bridged by international aid thereby constituting the most important macroeconomic problem facing Afghanistan. Simply stated, without foreign aid, Afghanistan would cease as a functional state. This dilemma is already confronting the new Taliban government, which has given the appearance of a slightly softened line on women's involvement in public and economic life for the sake of placating aid donors.

The prominent Afghan legal scholar Ms. Mahbuba Hoquqmal, reflected on her experience of participating in two historic Loya Jirgas (grand assemblies), at contrasting historical moments, one in 1977 under then President Sardar Mohammad Daoud Khan and then again in 2002 post-Taliban. In her memories, the difference was immense: "In the 1970s, we gathered in an environment that was characterised by a functioning government and the rule of law. In 2002, civil society was completely destroyed. We stood between war and peace. It was a

very sensitive moment, always close to breaking down, like walking on a knife's edge. … We had to bring together those who had fought each other before and hated each other. We did this with much passion and a lot of patience".

This indicates the immense difficulty, over the last two decades, of funding a new institutional architecture out of the ashes of decades of warfare. The Afghan national budget split into an operating budget (e.g. salaries of government officials, police and the military) and a development budget to benefit the people at large (e.g. health and education, industrial and agricultural development). As the Soviet Union had ended in economic bankruptcy, the Mujahideen had destroyed much of the infrastructure, and finally the Taliban had had little interest in economics and institutions, donors were obliged to contribute and invest in both. The Afghan government wished to have a larger say in and credit for the aid by channelling it through the government's budgetary processes and national systems, the low confidence of the international community in the accountability and sound management of a budding administration prone to corruption, did not allow for such. Donors thus chiefly used off-budget aid through direct implementation or funding of third parties such as the United Nations or non-governmental organisations, due to concerns about state weakness and corruption, and because of the need to deliver quick results post-2001. Yet this off-budget aid has had unintended or intended consequences (Cooper, 2018, p.2)[80]. With over 30 countries militarily involved in the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), many responsible for a Provincial Reconstruction Team tasked with a specific area of a province to coordinate, develop, and fund local projects with the aid of both military and civilian components, aid was uneven and became fragmented. Bizhan (2018) notes that the overreliance on this method created a parallel public sector which was fiscally much bigger than the

[80] Cooper, R. (2018). Aid dependency and political settlements in Afghanistan. K4D Helpdesk Report. Commissioned by Department for International Development (DFID) and other Government departments.

permanent public sector, unintentionally undermining the development of permanent state institutions, private sector, and in some cases state legitimacy (p.37).

On the positive side, the capacities deployed by a wide variety of aid agents allowed a rapid expansion of public services such as in health and education. (Bizhan, 2018b). However, there seemed to be little joined up policy connecting this huge expansion in basic services, especially education, to women's professional employment opportunities. Although there were more than hundred private and public universities across Afghanistan, one huge challenge was the failure of women graduates to secure a job as they were not recruited in the labour market. Women's representation in labour market remained disorganised, piece-meal and weak partly due to their absence within public spheres of consultation and decision-making: "women's representation in the job market remains at the lower end of value chains for the lack of access to many internal and external resources. Furthermore, women are not consulted or represented in in dialogues on national trade policies and international trade consultations," (p. 13). (Shakib, 2014, p.13).

Traditional cultural sentiments also continued to prevail. Parents, particularly the father, still had a heavy hand in a daughter's professional future. A young businesswoman, my interviewee Ms. Farzana, who is ethnic Hazara and owns a carpet company, explained how difficult it is to work in a male dominated patriarchal society and within the thoroughly "politicized misinterpretation of Islam which presents the wrong opinions about women and their freedom to work". Farzana has received repeated death threats and, at one point, escaped to Turkey for a month in order to make the perpetrators think that she had left the country for good.

The July 2014 Report submitted to the US Congress by the US Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) submitted "that by the end of 2014, the United States will have committed more funds to reconstruct Afghanistan, in inflation-adjusted terms, than it spent on 16 European countries

after World War II under the Marshall Plan."[81] However, Afghanistan remains war-torn, chaotic, impoverished and violent.

According to the 2015 Human Development Report of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), Afghanistan's ranking on the Human Development Index (HDI) was 0.479, putting the country into the low development category, at position 169 of 188 countries and territories (UNDP, 2016, p.2). Factoring into this low score are the endemic challenges of poverty in Afghanistan (36%), low participation of women in the national workforce, inadequate healthcare, and high educational dropout rates for children. The UNDP report claims that the low participation of women in the national workforce would seem to point to women's work being under-recorded due to their involvement in the opium-related economy and other sectors of the illicit economy such as prostitution.

A more profound criticism of the aid and development, also advocated in this thesis, is that the aid discourse denied Afghan women's agency, decontextualising them, both historically and socially. The discourse on Afghan women created by aid institutions was, to some extent, incompatible with the role of women in social transformations that had taken place throughout the country's history. Doing so was not mere coincidence but created the space for the USA and its allies to justify their intervention as being transformative for women (Abirafeh, 2009, p.5). It fitted the rhetoric of the "liberation agenda" with Afghanistan being the "good war", approved by the UN Security Council and framed against the unilateral invasion of Iraq by the USA and allies. The topic of women was highly inspirational, easily mobilizing popular enthusiasm for the intervention, and suiting the underlying sentiment of "white men rescuing brown women from brown men".[82]

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[81] SIGAR, Quarterly Report to the United States Congress, July 2014, p4. https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/quarterlyreports/2014-07-30qr.pdf

[82] Spivak, G. C., 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', in Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader, eds. Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1994), pp. 90-105

For this promised ambitious and transformative agenda to Afghan women's rights, the international community made very limited preparations—and that proved a mistake. Abirafeh (2009, p 17), acknowledges that Afghans were at first pleased with the enthusiasm for women and the funding it promised. The disillusionment, however, was not far off: "Afghan women were particularly uncomfortable with the rhetoric, their publicized plight, and their absence from campaigns waged on their behalf." Under the Bonn Agreement, a Ministry of Women's Affairs (MoWA) was established, but Abirafeh adds that although this received much publicity, it would ultimately become "the weakest link" in Afghanistan's national machinery, being largely marginalized and under-funded.

In absence of a functioning state, non-state actors helped to fill the void. Technical experts as they may have been, they came with little knowledge of the Afghan culture and with a high dose of pre-set convictions, often western biased if not only due to the donor money directed towards this popular topic. With little accountability to a near inexistent Afghan State they rolled out their programs, with a strong belief in themselves and in most of the cases the best of intentions (Abirafeh, 2009, p.17). Benard, Jones, et al. (2008) describes the role non-governmental organizations played in lobbying and drafting the new Afghan constitution, helping to shape both the procedural aspects and the final product (p. 68). The new Constitution of 2004, adopted by the Afghan Constitutional Loya Jirga or Grand Assembly, laid down benefits for Afghan women, and this too caused initial excitement and optimism about women's rights, namely, that Afghan woman would now be able to have the same rights as most western women. However, Abirafeh (2009, p17) notes that human rights and women's rights organisations noted "fissures" in the constitutional documents into which women's rights quickly vanished. The 2004 Constitution promises for "effective programs for balancing and promoting of education for women (,,,) and the elimination of illiteracy" (Art. 44). Within the upper house of the National Assembly (The House of Elders or Meshrano Jirga or Senate), a guaranteed 16% of the seats are reserved for women to be appointed by the President (Art. 84). Yet the crux for the gender regime comes early in the Constitution: Article 3 of the reads: "Law and Religion – In Afghanistan, no law can be contrary to the beliefs and provisions of the sacred religion of Islam". As noted in a previous chapter,

the issue would always be, whose version of Islam? As Armstrong stated: "When it comes to religion, interpretation is everything. When it comes to politics, everything is interpretation" (Armstrong, 2002, p.61)

8.9. Conclusion

Afghan women's opportunities for economic agency and professional identities have been shaped by different political regimes attempting to institute contrasting gender orders.

Between 1933 and 1946, women began to have access to public life and involvement in the economy. Modernization, of a limited kind, took place under both period of the monarchy and secular Communist rule, with women's access to jobs, education and the public sphere seen as a totem of Western liberalisation and progress. Afghan women lost most of their Soviet era rights under the Mujahideen and Taliban. The consecutive wars and conflicts that continued through to the present severely constrained women's agency, but did not make it impossible. Even in situations of extreme patriarchy women managed to find ways to continue engagement in education, remunerated employment and a professional identify

Afghanistan had been a moderately Islamic country before its experiments with communism. From that point, Afghanistan fell into fundamentalist Islamist *jihadists*' hands, and women's status deteriorated further. This dramatically reduced the participation of women in the economy and in many other professional areas in public life. Conversely the West propagated message about its aim for women's rights in Afghanistan was in part a sincere statement of its modernising *mission civilatrice* and in part a device to legitimise the USA and its allies to further their mission to control Afghanistan and the region. Western involvement added further complexities and layers to the gender regimes which Afghan women had to bargain and negotiate in the patriarchal hierarchy in order to be able to participate in the economy and public life.

Chapter 9 - Assessing the Challenges and Success of Professional Women and Final Conclusions

9.1. Obstacles and challenges for a professional public life for Afghan women

The purpose of my research was to give significance of Afghan professional women, highlight their public life in Afghanistan, and explain how they have negotiated with patriarchy to claim their agency. This thesis does refer to the broader segment of Afghan women to explain the exceptional feat of my interviewees. Almost all the interviewees I interrogated for this thesis are professionals and/or find themselves in entrepreneurial positions, making them very distinct for the fast majority of Afghan women, especially these residing in the rural areas. To focus on this segment of successful professionals allows understanding the nuances of the Afghan reality thereby confronting the simplified Western-led feminist discourse of Afghan females subordinated to the 'deceitful Afghan males' and thus in need of 'liberation' by the West.

Even in their position of hardship, Afghan women face obstacles as well as opportunities. The group of women interviewed is a success story for Afghanistan. Correct that being raised in middle- or upper-middle class of mostly educated families put them apart from the average Afghan who will not be offered the same opportunities. However, privileged as they may be, individually, they faced the same persisting Afghan traditions and conservative values, and have been through many hardships inside and outside the country, emotionally and physically. Their narratives show that obstacles are not the final point: success in their professional life is – even if the price is oftentimes high for the individuals concerned. Afghan women ask for their voices to be heard without being filtered, not being subjugated as illiterates who only through Western education would raise up to our foreign expectations. This thesis aimed to fill this gap.

Many media and authors offer interesting but incomplete narratives when explaining an extremely complex situation of women emancipation, often falling back in a black and white picture of women divested of any agency and victim of cultural exploitation and backwardness. They disregard the economic issues, an aid-

dependent economy and political regimes, security and safety, poverty and psychological trauma, corruption and power struggles among different forces (local and foreign) and fail to connect with the gender regimes. Among other topics, this thesis examines how different political regimes can alter the various degrees and forms of patriarchy.

In my thesis, three main impediments to the public life of professional Afghan women are highlighted:

> The first is the patriarchal nature of the family, the cornerstone of the Afghan society, and which moulds distinct gender expectations. The patriarchal concept is deeply entrenched and affects social interaction in its multiple facets; and this not only in traditional communities as my interviewees testify.
>
> The second is a weak central state that has aimed to modernize its institutions at different intervals of its history but has found it difficult to roll these reforms out to the periphery with the aim to renegotiate the local traditional views. If anything, these efforts resulted in resentment and outright violent opposition from those powers rooted in a peculiar interpretation of Islam serving tribalism and feudalism.
>
> The third relates to the previous two, with geopolitical strive between the big powers manipulating both the weakness of the state and the forces embedded in patriarchal traditions. From the Great Game between the British and Russian Empires, to the Cold War linking the USA to an unlikely ally of the Mujahideen, up to the War against Terrorism resulting in the most recent occupation of its territory.

Each of these three main streams in my thesis, can be broken down in multiple and interrelated strains. For instance, the Western advocacy for its intervention starting in 2001 by toppling the then Afghan regime, under pretext of the need to 'liberate' the Afghan women from the 'barbaric Taliban oppressors'. In my thesis the expression was used that the 'bodies of Afghan women' have been used by many as a tool to further their own interests'. What has been left out of this nar-

rative is that the West had few qualms to consider the setback for women emancipation after the fall of the Najibullah regime, as collateral damage of the struggle against communism. The hypocrisy is telling.

This thesis started in 2013 and as an update of the earlier hypocrisy is the renewed abandonment of the West of the country after two decades of occupation. Cynicism is an integral part of international politics. Al Jazeera reported that the UN Secretary-General, António Guterres, is "alarmed" to see promises "be broken", adding that gender equality is a priority for him. '"Broken promises leads to broken dreams for the women and girls of Afghanistan," the UN chief said. "Women and girls need to be in the centre of attention." (Al Jazeera, 11 October 2021).[83] During a panel discussion on the fate of education for Afghan women, held in the margins of the UN General Assembly in September this year, the Deputy UN Secretary-General, Amina Mohammed, expressed that international aid to Afghanistan was to be conditional on education for women and girls, and "continues to remain upfront" in ongoing discussions with the de facto authorities.[84]

Meanwhile the news coming out of Afghanistan is mixed and less than reassuring. The Taliban itself appears divided or do they esteem the right of education for girls, as a bargaining tool to restart the flows of international aid? The former is the case as reporting from within the country mentions that in a few provinces, girls have already gone back to high school. The New York Times gave the example of the Northern commercial hub of Mazar-i-Sharif where culturally seen the attendance of girls to school is less of an issue among the local Taliban. This said, students are segregated by gender as are the teachers resulting in a shortage of female teachers to cover the variety of educational topics. Telling too was the following statement quoted in the New York Times of Abdul Jalil Shahidkhel, the Taliban's director of education for Balkh Province. "Why is the West so concerned about women? If the world presses that Afghan women should be the

[83]https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/10/11/un-chief-slams-broken-taliban-promises-made-to-women-girls

[84] "Afghanistan: Girls' education must be a given, urges deputy UN chief", UN News, September 24. https://news.un.org/en/story/2021/09/1101132

same as Western women, then it is only a dream," he said. "We know, Islam knows and our women know what to do."[85]

When it comes to paid-work, culture, and the State, three of the six structures of patriarchy set out by Sylvia Walby, the de facto administration again sends out very confusing signals but none reassuring seen the negative track record under the previous Taliban regime. Few days after the fall of Kabul in the hands of the Taliban, on August 15, 2021, the BBC quotes Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid that "working women in Afghanistan must stay at home until proper systems are in place to ensure their safety". He added that "It's a very temporary procedure".[86] More positive inclined was Inayatulhaq Yasini, the deputy head of the Taliban political office in Qatar. Interviewed by the same British broadcasting early September, Mr. Yasini assured that women can continue working in the Afghan government, and that positions will be filled on merit, although, he added in cabinet and senior posts "there may not be women".[87]

Waheedullah Hashimi, a senior figure in the Taliban, was less reassuring when two weeks later he told Reuters the group would fully implement its version of sharia, or Islamic law, "Afghan women should not be allowed to work alongside men, (…) a position which, if formally implemented, would effectively bar them from employment in government offices, banks, media companies and beyond."[88] Finally, again hardly one month passed by, and CNN reported on October 21 that Kabul's acting Mayor Hamdullah Nohmani barred all women from government work in the Afghan capital. To add insult to injury the announcement allegedly stated: "One of the only jobs women can do for the Kabul government is clean

[85] Christina Goldbaum, "Taliban Allow Girls to Return to Some High Schools, but With Big Caveats", New York Times, October 27, 2021. https://www.nytimes.com/2021/10/27/world/asia/afghan-girls-school-taliban.html
[86] "Afghanistan: Taliban tell working women to stay at home", BBC, August 24, 2021. https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-58315413
[87] "Afghanistan: Taliban asked if there will be a place for women in new government", BBC Asia, September 01, 2021. https://www.bbc.com/news/av/world-asia-58407424
[88] Alasdair Pal, "Afghan women should not work alongside men, senior Taliban figure says", Reuters, September 13, 2021. https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/exclusive-afghan-women-should-not-work-alongside-men-senior-taliban-figure-says-2021-09-13/

female bathrooms."[89] A cry faraway from what was announced early September, of government positions 'to be filled on merit'.

One should never lose out of the eye, as explained earlier in this thesis, that the Taliban philosophy blended the customary 'code of life', the Pashtunwali, with the anti-imperialist Deobandi strain of Islam. The trade-off between these hard-line but deeply embedded views and the rather novel claim for international legitimacy will be a hard negotiation. If anything learned from the past, the former is to prevail over the latter. This said, at least on education, Taliban leaders might be willing to tolerate local measures accommodating local sensitivities. Conversely, with an economy contracting and job opportunities even scarcer than before, many households will have to make hard decisions on choosing what children will be worth the investment of education. Girls rarely end on top.

In the current context and watching a still evolving situation, the risk is real that the careers of the professional women I was fortunate to interview, will be cut short. Successful as they might have been, and serving as a role model to a younger female generation, their behaviour is breaking through social barriers and in the eyes of the majority of Taliban deviant. The patriarchy of their fathers who then decided to support their daughters in their educational and professional endeavour, has now shifted towards the patriarchy of the de facto rules, the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan as the Taliban present themselves.

For many of the interviewees, the decision to pursue a career implied that they were unable to compromise this aspiration with the wish to marry. Exceptions aside, Afghan males have strong opinions on what gender roles ought to be and publicly working women is not among these. Hence, for the interviewees who graciously shared their life experiences with me for this thesis, the loss is triple. First, the personal sacrificing endured to realize their individual ambitions despite

[89] Hira Humayun and Helen Regan, "About the only job women can do for the Kabul government is clean female bathrooms, acting mayor says', CNN, October 21, 2021. https://edition.cnn.com/2021/09/19/asia/afghanistan-women-government-jobs-intl-hnk/index.html

the social constraints; secondly, now being taking away these individual ambitions; thirdly, losing the leading role they have played for the younger generation of Afghan females.

9.1.1. Security and Violence

This thesis supports the view of Moghadam (1999, p.173) who argued that entrenched patriarchal social structures, as well as a hostile regional and international climate, undermined the government's reform programme, strengthened Islamist opposition, and reversed the legal status of women. This research has extended her thesis with my fieldwork in Afghanistan.

Security and safety in Afghanistan has historically been dependant on the strength of the central state and the level of influence they had to enforce reform on the periphery. As a weak state the influence of conflicting foreign powers has always been felt, resulting in different forms of occupation. In the best of situation, this might have propelled social and economic reform yet never in a sustained manner due to opposing domestic forces buoyed by foreign support. Violence and destruction has been an integral part of Afghan's recent history resulting in a broken society. In absence of any viable institution providing necessities and a sense of security, the significance of the inter-generational extended and patriarchal family has only increased as a coping mechanism.

The patriarchal family abides by strong and distinct gender roles, for both males and females. The social pressure to avoid and punish deviance is enormous. Those females who succeeded in breaking through these traditional norms are rare, often from urban and relatively wealthy backgrounds. Nonetheless, they do face serious trade-offs, one being under continued threat for their well-being in a country where impunity is standard.

No surprise, the level of anxiety among my interviewees was palatable. Interviewee Ms. Pari stated that "For a woman living in Afghanistan is living like in hell", followed by nuancing: "No, it is not that bad, but women are worrying all the time. Women live constantly with stress because of all the problems they are facing. The situation is getting worse and worse. Security is not good." In extreme

forms, such as experienced by interviewee Ms. Farzana, a business woman and politician interacting and working with foreigners, death threats obliged her to seek temporary exile in Turkey.

Many of my interviewees suffered this reality of fear. Judge Mrs. Fahima recounted the threats she did undergo: “When I was following the courses, I received death threats to myself and my children many times. When I was working for the benefit of women, I got threats again from the commanders outside Kabul province, the Northern part of Afghanistan. I made lots of regulations which come with the high risks. Those are not acceptable for the commanders. They do not want women to participate in the society.”

Judge Fahima continued: “When I was going home with my two children, two armed men with motorcycle came to us and try to open the car-door. Fortunately, the car-door was locked. My driver was a clever man. He was working for the security department. He informed me that these two attackers were following us. I told him not to stop and keep going. I received many emails, SMS and telephone death threats. I received death threats for different cases. In Herat, Badakshan, Northern part of Afghanistan and Pakistan, girls are escaping from their family and we offer shelters for them girls. It is difficult to keep these girls in secure houses. They threatened me that if you do not give our daughters back, wait what will happen to you. My driver was once shot by a gunman.” Ultimately, Judge Fahima decided to take on a low public profile and not accept any public interviews for a period of two years.

The threats aim to enforce women to forego their individual ambitions and end their role as a model for the thousands of young girls and adolescent who aspire anything different from the pre-programmed gender templates prescribed for them. Violence is however not limited to professional women and poses a real problem for any female as detailed in an earlier part of this thesis. On the Global Database on Violence against Women maintained by UN Women, one reads that lifetime physical and/or sexual violence by an intimate partner is experienced by 51 percent of Afghan women.[90] A significant problem is that the formal justice

[90] Global Database on Violence against Women, UN Women, based on data provided by the Central Statistics Organization (CSO), Ministry of Public Health

system considers violence against women as a family issue, to be dealt with by traditional meditation mechanisms thereby denying females legal recourse and fostering impunity. Applying customary law, the honour of the family will always prevail over the individual as a victim. With the Taliban now again in charge, customary Sharia law is to become the prevailing legal system and any progress made due to the proclamation of the statutory law protecting women against all forms of violence, will be undone.

Finally, understanding violence in Afghanistan demanded also a closer look in my thesis to the phenomenon of the 'broken society'. A society deeply traumatized by decades of destitution, conflict and displacement.

9.2. Traditional and cultural practices hostile to women

My research concluded that Afghan women do face a wide variety of challenges in their negotiating agency. Whenever the central efforts from Kabul accelerate to Afghan nation-building and modernization, emancipation of women gradually improves. Then again, these liberal epochs are undone by the ensuing rebellion of the conservative periphery, supported by clergy, as a proxy of competition between foreign powers.

As today we are again moving towards a period of obstruction, these prove very harsh and disheartening for the Afghan women who had benefitted from a more tolerant environment and especially those who have grown through their teenage and adolescent years over the last two decades.

Public-state and private-family patriarchy are again to coincide, with fathers having absolute power over their daughters and then, later in life, this power transferring this to the next male, her husband. As I explained in my thesis, the family interests and public honour will prevail over the aspirations of an individual be these educational, professional, or matrimonial. Obedience, chastity and humbleness are to replace the concepts of gender equality and female control on reproduction. With the economic constraints and poverty hitting, the incidence of

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(MoPH), and ICF, 2017. Afghanistan Demographic and Health Survey 2015. Kabul, Afghanistan. https://evaw-global-database.unwomen.org/en/countries/asia/afghanistan

girls being sold as commodities will augment, to pay off family debts and cash in on bride-price money. Customary forms of justice will oblige a higher number of daughters to marry the enemy's family, to resolve blood feuds between these families.

As referred to in the chapters of my thesis, many of my interviewees expressed how they have been intimidated and did personally experience harmful cultural and traditional practices. Twenty-two-year-old Ms. Sita (UNODC) who worked on gender issues, articulated her experience as follows, "In Afghan customs, women have to rely on men and whatever men say, women have to follow. Due to culture, there is a very high illiteracy rate among women. They can't fight for their education. This is the problem." She added to this: "to me, our society should give responsibility, authority and respect for working women. We should take women seriously. Women are working hard for our honour and our dignity."

Interviewee Ms. Sita was lucky to have an educated mother who never gave up fighting for her daughter's education against the wills of the paternalistic family. In this case, a mother who fought for her daughter's education illustrates the courage displayed by women and how harmful traditional and cultural practice can be defied under certain circumstances.

Interviewee Ms. Pari, working as translator, phrased: "Women going to work is culturally very challenging. The big barrier is our culture. In our culture, women are only made for home. Women should not work". A medical doctor, interviewee Dr Hasinah, shared the views of Ms. Sita and Ms. Pari: "In Afghanistan, culturally people don't like women who are working. No respect for women who are working outside their home and working in NGOs. They prefer working as teachers or doctors. Women who are working with women is fine. Working in managerial position is too much for men in such an extreme patriarchal society. Working in the government and being a lady is very hard. Managerial level is rare for women. Considering the situation in Afghanistan, it is really hard. Women are normally assistant positions. In a managerial position, you need to think the way men think. You need to adjust with them. Demand from women who are working in managerial positions are very high. They demand a lot from women, more than men".

Interviewee Ms. Farzana, a businesswoman and politician, recounts her story as follows: “the major challenges for me from my childhood until now is Afghan tradition. In one’s family, you are being told as you are a girl and thus should not go to school. Education is for boys. When my parents sent me to school to be educated, people laughed at us. They said, what? Sending your daughter to school? Why? At the age of 13 and 14, she should just get married. This is her responsibility. They told us. But my parents told them this is our girl's right to get education”

Interviewee Ms. Fahima, employed at the Ministry of Women’s Affairs, is also outspoken on this topic: “Customs and culture are dominating the society. Due to that they don’t send the kids, particularly the girls to school.” The majority ethnic Pashtuns are regarded as the most conservative ethnic group among Afghans when it comes to gender issues. According to Judge Mrs. Fahima, “We were living in Kabul-Shashdarak town. At that time people in our neighbourhood, no girls, particularly Pashtuns, were being sent to school.” (Interviewee Judge Mrs. Fahima,)

Interviewee Ms. Anar, Head of the Appeal Juvenile Court and Head of the Afghan Women Judges Association, also expressed the challenge she faced regarding the same concept of restriction on education for girls. “One of my big challenges is my relatives who were talking bad things about me going to school. They told my parents that it is enough for girls just like other sisters; marry, get children, take care of the family and let the boys go to the universities.” However, luckily, she could count on her family’s support: “my family is a very bright family. We believe opportunities must be equal for men and women.”

Interviewee Ms. Rasa, Member of Parliament, spoke about her uphill battle to achieve her dreams: “I am a politician. Nobody supported me to this position. Everybody opposed me to become an MP. I was interested in politics and social science since I was a child. I didn’t come to this position easily. In our culture, sons are always superior and no chance for girls. I against that. I tried to participate in the society.”

Interviewee Ms. Husnia, Judge at the Children and Family Primary Court, also shared her thought on her society and tradition. “Challenges are the society and the respected elders in the society who are not progressive and cannot see the

world from wider perspective. These are the figures who teach the people what is good and what is bad. They are the moral authority in the society and they are the ones who said no to women to work."

Interviewee Ms. Kobra, Gender Research Assistant UNWOMEN, remarked on her marital status: "The worst part is that we are still facing so many problems. Working girls are not accepted by our society. It is not acceptable here". Ms. Kobra explained that due to her work with the foreign organization, many of the marriage proposals were turned down and she thus remained single. At the time of the interview, she was 32-years of age and deemed too old for marriage.

Conversely, few of the interviewees had instead married to obtain support from their husband and to be liberated from their controlling parents. This noted, most of my interviewees opted to remain single as a painful trade-off between their professional and personal aspirations. Bizarrely, unmarried Afghan women represent the professional emancipation of women, not the opposite. UNODC legal Advisor, Ms. Minoo made an interesting statement pointing out that the higher you professional achieve, the less chance that you will find a life partner: "the more you get higher, the more you don't want to marry. We three sisters are single and we have one brother who is married."

9.3. The role of religion, ideology, and politics

In my thesis I gave detailed attention on explaining the local strain of Islam, mixed with customary law. The Mujahideen, the Taliban and other conservative forces legitimised their rule through their references to their specific interpretation of religion. Gender has been used as tool to mobilize popular support in their fight against modernization and foreign influences. In the other extreme, gender was used as a tool to mobilize overseas public support pointing to the oppression of women and the need for liberation from the perceived and real abuse. The reality is that the Afghan professional women interviewed find themselves caught between these contradicting forces. Near all consider themselves as proud Muslims yet reject the local Islam strain as misinformed while also finding offense in a Western view on female emancipation which takes their agency as Afghans away.

Women in Afghanistan are often left with the choice between living safer lives and giving up to their professional aspirations. This was a returning topic in each and every life story of my interviewees. Women working in public occupations do face violent death. Their experiences show that this has become a real threat not only to the women themselves, but also to the entire society and its nation-building process. As explained in previous chapters, Afghan history is case in point to demonstrate shows how gender relations have been affected by religion, state formation, ever-changing rulers and systems, imperial domination, dependence on foreign aid and subsidies, and foreign occupations. Mainstream media typically blame Islam for all the ill-treatment of women at the hands of their own rulers and intruders, family members and men in general. One-sided perspectives never provide the right answers and the problems on the ground are clearly quite complex.

As I referred earlier to the case of Ms. Farnaz, who received death threats she pointed out that her public exposure resulted in repeated death threats not by the Taliban but by warlords and elements close to the then Western supported administration. Interviewee Ms. Pari (translator) support backs up this ambiguity in her statement: “violence against women takes place due to the government’s discrimination laws. If women are in politics, those women can bring these issues up to the government. Now rape cases are everywhere in the news and the Government is not doing anything. It is just because these people involved are high profile people. They are involving in crimes and rapes. These are the government officials.”

The problems faced by women are not always related to ideology and may sometimes be brought back to internal power struggles, abuse and impunity of these in power, and sheer corruption. I discussed the problems of aid programs and NGO activities in Afghanistan. The money supposed to be spent on the people of Afghanistan did not always arrive to those identified as being in need. Famous Afghan MP Malalai Joya called them “NGO-Lords” and said that they go hand in hand with the problem of warlords and drug lords. (Joya, 2009, p.162). She accused that foreign aid disappeared into corrupt officials' pockets or is in fact used for programmes that legitimise the NATO war. Regretfully, in regard to this aid, she said that her people can only say, “Don't show me the palm tree, show me

the dates." For the average Afghans without access to the internal power elite, only bitter fruit has grown in recent years. (p.162)

9.4. Overcoming the obstacles: measuring the success

9.4.1. Family

Interviewee Ms. Anar, Head of Appeal of the Juvenile Court and Head of the Afghan Women Judges Association, put it blunt: "If there was any barrier in my family, I would never have reached to this position. Family is the most important and absolute institution for women to reach their goals and to be successful professional women in public life". Interviewee Ms. Husina, Judge at the Children and Family Primary Court, confirms this in her life-story: "My entire family is from Kabul. My parents are educated. They supported me although they faced financial problems. I was always interested in law and wanted to become a lawyer. My family wanted me to be a lawyer more than myself. My father and mother encouraged me. They told me that you have the capacity of becoming a lawyer, judge. I was very encouraged."

A similar story is related by interviewee Ms. Zahra, Prison Commander, "I am happy to be an Afghan woman. It is difficult. We need family permission to do something. If my family against what I want to do, then I can't do. There are segregations and cultural restriction. In my opinion, according to constitution, there are rights for men and women. But still families are important for women for her career. Luckily, I don't face any problem in that sense. I believe there is no difference between men and women. If I want to become something, nobody can stop. The society expected a lot more from women." Interviewee Ms. Suraya, Member of Parliament, made it very clear that, "the most important thing in my life is my family. That time, I could not go for campaigning, it is very important to acknowledge that my family supported me". She described that family support can even defeat Taliban thinking, especially when it concerns an elite family. "For an elite family, they can send girls to school. Some of these people want to promote themselves. In Jowzjan province, a girl can go to school since the Taliban time with the individual decision and with the support of the family."

Interviewee Ms.Sita, working for the UN, is of the same opinion yet in the negative, "No freedom. Family is the most important. For women, there is no need to be educated. Live the life that others want you to." In her remarkable case though, her mother supported her strongly, more so than her father did: “I went to school in Islamabad. I got my BBA from a private university. Mothers are important educating their children. There were many challenges to get education in Afghanistan. For a girl, if you are older than 15, no need for education. My uncle from my father side was angry with my father for educating me. He was my step-uncle. My mother and my father fought with them to educate me. Elders are very important in the family. In fact, my father gave up. My mother was the one who fought against them until the end. My uncle wanted me to marry his son and said no need for education. I cried. I was too small to say anything. My mom told me not to worry. We were in the middle and puzzled how to live our lives. One was my mom who kept fighting and the other was my father’s family. It was tough.”

In a patriarchal society the role of the patriarch, the male elder, is of essence. Interviewee Ms. Fahima, employed at the Ministry of Women’s Affairs, explained her situation: “My father can speak five languages. He graduated from Germany. He got his PhD as a Pharmacist. He loves education. He tried to support education for his children. My two sisters are medical doctors, one is engineer and three are teachers. My mother was an educated housewife”. Interviewee Ms. Farnaz, journalist, supports the view of the father’s significance: “when I was single, I lived with my father (she did not mention her mother), whenever my voice appeared on air, my brother was very angry and told to my father that one day someone will kill your daughter. But my father fully supported me. He said I trust her. She is brave and she will be the leader.”

Remarkable in Ms. Farnaz situation was that she was one of the few interviewees married. The fact that her husband proved not only understanding but equally supportive to her professional aspirations was decisive. He was pleased to recount, “Luckily my husband is also a journalist. He also supported me. We have a love marriage. Not an arranged one. We met and we decided to marry. We have a very good marriage. What I most wanted in life is that trust and respect from my husband. My mother-in-law family also supported me. They know the value of my success and achievement.”

9.4.2. Ethnicity

Ethnicity matters in terms of gender relations. Pashtuns are regarded as the most conservative ethnic group in regards to gender discrimination compared to the rest of Afghanistan. According to interviewee Judge Mrs. Fahima, “We were living in Kabul-Shashdarak town. That time people in our neighbourhood, no girls, particularly Pashtuns are not sending to school.”

9.4.3. Economic reality

Interviewee Judge Mrs. Fahima shared her view on why many women are not achieving their potential that “the problem is uneducated family will not send their kids to school. Some, due to the economic hardship.” The interviewees are either from a wealthy family or from the middle-class social grouping. There are a few who faced extreme hardship and became successful as professional women in public life, an example being the translator Ms. Pari, who described her obstacles. Gender Research Assistant from UNWOMEN, and interviewee Ms. Kobra, had struggled extremely hard to get an education and to work. Her life as a refugee in Pakistan helped her to learn English. Although her parents could not afford to send her to school due to financial problems, she got free English classes with the International Rescue Committee. From this she could go on to further education. Otherwise, the family backgrounds of the interview participants are relatively wealthy landowners and business owners or important government officials. Without a solid economic background, it is hard to imagine this social group would be included in this study as examples of successful professional women in public life.

9.4.4. Empowerment and marital status: being a single woman

Some of the interviewees married to obtain support from their husband and to be liberated from their controlling parents. On the other hand, many other interviewees stated that they are single because they are afraid that marriage means that men are going to control their lives. If they marry, they will not be able to continue with their education or job. Unmarried Afghan women represent

the success and power of women, not the opposite. My interviewee from UNODC, a legal Advisor, Ms. Minoo made a statement that “the more you get higher, the more you don’t want to marry. We three sisters are single and we have one brother who is married.

9.4.5. Perseverance

Women themselves strategise and bargain with the patriarchy. They state what they want to become, such as getting an education or the right to work, and then strive to achieve it. For instance, Member of Parliament for Kabul province, interviewee Mrs. Farnaz told how she had to fight to get an education. “I was living in Guldara district in Kabul. The darkness was unspeakable. No school for girls. No one wanted to send their girls to school. My family was elite. Although we were not much of an elite, but still a better social class. Let’s say middle-class family. There were problems when I was younger. There were many boundaries for me. They did not allow me to do anything. So, I had to strike against that. I did not eat. I did not drink anything because they didn’t let me go to school. My hunger strike was just for my parents to let me go to school.”

Another example is interviewee Judge Mrs. Fahima who told the story of her childhood and education, “My parents supported education. I went to school when I was 5. But not without a tragic story. I had to pull out my teeth to show that I was 7, which was the age to admit to school. Blood were everywhere and it was painful”. Economics were another obstacle to be overcome. Judge Mrs. Fahima shared her views on why many women are not achieving their potential that “the problem is uneducated family will not send their kids to school. Some, due to the economic hardship” (Interviewee Judge Mrs. Fahima, Ministry of Women’s Affairs)

The interviewees are either from a wealthy family or from the middle-class social grouping. Without a solid economic background, it is hard to imagine how many could have become successful professional women in public life. There are a few who faced economic hardship and succeeded professionally. An example is Gender Research Assistant, Ms. Kobra. Her life as a refugee in Pakistan helped her to learn English. Although her parents could not afford to send

her to school due to financial problems, she got free English classes with the International Rescue Committee. From there onwards she could go on to further education.

9.5. Final Conclusions

In this thesis, I addressed the six structures of patriarchy as developed by Sylvia Walby on the situation of women emancipation in Afghanistan. It is clear that the Western myth of Afghan women as helpless victims in need to be saved by foreign liberators, is a caricature of the reality. The complexity of the situation resembles more a colourful kaleidoscope with complex depictions pending on the vintage point of history, ethnicity, religion, culture, governance and other factors. The 'Key Concepts of Patriarchy and Gender Regimes' were explored in Chapter 2, and Walby's six structures selected as the research template best fitting the intricacy of the Afghan context.

Chapter 3 went in-depth on how historical political and gender regimes have over time shifted with domestic efforts of modernization and nation-building thwarted by rebellion, and influenced by the geopolitical games of the great powers. Traditional culture and ethnicity have a significant influence on how the professional women I interviewed for this thesis, were able to negotiate their agency. Chapter 4 examined this in detail. The next Chapter 5 then analysed how Afghan traditional culture and religion mix in a unique strain of Islam. The blend between Hanifi Deobandi Islam and Pashtunwali results in a very conservative setting, through which rigid gender roles are moulded.

In absence of valid alternatives, the social, cultural and economic bedrock of the Afghan society is the family – inter-generational, extended and headed by the patriarch. Chapter 6 highlights its implications for gender relations, including the high levels of violence against women in the family context. A recurring issue is not only illiteracy but the hope that through education the customary views can be altered benefitting women emancipation. Chapter 7 deals with this topic before moving to Walby's (1990) household production and paid employment in Chaper 8.

This thesis concludes that Afghanistan is a case in point to apply the Walby's six structures of patriarchy. Taking a historical approach to explain the fast changing gender regimes, it addresses patriarchy from economic, social, political and religious prisms since all these create inter-connected powers women have to negotiate with to gain agency. These powers shape opportunities but equally oppresses, exploits, and takes advantage of women in multidimensional manners.

Interesting is how the rights and position of women in Afghan society have taken sharp turns over the last 150 years, with gradual progress accelerated and then again being undone by opposing forces, pending on the cultural attitudes and the political or religious ideology of the men in power.

In several periods of Afghan history, women have been relegated to the private domain, forced to stay in their homes, wear the veil, and follow the dictates of the patriarchy. Conversely, foreign media amplified real and cruel abuse by to shape a narrative of weak Afghan women oppressed by brutal barbarians and in need of rescue by the Western crusaders. It has been one of the leitmotivs to prepare an international invasion, toppling the Taliban regime in 2001. Islam has been blamed for the dire fate of the Afghan women, failing to appreciate that Sunni Islam is not a unified religion but a very scattered belief model adapted to local contexts and customs. In many cases, it is hard to distinct what Islam prescribes and what the political regime tells the Islam prescribes. The constant flow of images of oppressed Afghan women under Islam has generated a general wave of negativity towards Afghan culture and Islam religion.

This propaganda does not do right to the courage of the Afghan women who, as proud Muslims, do not want to be regarded as passive victims. The humiliation for them is twofold – being used as a tool to mobilize conservative forces against modernization and being used as a tool for those aiming to justify their occupation of twenty years. The more perfect choice is not between a conservative East patriarch or a liberal West patriarch, but for a tolerant Afghanistan shaped by its own rich culture and history. The personal sacrifices made by the professional Afghan women pursuing female agency in an often-forbidding context, are genuine and to be deeply respected.

The militarisation of Afghan society over the last five decades by the Soviets, Mujahideen, Taliban, and the forces allied with the USA after 9/11 has been unevenly highlighted in media headlines, pending on geopolitical interests. The Great Game between the Russian and British Empires, the Cold War between the Soviet Union and the USA, and more recently the War against Terrorism, have offered pretexts to fight proxy wars in Afghanistan. As wealthy foreign caravans trekked through the old Silk Road, they left weaponry, corruption, warlords, dishevel and unequal affluence in their tracks, before packing up and losing interest in how the country is to cope with the disaster and destitution left behind.

Most observers suppose, with some justification, that Afghanistan is an unkempt violent country, oblivious to the rich culture and history if offers with the Greater Khorasan (Persian for 'where the sun arrives from') once stretching from north-eastern Iran to the southern parts of Central Asia. In turn, it is, partly due to its geographical landscape of rugged mountains intersected by lush green valleys. Afghanistan is in no ways a centralised country with ethnic groups and subsections of subgroups, in continued competition for resources. Afghanistan is known as the Graveyard of the Great Empires referring to the troops of the British Empire, the soldiers of the Soviet Union and now also the NATO Alliance having to face defeat by the hands of the fierce Pashtuns. Yet this is only one side of the coin, seen that a graveyard is not a place to plot a bright future for those inhabiting it.

Nobody can vouch to this more than the Afghan women, who have to live from hope to despair. Those who recently promised to save them from the Afghan male savages, earlier sponsored without remorse the Mujahideen in their anti-communist struggle. That the clock of women emancipation was turned back by 180 degrees when the Muajhideen celebrated victory, was then nothing more than collateral damage. 9/11 turned the attention back to this bare country and suddenly women emancipation became a topic to rally for. August 2021 is thus an ironic repeat – a defeat in modernizing a nation-state and a handing over of the country to its most conservative powers. In the last two decades girls and female adolescents grew up with a belief that they could navigate a better future.

They heard cruel narratives of the past-Taliban rule but will now have to experience it under a new-Taliban era.

This thesis looks critically in this account of hypocritical gender politics. I explored gender politics in Afghanistan as it tied to the geopolitics of superpowers, who shaped and reshaped Afghanistan continuously according to their political agendas. Many regimes in Afghanistan have proclaimed their desire for a drastic transformation of women's participation in the public sphere and have developed gender policies as part of their drive to modernize Afghanistan. Yet Afghanistan remained stuck between the metaphorical hammer and nail of geopolitics, denying continuity in nation-building, including those rights related to women. The stop-start nature of Afghan politics was conductive to shifting kinds of oppression for women, while the generally accepted narrative in the West has depicted Afghan women as passive victims, without agency, and awaiting comfort from some kind of patriarchy, local or international.

This thesis challenged that narrative: the stories of my interviewees affirmed the bravery and agency they have shown in the courses they have followed throughout regime changes. Women's aspiration for a life in the public domain has been threatened by all sides and attacks on women have been physical and indiscriminate. The professional women I interviewed are not ordinary women. All the interviews were extremely intense as they told of how they are fighting the conservative and extreme patriarchal society with men assuming superior social roles justified and determined by both politics and local interpretation of religion. Their drive towards successful public life had them to accept enormous personal sacrifices and security challenges.

The security a women benefits is in fact a benchmark for the gains gender issues have achieved in Afghanistan. These successful professionals demanded that women should be entitled to security, education and other rights granted to all citizens of Afghanistan. Even two decades of Western intervention could not guarantee such. Is this to be blamed on local cultural norms or on international interventionist politics since the "Grand Game'? In my thesis I argued that the principal challenges and obstacles for women and their involvement in public life

did not only derive from their own culture, their own men, and tribal feudalism. These factors are not solely responsible for the wide variety of problems.

Up to today women remain second-class citizens. The West's two decades long intervention and its promotion of Western 'universal values and norms' have not helped many females but a few – too few. President Ashraf Ghani blamed the ill-conceived, misguided Western aid efforts that fail to acknowledge the realities on the ground. Lauren Bohn (2018) cited President Ghani's complaint that "the issue here is that international experts were male-centric. They talked about gender but their pamphlets were glossy and totally lacking content" (Bohn, December 8, 2018).

It has been often said that the first casualty of war is truth. The second casualty in Afghanistan are women, their rights and their aspirations. This thesis debunks this dichotomy of the current narrative between liberator and oppressor, good and bad – the pro-gender West versus the macho-evil Islam.

Women occupying roles in the public domain are succeeding because of their own personal attributes, their family's socio-economic status, and importantly, through the backing of their own patriarchs. The freedom to live and work in the public domain is a right that needs to be extended to all Afghan women, irrespective of family and socio-economic status. Feminists, scholars and women's rights activists have to dissect and understand gender relations as rooted in both social/cultural and economics/political contexts, if they truly want to make a positive and sustained change in the lives of Afghan women.

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Appendix A: Informed consent form

Title of research: Professional Afghan women in public life

Researcher: Soe Myat Nwe, PhD researcher, Faculty of Social Sciences, Department of Peace Studies and International Development, University of Bradford. Tel: +94 791 53 62 77, Email: soemyatnwe@yahoo.co.uk

Subject: Consenting matters

It is important to understand that it is your voluntary participation in this study. The following is explanation and information regarding this project and your participation.

1) This research is designed to understand the Afghan women's public life before and after 9/11. Its aim is to get the better understanding, knowledge of Afghan women who are currently working in may difficult circumstances and the role they have played in the past and present time.

2) There will be twenty-one participants in this research. The duration of the interview is as much as time you permit.

3) This is about your life as a professional woman and how you have experienced throughout the history of contemporary Afghanistan. How have you achieved in this role and position in public life.

4) I will record it by hand-written notes as well as by audio tapes.

5) If you want to change your name and keep anonymous, I will give you a different name in this study.

6) The recoded tapes will be destroyed after 10 years.

7) The data will be kept separately from identifying information, which will be stored in a very safe place. Participant's identity will not be fully exposed.

8) Risk and Discomforts: There are foreseen risks or discomforts from your participation in this study. Examples of any potential risks or discomfort include emotional feelings, such as anger, sadness or grief, when asked questions during the interview.

9) Benefits: The overall benefits for your participation is an opportunity to talk and to be listened to your life story with your own voice. There will not be remunerated financially or any other material forms.

However, your contribution will give a chance for raising awareness about Afghan women's professional public life and it will encourage the young Afghan women to participate more in public life.

10) If you have questions after the interview, please feel free to contact me. If you have questions or concerns about this project and you may wish to discuss, you can contact my university.

11) If you agree to participate, please sign below.

Name	Date
Signature of Participant	Signature of person obtaining consent

Appendix B: The decrees or the conduct of women by the Mujahideen rulers

1. They must not perfume themselves.
2. They must not wear adorning clothes.
3. They must not wear thin clothes.
4. They must not wear narrow and tight clothes.
5. They must cover their entire bodies.
6. Their clothes must not resemble men's clothes.
7. Muslim women's clothes must not resemble non-Muslim women's clothes.
8. Their foot ornaments must not produce sound.
9. They must not wear sound-producing garments.
10. They must not walk in the middle of streets.
11. They must not go out of their houses without their husband's permission.
12. They must not talk to strange men.
13. If it is necessary to talk, they must talk in a low voice and without laughter.
14. They must not look at strangers.
15. They must not mix with strangers.

(Extracted from Malalai Joya's book "A Woman Among Warlords, 2009: p. 28)

Appendix C: A sample of Taliban decrees relating to women and other cultural issues

(This translation from Dari was handed to Western agencies to implement; the grammar and spellings are reproduced here as they appeared in the original.)

Decree announced by the General Presidency of Amr Bil Maruf and Nai Az Munkar (Taliban Religious Police), Kabul, November 1996.

Women you should not step outside your residence. If you go outside the house you should not be like women who used to go with fashionable clothes wearing much cosmetics and appearing in front of every men before the coming of Islam.

Islam as a rescuing religion has determined specific dignity for women. Islam has valuable instructions for women. Women should not create such opportunity to attract the attention of useless people who will not look at them with a good eye. Women have the responsibility as a teacher or coordinator for her family. Husband, brother, father have the responsibility for providing the family with the necessary life requirements (food, clothes etc). In case women are required to go outside the residence for the purposes of education, social needs or social services they should cover themselves in accordance with Islamic Sharia regulation. If women are going outside with fashionable, ornamental, tight and charming clothes to show themselves, they will be cursed by the Islamic Sharia and should never expect to go to heaven.

All family elders and every Muslim have responsibility in this respect. We request all family elders to keep tight control over their families and avoid these social problems. Otherwise these women will be threatened, investigated and severely punished as well as the family elders by the forces of the Religious Police (*Munkrat*).

The Religious Police have the responsibility and duty to struggle against these social problems and will continue their effort until evil is finished.

Rules of work for the State Hospitals and private clinics based on Islamic Sharia principles. Ministry of Health, on behalf of Amir ul Momineen Mullah Mohammed Omar. Kabul, November 1996.

1. Female patients should go to female physicians. In case a male physician is needed, the female patient should be accompanied by her close relative.

2. During examination, the female patients and male physicians both should be dressed with Islamic *hijab* (veil).

3. Male physicians should not touch or see the other parts of female patients except for the affected part.

4. Waiting room for female patients should be safely covered.

5. The person who regulates turn for female patients should be a woman.

6. During the night duty, in what rooms which female patients are hospitalized, the male doctor without the call of the patient is not allowed to enter the room.

7. Sitting and speaking between male and female doctors are not allowed. If there be need for discussion, it should be done with hijab.

8. Female doctors should wear simple clothes, they are not allowed to wear stylish clothes or use of cosmetics or make-up.

9. Female doctors and nurses are not allowed to enter the rooms where male patients are hospitalized.

10. Hospital staff should pray in mosques on time.

11. The Religious Police are allowed to go for control at any time and nobody can prevent them.

Anybody who violates the order will be punished as per Islamic regulations.

General Presidency of Amr Bil Maruf. Kabul, December 1996.

1. To prevent sedition and female uncovers (Be Hejabi). No drivers allowed to pick up women who are using Iranian burqa. In case of violation the driver will be imprisoned. If such kind of female are observed in the street their house will be found and their husband punished. If the women use stimulating and attractive cloth and there is no accompany of close male relative with them, the drivers should not pick them up.

2. To prevent music. To be broadcasted by the public information resources. In shops, hotels, vehicles and rickshaws cassettes and music are prohibited. This matter should be monitored within five days. If any music cassette found in a shop, the shopkeeper should be imprisoned and the shop locked. If five people guarantee the shop should be opened the criminal released later. If cassette found in the vehicle, the vehicle and the driver will be imprisoned. If five people guarantee the vehicle will be released and the criminal released later. If cassette found in the vehicle, the vehicle and the driver will be imprisoned. If five people guarantee the vehicle will be released and the criminal released later.

3. To prevent beard shaving and its cutting. After one and a half months, if anyone observed who has shaved and/or cut his beard, they should be arrested and imprisoned until their beard gets bushy.

4. To prevent keeping pigeons and playing with birds. Within ten days this habit/hobby should stop. After ten days this should be monitored and the pigeons and any other playing birds should be killed.

5. To prevent kite-flying. The kite shops in the city should be abolished.

6. To prevent idolatry. In vehicles, shops, hotels, room and any other place pictures/ portraits should be abolished. The monitors should tear up all pictures in the above places.

7. To prevent gambling. In collaboration with the security police the main centers should be found and the gamblers imprisoned for one month.

8. To eradicate the use of addiction. Addicts should be imprisoned and investigation made to find the supplier and the shop. The shop should be locked and the owner and user should be imprisoned and punished.

9. To prevent the British and American hairstyle. People with long hair should be arrested and taken to the Religious Police department to shave their hair. The criminal has to pay the barber.

10. To prevent interest on loans, charge on changing small denomination notes and charge on money orders. All money exchangers should be informed that the above three types of exchanging the money should be prohibited. In case of violation criminals will be imprisoned for a long time.

11. To prevent washing cloth by young ladies along the water streams in the city. Violator ladies should be picked up with respectful Islamic manner, taken to their houses and their husbands severely punished.

12. To prevent music and dances in wedding parties. In the case of violation the head of the family will be arrested and punished.

13. To prevent the playing of music drum. The prohibition of this should be announced. If anybody does this then the religious elders can decide about it.

14. To prevent sewing ladies cloth and taking female body measures by tailor. If women or fashion magazines are seen in the shop the tailor should be imprisoned.

15. To prevent sorcery. All the related books should be burnt and the magician should be imprisoned until his repentance.

16. To prevent not praying and order gathering pray at the bazaar. Prayer should be done on their due times in all districts. Transportation should be strictly prohibited and all people are obliged to go to the mosque. If young people are seen in the shops they will be immediately imprisoned. (Extracted from Ahmad Rashid, “Taliban: Islam, Oil and the New Great game in Central Asia”, 2002, p. 217-219)