Rights in Flux: The Rights of Afghan Women in Different Eras

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RIGHTS IN FLUX: THE RIGHTS OF AFGHAN WOMEN IN DIFFERENT ERAS

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the degree of Master of Arts

By
Kelly A. Drevitch

May 2010
RIGHTS IN FLUX: THE RIGHTS OF AFGHAN WOMEN IN DIFFERENT ERAS

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ABSTRACT

RIGHTS IN FLUX: THE RIGHTS OF AFGHAN WOMEN IN DIFFERENT ERAS

By

Kelly Drevitch

May 2010

Dissertation supervised by Pat Dunham, Ph.D.

Have the lives of Afghan women improved since the U.S. invasion of October of 2001? Historically, the George W. Bush Administration followed past foreign governments, Afghan political parties, and Afghan regimes who also promised to “liberate Afghan women” when making the case for war or violence. Using case study methodology and feminist theory, the research compares the status of Afghan women in three eras: before the Taliban (1973 to 1995), during the Taliban (1996 to October 2001), and since the U.S. invasion (October 2001 to December 2009). By applying gender and cultural essentialism, the research concludes that these theories offer historical explanations for the little change in status and the continued oppression of Afghan women.
DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to the women of Afghanistan.
This project would have never been completed without the support and efforts of many individuals. I am blessed to have such positive individuals in my life.

First, I am forever thankful to Dr. Pat Dunham. Through her brilliance and guidance, I was able to transform my initial vague prospectus into a completed master’s thesis. I am also extremely grateful to Dr. McIntyre for her patience and support throughout this long thesis process. Thank you both for challenging me and providing to me your wisdom and insight. I also am grateful to Dr. Yenerall for his guidance and support throughout my tenure at the Graduate Policy Center. Thank you all for enriching my experience at Duquesne University and your kind support.

To my family, thank you for your never-ending support, constant understanding, and love. This project and my past two years of graduate school certainly limited my time and tested my stress in balancing my career with my desire to pursue higher education. Mom, there are no words to express how much your encouragement, belief in me, and love has been my calming force. Dad, you are a miracle and thanks for your humor at times when I really needed it. I love you both and am blessed to have the two most amazing parents. I also thank my amazing sister, Katie, and my wonderful Aunt Sherry. I love you all.

To my friends, thank you for your support and understanding for the past two years and especially, the past few months. To Becky, from kindergarten to now to tomorrow, thank you for everything. I treasure our friendship. To Kristy, your friendship means more to me than I can ever say. To all of my friends, I thank you all for just being
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION TO THESIS

1.1: Problem Definition and Background

“The Citizens of Afghanistan, whether man or woman, have equal rights and duties before the law,” reads Article 22 of the Constitution of Afghanistan. Theoretically, this statement would symbolize gender parity in Afghanistan’s legal and social worlds. Historically, this does not mark the first time that the Constitution of Afghanistan granted women the same freedom as men. In fact, individuals referred to the 1964 Afghanistan Constitution, under King Mohammad Zahir, as “a model for all of the Muslim World” (Lederman 2002:48). In the 1964 Constitution, Article 25 afforded all Afghan people, “without any discrimination or preference equal rights and obligations before the law.” Further, in the 1976 Constitution, under President Mohammad Daoud, Article 27 granted “both women and men, without discrimination and privilege, equal rights and obligations before the law.” Despite the symbolic equality written in these Constitutions, Afghan women have experienced brutally oppressive and restrictive lives under these different regimes.

Most writing and research about Afghanistan begins with a discussion of the past three decades of conflict and war that have plagued the country. While this is true, it does not always discuss that Afghan women were historically pawns and part of the rationale for war by different internal and external regimes. In fact, in 2001, before the official U.S. invasion of Afghanistan began, “saving Afghan women” was one justification touted by the George W. Bush Administration. According to the Bush Administration, “liberating women from the misogynistic rule of the Taliban” served as a cornerstone of their policy goals (Human Rights Watch 2004). However, are Afghan
women’s lives improving since the U.S. invasion compared to under the Taliban and before the Taliban? According to the 2007 Afghanistan Human Development Report (AHDR) 2007,¹ violence against women has reached “epidemic proportions” (Library of Parliament 2008:2). In 2007, one in three Afghanistan women still experienced physical, psychological, or sexual violence. Additionally, 87 percent of Afghan women still cannot read, and every 30 minutes an Afghan woman dies during childbirth (Afghanistan Online 2007). One must question the validity of the Constitution’s empowering verbiage and compare it to the lived reality of Afghanistan’s women. Are Afghan women’s lives improving or are they once again pawns in war? This thesis will explore how and whether women’s lives have improved since the U.S. invasion compared to before the Taliban and under the Taliban. This research will examine the history and status of women in these eras as well as explore both U.S. policy and Western feminist organizations’ campaigns.

1.2: Rationale for Research and Contributions to Research

In 2008 and 2009, the media, politicians, and women’s organizations increased their critique and coverage of U.S. policy in Afghanistan compared to earlier years when Afghanistan was the “forgotten war” and the focus was the Iraq War. Often, the U.S. media and U.S. politicians question U.S. policy in terms of American support for the war or the number of American troops killed. Meanwhile feminist organizations, like The

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Feminist Majority Foundation\(^2\) (FMF) and other Western feminist organizations, focus on “saving” Afghan women. For example, in March 2009, FMF (2009) publicized a new campaign “to help Afghan women and girls.”

A significant amount of research on U.S. policy dealing with factors like the military, narcotics, nation building, security and women’s rights in Afghanistan exists. In many cases, the research topics belong in separate spheres and operate in “silos” rather than in accordance with each other. According to Angela Y. Davis (2008:20), feminist author and Professor at the University of California, feminist methodology forces one to explore associations not necessarily visible and to connect items together that appear separate. In this thesis, I attempt to show a holistic perspective by using feminist theory in my examination of how governmental policies and feminist campaigns affect women’s policies, either directly or indirectly throughout history.

The research design is a case study that applies the theories of gender essentialism and cultural essentialism to compare the lives of women in Afghanistan before the Taliban, during the Taliban, and since the U.S. invasion. By evaluating relevant factors, this paper’s contribution will be an evaluation of the policy and campaign implementation in comparison to the goals of “liberating women” in Afghanistan.

1.3: Research Questions and Thesis Statement

In each of the three periods, the application of gender essentialism and cultural essentialism will attempt to analyze the status of women and consider the following research questions:

\(^2\) Founded in the late 1980’s, the mission of the Feminist Majority Foundation (FMF) is to advance women's equality, non-violence, economic development, and, most importantly, empowerment of women and girls in all sectors of society (www.feminist.org).
How have women’s rights improved in Afghanistan since the U.S. invasion compared to under the Taliban and before the Taliban?

If “liberating” (or saving) Afghan women is important, why do some policies negatively affect or overlook women?

How can the application of gender essentialism and cultural essentialism provide insights into why policy decisions often negatively affect or overlook Afghan women?

How can the application of gender essentialism and cultural essentialism provide insights on the justification for war in the name of “saving” Afghan women?

Thesis Statement: The thesis will apply the theories of gender essentialism and cultural essentialism to analyze the status of Afghan women in the three periods: before the Taliban, under the Taliban, and since the U.S. invasion. The goal is to see if these theories can help to describe and explain the differences in status for Afghan women in each of these eras.

1.4: Theoretical Framework

The rationale for feminist theory. According to Jennifer Ring (2006:10-12), feminist theory allows individuals to theorize through a different “lens” and potentially arrive at varying historical and political perspectives otherwise concealed by a traditional viewpoint. As earlier quoted by Angela Davis (2008:22), a feminist approach allows one to explore associations not necessarily visible and to connect items together that appear separate. The value of a feminist approach is more than just exploring these potential associations; it also explores the contradictions that arise from the traditional approach and the feminist approach.
According to Patricia McFadden (2008:56), “it has never been a secret that war is the most powerful instinct of patriarchal state and individual power.” When digging deeper into the historical context of war, the traditional approach risks not examining all the connections. With a feminist approach, it is possible to bring in factors that otherwise remain silent. Furthermore, the theoretical lens and application of the feminist perspective can potentially provide insight and more specifics for the broader questions.

The theory of essentialism. The theoretical framework for this research focuses on gender essentialism and cultural essentialism. Before applying these theories, it is important to examine briefly the theory of essentialism. According to Diana Fuss (1989), a feminist theorist and scholar, essentialism is

most commonly understood as a belief in the real, true essence of things, the invariable and fixed properties which define the “whatness” of a given entity. . . . Importantly, essentialism is typically defined in opposition to difference. . . .The opposition is a helpful one in that it reminds us that a complex system of cultural, social, psychical, and historical differences, and not a set of pre-existent human essences, position and constitute the subject. However, the binary articulation of essentialism and difference can also be restrictive, even obfuscating, in that it allows us to ignore or deny the differences within essentialism. (P. xi-xii)

The theory of essentialism spans across several disciplines, including the social sciences, feminist theory, biology, philosophy, anthropology, theology, education and psychology. Regarding the feminist approach, feminist scholar Allison Jaggar (2005) writes that essentialism has been “central to the women’s studies debate” and the critique of it “widely accepted.” Many feminist scholars have applied essentialism to explain “post-colonial feminism” and its effects on Third World women. In applying essentialism, whether it is cultural or gender, the value is the opportunity to reveal biases (Jaggar 2005). When individuals continue to attribute certain characteristics as belonging to a certain race, gender, or culture, they continue to stereotype or discriminate.
CHAPTER 2: RESEARCH DESIGN

2.1: Introduction to the Research Design

The research design is a case study applying the theories of gender essentialism and cultural essentialism to compare the lives of women in Afghanistan before the Taliban, during the Taliban, and since the U.S. invasion. The case study will be descriptive and explanatory and will include both qualitative and quantitative research.

2.2: Rationale for the Case Study Method

According to Yin, there are three elements to consider when deciding the best research strategy for a study. First, one needs to consider the form of the research questions. Second, one needs to ask if the project requires the researcher to control any behavioral elements. Third, the researcher needs to consider whether the study focuses on contemporary events. Yin believes that case studies are ideal when the research questions ask “how or why” questions, require no control of behavioral events, and focus on current events (2003:5-6). For this study, the research questions ask “how” and “why” questions pertaining to the theories and policies in the three case study eras. Last, this study does not control any behaviors of the variables being investigated.

Moreover, case studies provide rich detail in ways that other methods like surveys or experiments cannot provide. Since part of the focus is on contemporary events, the research provides real-life context to a reader. In addition, case studies help to preserve the holistic nature of what it is being studied (Yin 2003:1-2). Since this study focuses on the application of two theories, the case study method potentially offers a deeper understanding than other research strategies.
2.3: Defining the Case Study Periods

The case study defines these three periods as:

- **Before the Taliban:** This period includes the early 1970’s, when student movements started to cause civil unrest within Afghanistan, during the era of Soviet domination, the civil war, and pre-Taliban control. The case study will NOT include the earlier history of Afghan women and the time ranges from 1973 to 1995.

- **During the Taliban:** This period includes the years the Taliban controlled Afghanistan. This time ranges from 1996 to October 2001.

- **Since the U.S. Invasion:** This period covers the U.S. rationale for the invasion of Afghanistan, the immediate policy decisions made by the United States after the invasion, and the situation afterwards, ranging from October 2001 to December 2009.

2.4: Methods for Data Gathering

This project utilizes both primary and secondary sources. As far as primary sources, research includes first-hand research conducted by non-partisan public policy institutions, human rights organizations, the United Nations and United Nations’ programs and funds, non-governmental organizations, non-profit organizations, U.S. government agencies, foreign policy think tanks, security research centers, and international and domestic women’s organizations. Much of the primary sources include interviews/narratives collected from the above references. Women from Afghanistan representing different ethnic groups, different political affiliations, different regions, and different social class composites served as the primary participants in the interviews.
Additionally, some of the research studies, for example the *Human Rights Watch 2004* study, included interviews from non-governmental workers, journalists, United Nation’s workers, government officials, teachers, doctors, and international donors.

This project also utilizes secondary sources from additional government agency reports, women’s organizations, foundations, transcripts from U.S. Congressional hearings, books written about Afghanistan, and articles in foreign and domestic newspapers. Regarding the theoretical literature, scholarly articles and books written by feminist theorists were utilized. There was no usage of surveys or any personal communication with human subjects.

### 2.5: Units of Analysis

For the case study, policy that affects Afghan women in each of the three periods represents the units of analysis. This distinction is important, as it helped to limit the data collected. While policy differs in the three periods, each era includes factors that affect women legally, socioeconomically, politically, including their safety and their access to health care, education, and economic opportunities. For example, from 2001 to 2009, policy decisions on nation building, narcotics, and aid distribution were evaluated in how they affected Afghan women. In the other eras, nation building or aid distribution was not a policy. However, it is important to evaluate these policies and their effect on women in areas of security and their access to healthcare, education, and economic opportunities. While this project examines the policy in all of Afghanistan (no boundaries or limitations in certain provinces), there is a difference in how policies affects rural and urban women in each of the three periods. The definition of the theories
of gender essentialism and cultural essentialism remain constant in each era. Moreover, these theories are used to analyze the status of Afghan women in each of these periods.

2.6: Validity and Reliability

To meet the tests of construct validity, the research includes multiple sources of documents (primary and secondary nature) in the data collection segment. As described, this includes past works of several realms e.g., governmental, non-governmental, women’s organizations, and public policy institutions. This is important, since although an organization may be reputable, the use of a wide variety of sources avoids subjective bias. The definition of the units of analysis remains relatively consistent for the three periods.

Additionally, the use of research conducted by experts in the field also establishes reliability and validity. For example, organizations like Human Rights Watch receive rather universal credit for their reputation in defining human rights violations. Conducting research in war-torn areas like Afghanistan includes setbacks in establishing pure reliability and validity. For instance, one understands that it would be impossible to standardize conditions in Afghanistan to ensure reliability.

2.7: Analysis of the Data

To analyze the data, the study includes quantitative statistics and qualitative interviews (conducted by other sources) with women in each period. The theoretical application looks for similar conclusions in each period and helps to understand questions such as: 1) If “liberating” (or saving) Afghan women is important, why do some policies negatively affect or overlook women? 2) How can the application of gender essentialism and cultural essentialism provide insights into why policy decisions often negatively
affect or overlook Afghan women? 3) How can the application of gender essentialism and cultural essentialism provide insights on the justification for war in the name of “saving” Afghan women?

2.8: Conceptual Framework: Defining Women’s Status

The following chapters define and compare women’s status in these periods by using the following variables:

- Economic (i.e. labor force participation)
- Education (i.e. literacy rates, completion of schooling at the primary, secondary, and college level)
- Health-Related (i.e. life expectancy, reproductive health statistics, suicide rates, mental health)
- Legal (i.e. laws and policies that preclude or give legal rights, social rights, political rights, or infringe on their access to health care, education, and economic opportunities)
- Political (political participation and political representation) (i.e. how many women voted, how many women ran for office, and how many women are elected officials)
- Social (i.e. family policy, marriage policy, violence against women, domestic)
CHAPTER 3: LITERATURE REVIEW

3.1: Introduction: Origin and Definitions of Essentialism

Controversy over the theory of essentialism is not a new phenomenon. Rather the controversy spans countless centuries, several disciplines, and various cultures. The roots of essentialism in philosophy originated with Plato (428-348 BC) (DeLamater and Hyde 1998). According to Plato, the occurrences in the natural world “were simply reflections of a finite number of fixed or unchanging forms” (DeLamater and Hyde 1998). In Plato’s definition of essence, constancy and discontinuity represented the paramount properties, meaning the essence remained the same and was “categorically different from another essence” (DeLamater and Hyde 1998). Defined in Aristotelian terms, essentialism is “a belief in true essence, that which is most irreducible, unchanging, and therefore, constitutive of a given person or thing” (Fuss 1989:2). John DeLamater and Janet Shibley Hyde (1998) labeled Plato and Aristotle’s definition of essentialism as “classical essentialism.”

In contemporary discourse, the commonly accepted definition of essentialism differs from the Plato and Aristotle definition. According to DeLamater and Hyde (1998), modern essentialism is “a belief that certain phenomena are natural, inevitable,

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3 As mentioned earlier, these various disciplines include social sciences, feminist theory, biology, philosophy, anthropology, theology, education, and psychology.

4 Plato referred to the natural occurrences as the “eide.” During the Middle Ages, the philosophers studying Thomism renamed the “eide” to “essences” (DeLamater and Hyde 1998).

5 John DeLamater, PhD., Professor of Sociology at the University of Wisconsin Madison, served as the Editor of the Journal of Sex Research from 1997-2008, and authored several scholarly journal articles and books on gender, human sexuality, and social psychology.

6 Janet Shibley Hyde, PhD., Professor of Psychology and Women’s Studies at the University of Wisconsin Madison, authored several scholarly journal articles on the psychology of women, human sexuality, and gender-role development.
universal, and biologically determined.” While many criticize the theory of essentialism, the question of innate differences or innate similarities in sex or in race still ignites ardent debate, especially among feminist and race theorists.

Throughout history, essentialist attributes have been applied to gender, sex, sexual orientation, religion, race, culture, ethnicity, and other groups. In an essentialist vision, these attributes remain unchanged and withstand any cultural, societal, or historical influence. To an essentialist, “. . . history is an unbroken continuum that transports across cultures and time” (Fuss 1989:3). Furthermore, these perpetual essentialist attributes are evident in modern day “identity politics,” meaning the tendency or concept of an individual formulating their political beliefs based on “a sense of personal identity” (i.e. being gay, being a female, being Hispanic, being Black, or being Christian) (Fuss 1982:97). In society, essentialist traits create the dangers for unconscious discrimination, continued oppression, and resistance to social change.

3.2: Introduction to Gender Essentialism and Cultural Essentialism

While gender essentialism assumes differences between women and men, cultural essentialism assumes differences between cultures, especially between “Western culture and non-Western culture” or “Western culture and particular ‘Other’ cultures” (Narayan

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7 It is important to distinguish the difference between gender and sex. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), sexes refer to the biological and physiological characteristics that define women and men (i.e. different genitals). Gender refers to the socially constructed roles, behaviors, attitudes, attributes, or activities socially assigned to women and men (i.e. masculine or feminine qualities). Sex and gender are not interchangeable definitions. For more information, visit, WHO, “What do we mean by sex and gender?” http://www.who.int/gender/whatisgender/en/index.html.
2000:82). Both gender and cultural essentialism share a number of parallels with each other. As Uma Narayan,\(^8\) feminist scholar, (2000) said,

“essential differences” operate in a manner that helps construct the senses of gender identity and of cultural identity that shape the self-understandings and subjectivities of different groups of people who inhabit the discursive contexts. . . . Both often operate to conceal their role in the production and reproduction of such “differences,” presenting these differences as something pre-given and prediscursively “real” that the discourses of difference merely describe rather than help construct and perpetuate. (P. 82)

Gender essentialism is a binary belief that biological differences exist between women and men. These differences include the qualities, abilities, or locations of “men” and “women” (Narayan 2000:82). For example, a gender essentialist may define men as strong, aggressive, violent, brave, and independent while women as weak, passive, gentle, cowardly, or emotional (Ratliff 2004). Men are “dominating,” while women are “dominated” (Fuss 1982:46). Some feminist theorists argue that the essentialist depiction of men as dominating women is often in the context of dominating women’s bodies and their sexuality (Fuss 1982:46).

Gender essentialism treats women as a monolithic category, where gender supersedes any other group membership of a woman (i.e. race, religion, class). Moreover, gender essentialism then reduces women (and men) to a constructed “essence.” In this essentialist view, attributes that define women’s (or men’s) essence then apply to “all” women (or men).

Cultural essentialism assumes all persons in a culture share the same universal attributes, morals, and or attitude. Historically, this form of essentialism has reduced individuals to an “essential” attribute of what it means to be Afghan, African, American,

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\(^8\) Uma Narayan is an Associate Professor of Philosophy at Vassar College and author of several books and scholarly articles, including *Dislocating Cultures: Identities, Traditions, and Third World Feminism* and co-editor of *Reconstructing Political Theory: Feminist Perspectives* and *Decentering the Center*. 
Asian, or Middle Eastern, etc. For instance, in the historical context of colonization, this “reduction” created hierarchal differences and separation between the colonizers and the colonized, specifically in sex and race (Mohanty 1991:17). This cultural and gender essentialist example characterized white men (the colonizers) as “naturally born to rule,” while characterizing the colonized (both men and women) as “childlike subjects” (Mohanty 1991:17). For the colonizers, the “superiority” of “Western values” like equality, liberty, and freedom served as the rationale for colonization. However, during the epoch of colonization, the West did not fully practice these “values” within the colonized countries or within their own borders through the participation of slavery and the deprivation of certain freedoms to their own population, including women (Narayan 2000:83-84).

Conversely, nationalist movements within non-Western countries, especially in the context of anti-colonial struggles, have also “reduced” Western values to an “essence,” making the label of “Westernization” derogatory. For example, Narayan (1997:404-409) described how nationalist Indian men and women believed in a “dichotomy between the ‘material’ West and the ‘spiritual’ East.” In this example, Indian women became an essence that protected against “Westernization and its implied pollution.” While the British charged “Indian spiritualism” as proof of their inability to self-rule, the Indian nationalists only welcomed this label as proof of their “superiority” to the West. Thus, in an attempt to differentiate from “Western culture,” colonized nationalists built upon their non-Western essences as badges of cultural honor (Narayan 2000:84).
In the post-colonial context, this ongoing dichotomy and use of cultural essentialism has continued to create complexities, especially for women rights and human rights. For example, some Third World feminists, like Narayan (1997:396), described the criticism directed at them within their own cultures from those who consider their views “attacking their ‘Nonwestern culture’ on the basis of ‘Western’ values.” In many cases, the questions of different cultural values and cultural traditions collide with the questions of human rights, universalism, and cultural relativism. In fact, some non-Western governments and leaders engage in cultural essentialism to defend violations of human rights. To them, the concept of human rights serves as the newest form of Western imperialism. As Michael Goodhart (2003) stated, cultural essentialism also includes “reducing the most important theoretical questions about human rights to the core questions of whether such an ‘essential’ connection exists between a given culture and ‘universal’ human rights doctrines.”

3.3: Essentialism within Feminist Studies

For decades, the question of essentialism has served at the heart of debates within feminist studies (Jaggar 2005). As Fuss (1982:2) outlined in Essentially Speaking, feminist theorists have discovered assumptions derived from essentialist perspectives. For example, Fuss (1982:2) discussed how the concept of “pure or original femininity” as being a biological essence rather than a social construction originated from essentialist thought. Further, some feminists advocate that essentialism expicates “universal female oppression,” the belief that patriarchal dominance transcends all cultures (Fuss 1982:2). Jaggar (2005) refers to this as global radical feminism, where there is a belief in a “global sisterhood.” Moreover, Fuss (1982:2) argued that essentialism surfaces the most strongly
within feminism itself, describing women to feminism as the “unity of its object of inquiry even when it is at pains to demonstrate the differences with this admittedly generalizing and imprecise category.” Often, many feminists struggle not to engage in essentialism.

According to Jaggar (2005), global radical feminists argue that women as a group are predisposed to a unique kind of oppression that is universal while post-colonial feminists argue against this uniform oppression. Rather, post-colonial feminists theorize that different factors of women’s oppression exist worldwide, which includes the factors of historical colonialism and neo-colonialism (Jaggar 2005). Post-colonial feminists assert that essentialist assumptions about women’s universal oppression fail to consider the oppression created by women’s class, ethnicity, race, age, or nationality (Jaggar 2005). The feminist critique of the “universal woman” as “white, middle-class, heterosexual, and privileged in some capacity” is widely accepted among many theorists (Jaggar 2005). Additionally, this critique extends to the generalizations of the “universal woman’s problems” (Narayan 2000:80).

Due to this criticism, many feminists argue for the consideration of differences among women to preclude essentialist generalizations that do not address the concerns of many women, especially in the Third World perspective (Narayan 2000:81). However, according to Narayan (2000:81), in attempts to avoid gender essentialism, feminists often replace it with cultural essentialism. Cultural essentialism then treats women within one culture as a monolithic group, reducing them to an “essence” (i.e. all Afghan women, all Muslim women, all Indian women, all Western women) (Narayan 2000:81).
Narayan (2000:83) attributes inadequate knowledge of the relationship between “cultural imperialism” and “gender essentialism” as part of the reason why some Western feminists engage in cultural essentialism. According to Narayan (2000):

The gender essentialism perpetuated by relatively privileged subjects, including Western feminists, is understood to be a form of “cultural imperialism,” whereby privileged subjects tend to construct their “cultural Others” in their own image, taking their particular locations and problems to be those of “All Women.” This account ignores the degree to which cultural imperialism often proceeds by means of an “insistence on Difference,” by a projection of Imaginary “differences” that constitute one’s Others as Other, rather than via an “insistence on Sameness.” Failing to see that “cultural imperialism” can involve both sorts of problems, attempts to avoid the Scylla of “Sameness” often result in moves that leave one foundering on the Charybdis of “Difference.” (P. 83)

“Cultural imperialism” mimics the political and historical motive of “the Western moral and cultural superiority” given for colonialism (Narayan 2000:83). In this colonial context, the notion of Western superiority and the colonized nationalist backlash against the colonizers relied upon the “insistence on Difference” between the two cultures (Narayan 2000:83). According to Narayan (2000:83), a Western feminist must recognize the historical “insistence on Difference” to avoid cultural essentialism.

Western feminists and human rights organizations often hold a legitimate interest and well-meaning concern regarding the exploitation of Third World women or certain cultural practices within non-Western cultures (i.e. female genital mutilation\(^9\) (FGM), honor killings\(^10\), sati\(^11\), etc.). However, the danger is when Western feminists portray these issues in an essentialist illustration. Meaning, they treat the issues as emblematic of

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\(^9\) Female gender mutilation (FGM), also called female genital cutting, refers to the deeply rooted tradition of removing all or part of the female genitalia.

\(^10\) Honor killings refer to male family members murdering girls or women within their family for actual, alleged, or perceived immoral behavior.

\(^11\) Sati, also spelled sañi or suttee, is a Hindu practice whereby a widow immolates herself on the funeral pyre of her husband. Source: www.dictionary.com.
the “culture as a whole” or by “marginalizing all Third World women as underprivileged” while simultaneously casting all Western women as privileged (Narayan 2000:83-84). In her well-known article *Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses*, Chandra Talpade Mohanty (1991) discusses some Western feminists’ view of the “average Third World woman” compared to Western feminists themselves:

This average Third World woman leads an essentially truncated life based on her feminine gender (read: sexually constrained) and her being “Third World” (read ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition-bound, domestic, family-oriented, victimized, etc.). . . . In contrast to the (implicit) self-representation of Western women as educated, as modern, as having control over their own bodies and sexualities, and the freedom to make their own decisions. (P. 56)

To Narayan, if feminists reject essentialism regarding “women,” then feminists must also reject essentialism regarding “nation or culture” (Nicholson 1997:321). Otherwise, it just perpetuates the strength of essentialism of any sort to withstand time.

However, some theorists raise concerns that omitting any essentialist attributes to women then “pulls the theoretical rug from under feminist activism” (Jaggar 2005). In fact, theorists have questioned “if the risk of essence must be taken” (Fuss 1983:18). In her famous essay, “Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography,” acclaimed theorist, professor, and literary critic Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak introduced the term “strategic essentialism.” In *The Second Wave: Reader in Feminist Theory*, Linda Nicholson (1997:318) described strategic essentialism as “an essentialism that does not attribute any essence to womanhood in a real or ontological sense but which employs positive ideas about being a ‘woman’ for the sake of political action.” While often misunderstood within feminist theory, “strategic essentialism” provides feminists with a “certain alibi to essentialism” (Nicholson 1997:318). To Spivak, strategic essentialism is
a “persistent critique, a continuous recognition of the dangers of that which is
unavoidably useful” (Nicholson 1997:318). Moreover, Spivak stressed that strategic
essentialism must be viewed as a “strategy” and not as a “theory” that allows a temporary
acceptance of essentialism about women to advance social action and “the necessity of

3:4: Essentialism in the Context of Women and War

Historically, women have served as the metaphorical pawns in war and conflict
situations. Unfortunately, the case of “saving Afghan women” is not new. As noted
earlier, Patricia McFadden said, “it has never been a secret that war is the most powerful
instinct of patriarchal state and individual power” (McFadden 2008:56). In times of war,
gender essentialism exaggerates the different attributes and qualities assigned to women
and men. Gender essentialism would define men as aggressive and strong while women
would be non-aggressive, caring, helpless, weak, and passive. Additionally, gender
essentialism “evolves into more distinct categories as the military conflict escalates” with
men as both the “perpetrator and the protector” (Fluri 2008:143). As Zillah Eisenstein
(2008:34) said, “Gender naturalizes war; and war is gendered. Masculinity and
femininity are set as normal oppositions . . . . The essentialist argument assigns these
categories in nature while masking the artificial gendering of wars.”

Throughout the history of war, women have been illustrated as the “beautiful
souls,” while men are the “just warriors” (Elshtain 1987:3-13). In the context of war and
politics, Jean Beth Elshtain (1987:3-X) argued that “women are represented as being
laced through and through with sexual and maternal imagery, including the residues of an
everlasting and often intimate combat and cooperation with men in war and peace.”
For instance, while men represent the “just warriors,” women represent the peaceful non-combatants that need to be saved (Elshtain 1987:3-13). Society expects a woman’s role in war to be peaceful or nurturing, like a “pacifist protestor” (peaceful) or a “militant mother” (nurturing) (Elshtain 1987:3). While certainly, peaceful and nurturing represent positive attributes, assigning them as solely “women’s traits” further exaggerates women’s roles as only mothers and their bodies as outlets for reproduction. As Elshtain (1987:3-13) simply stated regarding the roles of women and men in war, “Men are life-takers, while women are life-givers.”

People often justify that in war, collateral damage is the trade-off for the “just cause.” Often, the collateral damage represents women who were the “just cause.” In war, women often receive the brunt of the violence. Even in modern warfare, it is estimated that women and children comprise 80 percent of the casualties and that 70 percent of the casualties in any conflict are non-combatants (Mohanty, Pratt, and Riley 2008:9; United Nation’s Development Fund for Women 2007b). Inevitably, the consequences of war extend far beyond collateral damage. Historically, rape has served as a silent “weapon of war,” where women’s bodies become a part of the battlefield (United Nation’s Development Fund for Women 2007b). For example, in the 1994 Rwanda genocide, up to half a million women were raped and in the Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina War, at least 60,000 women were reportedly raped (United Nation’s Development Fund for Women 2007b). Eistenstein (2008) described rape as part of the “gendered war”:

Rape articulates the violence encoded in gender; in wartime, it reinscribes the continuity of gender inscription of woman as victim rather than actor. Yet enemies, male or female, are also feminized in the process. . . . Men are demasculinized by the rape of their daughters or wives. Everyone is shamed in this process. (P. 37)
According to the United Nation's Development Fund for Women (2006), “Wartime sexual violence has been one of history's greatest silences.”

Women also experience the realities of war like loss of loved ones, loss of residence, and loss of their life, as they knew it (Mohanty et al. 2008:9). In addition, women unequally suffer from the economic hardships of war, like unemployment and lack of educational opportunities. For example, after the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq, Iraqi women experienced disproportional rates of unemployment compared to Iraqi men. Prior to the invasion, 72 percent of salaried Iraqi women were public employees. After the invasion, many of them endured job loss as the ministries were dissolved and men received preference for the few job openings (Chew 2008:76). According to Huibin Chew (2008:77), Iraqi women have followed an unsettling trend studied by feminist’s scholars regarding women in conflict nations. Since 2003, poverty has increased amongst Iraqi women as has the number of women engaging in prostitution.

Women after the conflict. While women often serve as the rationale for war, they often are deemed secondary once the war is over. According to the RAND Corporation\(^\text{12}\), the primary goal for a post-conflict nation is inevitably security. With that, research by RAND indicates that often the attempts to avoid violence surpass everything else and disagreements sometimes arise between those who serve as the nation building policymakers and those who serve as advocates for women (Bernard et al. 2007:11).

\(^{12}\) The RAND Corporation is a nonprofit institution with a mission to improve policy and decision-making through research and analysis. The RAND Corporation is headquartered in Santa Monica, California with national and international offices.
While those in charge of nation building may agree on the objective of women in an “equitable, democratic, and egalitarian society” free of human rights violations, they often view women’s rights as a secondary goal (Bernard et al. 2007:11). For example, consider the Iraq War. In an article in *Foreign Affairs*, Ambassador Swanee Hunt stated that after the initial “shock and awe” attack in 2003, she questioned a Pentagon colonel regarding recruiting Iraqi women as leaders along with Iraqi men. According to Hunt, he responded, “Ambassador Hunt, we’ll address women’s issues after we get the place secure” (Bernard et al. 2007:4). Often, rather than including women as part of the security plan in the nation-building process, policymakers view women as a potential danger that can jeopardize the entire process. In a country with a democratic objective, it is difficult to reach that goal without both genders. Democracy without women cannot happen. Reports also indicate that when the focus is stability without the consideration of women, women then experience “an extension of violence” (Cohen 2006:266). Without being part of the process, women often also experience the same political repression and the country maintains the same patriarchal power structure.

Women in developing nations often face domestic violence and rape. The confusion between formal laws and customary laws serves as an obstacle in understanding their rights, whether it be regarding violence or property rights. Moreover, in developing nations, abused women often accept both their inferior status and the patriarchal structure (Cohen 2006:261). For instance in 2003, a study by United Nations Development Fund for Women, revealed that two-thirds of women surveyed in Morocco and Algeria believed that domestic violence could be justified at times (Cohen 2006: 261). Additionally, some consider a woman “dishonoring” their family if she is raped.
In some Muslim countries, honor killings still exist when a woman “dishonors” the family. Furthermore, some countries may even legally justify an “honor-killing.” Pakistan and Jordan both have laws that allow honor killings in certain circumstances (Cohen 2006:261).

Understanding this context is important and indicates that women in post-conflict developing nations often suffer physical and sexual attacks and economical, psychological, and health problems. Additionally, it shows that, unfortunately, the trend of not involving women in nation building negatively affects them and the country. Next, this opens the questions of how and why women often serve as the rationale for war while experiencing the biggest burdens of war.

3:5 Saving Women is Not a New Concept

Historically, the rhetoric made by men “to save women” has continued for centuries in both domestic and international contexts. To many societies, women are the “emblems of cultural integrity” (Jaggar 2000:1). According to Seyla Benhabib, “Women and their bodies are the symbolic-cultural site upon which human societies inscript their moral order” (Jaggar 2005). This essentialist notion of preserving a woman’s purity has included controlling her dress, marriage, sexuality, rights, and role in society. For example, in American history, anti-suffragists equated their movement as a way to preserve a “woman’s condition of purity.” In a speech against suffrage, one anti-suffragist said,

Man assumed the direction of government and war, woman of the domestic and family affairs and the care and training of the child. . . . It has been so from the beginning . . . and it will continue to be so to the end, because it is in conformity to nature and its laws, and is sustained and confirmed by the experience and reason of six thousand years. . . . The domestic altar is a sacred flame where woman is the high and officiating priestess. . . . To keep her in that condition of purity, it is necessary
that she should be separated from the exercise of suffrage and from all those stern and contaminating and demoralizing duties that devolves upon the hardier sex—man. (Elshtain 1987:5)

Through a theoretical lens, essentialism provides an explanation for the continued oppression of women who reside in war-torn, developing nations. Using this lens, Third World women become a figurative ping-pong ball shuffled between cultural essentialism and gender essentialism utilized by both the West and within their own patriarchal countries. Meaning, while the West criticizes certain cultural practices and the denial of women’s rights within Third World countries, the Third World countries epitomize women as the symbol of “cultural preservation” (Narayan 2000:83).

From a historical perspective, the Bush administration’s mission “to liberate Afghan women” follows a long-line of wars waged in the name of “saving women.” During the colonial period, the British engaged in “saving women” rhetoric as the rationale for colonizing in both India and Egypt, while the French touted “women rights” for their occupation in Algeria (Abu-Lughod 2002). Within feminist discourse, much influential literature exists on the history of “saving women” by feminist scholars like Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Leila Ahmed, Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Lila Abu-Lughod, Uma Narayan, and many others.

In her article, “Can the Subaltern Speak,” Spivak (1988) created the well-known term of “white men saving brown women from brown men” regarding the British justifying their mission “to save brown women” from the “uncivilized” practice of sati. Likewise, British Victorian feminists also believed that Indian women needed to be “saved” and rallied against this “uncivilized” practice. Conversely, nationalist Indian men also considered their political role as “crucially connected to improving the status of
Indian women” (Narayan 1997:403). In “Contesting Cultures: ‘Westernization,’ Respect for Cultures and Third World Feminists,” Narayan (1997) described this colonial dichotomy between Victorian feminists and Indian nationalists men:

In the colonial context, “Indian women appeared to them (Victorian feminists) to be the natural and logical ‘white woman’s burden.’” Indian nationalist men similarly saw their political role as crucially connected to “improving the status of Indian women” . . . . Both Victorian feminists and Indian nationalist men constructed “the Indian woman” as a site upon which to ground their own demands for political liberation and agency, giving them both an Other to “speak for” in a context where “speaking for” was “one of the prerequisites of political subjectivity.” 13 (P. 403)

In the context of cultural essentialism, the Victorian feminists and the British defined “sati” as essential “Indian culture.” However, while some Indian women practiced sati, it generally was limited only to small numbers of Hindu Indian women, not all Indian women (Narayan 1997:405). In the context of gender essentialism, the male Indian nationalists defined their role as saving Indian women and improving their status.

Leila Ahmed famously depicted another classic example of “saving women” rhetoric as a rationale for colonialism. In her prominent Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate, Ahmed (1992) discussed Lord Cromer, a British consul general in Egypt at the beginning of the twentieth century. To Lord Cromer, the veil was “uncivilized” and represented the unjust seclusion and oppression of Egyptian women imposed by Islam. However, he simultaneously opposed women’s suffrage in Britain (Ahmed 1992). This example shows again the utilization of both gender and cultural essentialism. To Lord Cromer, it was not the question of whether women should have rights; it was the question of the most “civilized” way to deprive women of their rights.

13 In this section, Narayan references Antoinette Burton’s Burdens of History: British Feminists, Indian Women, and Imperial Culture, 1865-1915.
The use of “saving women” rhetoric represents a continuum of history repeating itself. Thus, one can draw parallels from these examples to the current subject of “saving Afghan women.” First, like the example of Indian women, some Western feminists and some American conservatives agree on the need to “save Afghan women,” much like British feminists and colonizers agreed sati was “uncivilized.” Second, similar to Nationalist Indian men, some Afghan men have historically positioned themselves politically to protect and save Afghan women. Third, to many Western policymakers and feminists, the burqa\(^{14}\) has emerged as the symbol of cultural oppression of Muslim women and the concept of unveiling as the sign of their liberation. This example resonates much like Lord Cromer’s view of the veil as culturally uncivilized.

While to the West the veil symbolizes cultural oppression, Ahmed (1992) argued that since the twentieth century, the veil to Muslim societies, symbolizes their tradition and resistance to the West. Through a theoretical lens, this example highlights the omnipresence of gender essentialism and the perpetual pushback of cultural essentialism between Western countries and non-Western countries. From a gender essentialist perspective, the veil represents “women’s sexual freedom,” reducing women to their sexuality and ability to “uncover.” Kelly Oliver (2007) discussed this in her *Women as Weapons of War: Iraq, Sex, and the Media*. Regarding veiling (Oliver 2007), she said:

> women’s freedom is reduced to women’s sexual freedom, which in turn is reduced to the freedom to reveal their bodies in public. Whether women’s right to bare arms merely makes them more sexually available to men or allows them to celebrate their own bodies, their agency is circumscribed by social forces that discipline even as they liberate. The modern woman is the subject of the free market. Hers is the freedom to shop. (P. 51)

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\(^{14}\) Burqa is a head to toe covering for women made of mesh cloth so that women can see or breathe through the covering. Sometimes, individuals will use the word *chador* or *chaddari*, which is a veil that is culturally specific and variable among different Islamic countries.
Some Muslims cast the depiction of un-veiling as a sign of “evil” Westernization and sexual promiscuity. Hence, in this view, a woman wearing a veil symbolizes “traditional and authentic values” (Oliver 2007:51). For instance, since the inception of the Iraq War, there has been a movement to “re-veil” Iraqi women, potentially as a response against the U.S. occupation (Oliver 2007:51). In this example, some Iraqi men position re-veiling Iraqi women as “saving” their culture from Westernization.

3.6: Conclusion of the Literature Review

Historically, gender and cultural essentialism show how women are the continuous pawns in conflicts and post-conflicts. Thus, the case of “saving” Afghan women is not unique in this aspect. However, gender essentialism does provide potential explanations for why this historical tradition of “saving women” has continued for centuries. In this case study, cultural essentialism also provides potential insight for the decades of struggle Afghan women have endured in improving their status. These theories are relevant to this case study as they historically have offered richer insight otherwise unseen. Historically, gender and cultural essentialism provide theoretical understanding of how this perpetual utilization negatively affects women.
CHAPTER 4: SOCIAL AND POLITICAL OVERVIEW OF AFGHANISTAN IN THE
THREE ERAS

4.1: The Historical Imbalance Between Afghan Culture and Women’s Rights

Afghanistan is a traditional country with deep patriarchal roots and a tribal-based family structure. In Afghanistan, family is at the heart of the society. Oftentimes, the balance of tradition, family, and Islam has collided with “women’s rights.” In Afghan society, some view women as “half of men,” which is a common phrase within the country (Brodsky 2004:37). In the tribal-based family structure, society deems women as the “receptacle of honor” (Ahmed-Gosh 2003:3). Much of this cultural role originated from the Pashtunwali code, which is an ancient ethnic custom and a tribal code of the Pashtuns.15 According to Women for Women International16 (2009), Pashtunwali code is the “absolute duty of men to protect the respectability of women and the integrity of the homeland.” Throughout history, the preservation of women’s honor through tribal laws often superseded any constitutional law or progressive reform that would have benefited Afghan women. Most Afghans place their primary values as community and group identity. Often, women view their identity as central to their family’s identity and not in separate individual spheres. To rural women, the value of “individual identity” is a foreign concept (Rostami-Povey 2007:17).

Historically, Afghan monarchs and politicians, warlords, and foreign powers have used Afghan women as “political pawns.” Even as early as the 1920’s, there have been

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15 Throughout history and in modern times, the Pashtuns represented the largest ethnic group in Afghanistan and dominated much of the political leadership. President Hamid Karzai is of Pashtun descent.

16 Women for Women International is a nonprofit 501 (c) (3) organization with a mission of helping women of war torn countries rebuild their lives. www.womenforwomen.org
attempts to create equality for Afghan women. In addition, there is a deep divide between rural Afghanistan and urban Afghanistan. Urban women often experienced reform while in the rural areas patriarchal tradition precluded any changes. Even in modern times, there is a clear cultural divide between rural Afghanistan and urban Afghanistan. In 2008, 75 percent of the population resided in rural areas. Historically, most political, civil, and social gains experienced by women occurred in Kabul or other urban settings, not the rural areas. As stated in the Parliamentary Information, “the reality of a nomad woman is different from that of a village woman, and both are different from an urban university graduate woman” (Library of Parliament 2008:2).

Many Western governments and organizations categorize women’s rights in Afghanistan as either “before the Taliban” or “after the Taliban.” It is important to realize that oppression did not start with the Taliban, and oftentimes, oppression was a partial result of the patriarchal and tribal-based family structure. This patriarchal family structure does not mean that all Afghan men are oppressive or “women-haters.” On the contrary, many Afghan men and women believe that the oppression of women, especially in education, violates Islam. Some Afghan men believe that in Islam, “. . . men and women have the right to knowledge, that it is their duty as human beings to educate and to be educated” (Daoud 2002:104). According to Anne Brodsky (2004), author of With all our Strength: The Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan, many Afghan men understand the negative consequences of women’s oppression in society. In fact, many Afghan women view Afghan men as part of the solution, not part of the problem. It is also important to realize that while women’s equality never existed in Afghanistan, progressive reforms and attempts were made at different times.
Nevertheless, even prior to the Soviet Invasion and the three decades of war, Afghan women had one of the lowest social statuses in the world. For example, Physicians for Human Rights (1998) stated that historically, over 80 percent of women in Afghanistan were illiterate. Thus, even in the best of times, only 20 percent of Afghan women could read.

4.2: Brief Historical Review of the Afghan Political Environments in the Three Eras: The Early Twentieth Century Background

While Afghanistan has historically struggled with balancing Islam and women’s rights, the early twentieth century actually included rather progressive movements towards democracy and modernization. In fact, at one time, people considered Afghanistan as a model of progress and reform in Muslim states (Khan 2008:163). From 1919 to 1929, King Amanullah ruled Afghanistan. After the country won independence from the British, progressive reform started to take place. In 1920, Afghan women received the right to vote. Additional reforms included the opening of schools for girls, an increase in the minimum age to marry, and the elimination of the bridal dowry. With these modern changes also came opposition from the conservative Islam clerics and rural tribes. This political unrest ultimately forced King Amanullah into exile in 1929. The next King favored the conservatives and overturned many modernizations, including revoking women’s right to vote (Brodsky 2004:35).

From 1933 to 1973, under the rule of King Mohammad Zahir, Afghanistan’s political environment experienced relatively progressive reforms and notably, a period of civil stability. By 1964, women again received the right to vote and the right to enter into politics. Further, Afghanistan made other advancements including the banning of child
marriage, changes in laws regarding polygamy, and the opening of girls’ schools (*Human Rights Watch* 2004). In the 1960s, women were encouraged to “unveil.” In fact, at several points in Afghan history, the wives and daughters of Afghan diplomats and leaders chose not to wear veils when traveling abroad (Brodsky 2004:35).

4.3: *The End of Political Stability and the Pre-Taliban Political Environment*

While the political environment remained relatively stable for 40 years in Afghanistan, 1973 started the beginning of political turmoil and enduring civil unrest. In 1973, Mohammad Daoud\(^{17}\) overthrew King Mohammad Zahir, eliminating the monarchy system and declaring himself President of Afghanistan. While Daoud originally united with the People’s Democratic Party of Afghanistan\(^{18}\) (PDPA), a Marxist political group, in ousting King Mohammad Zahir he attempted to disassociate himself with both the PDPA and the Soviet Union government once in power.

From 1973 to 1978, the political environment continued to support reforms in Afghanistan. While Kabul started to modernize, the rural areas remained unchanged and still “backwards” (Qazi 2009). Politically, Daoud changed the government structure from aristocratic to bureaucratic. Additionally, Daoud depended heavily on military and economic aid from both the Soviet Union and the United States (Rostami-Povey 2007:10). While Daoud pledged to democratize Afghanistan, he actually executed more

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\(^{17}\) Mohammed Daoud served as the Prime Minister of Afghanistan under King Mohammad Zahir and was also his cousin. The overthrow was a bloodless coup and many historians believed that King Mohammad Zahir had prior knowledge of the coup.

\(^{18}\) Founded in 1965 by Nur Mohammed Taraki, Babrak Karmal and others, People’s Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) was a Marxist political group in Afghanistan. In 1966, the group split into two factions, Taraki’s *Khalq* (literally “people”) branch and Karmal’s *Parcham* (literally “banner”) branch.
control over the country, including the press, limited political activity to just one political party, and made it an “autocratic, centralized, and repressive regime” (Brodsky 2004:49).

In this same period, the Afghan student movement exploded with different political groups (e.g., socialist groups, Marxist and Maoist organizations, right-wing Islamic extremists, and pro-democracy groups) (Brodsky 2004:42). While each group protested in order to shift Afghanistan into their definition of a better society, the visions between the groups, especially right and left, conflicted with each other. As the student movements began, so did violent conflicts against each other. The right-wing Islamic groups fought against modernization and secularism while the other groups protested issues like workers’ wages or the lack of jobs (Brodsky 2004:42).

Urban Afghan women often participated in these movements through involvement in leftist or pro-democracy organizations. However, while many of the leftist groups believed women’s rights to be instrumental for societal change, women’s rights were never the priority. Conversely, women essentially “had no place or worth” within the right-wing groups (Brodsky 2004:55-57). As no group focused exclusively on women’s rights, Meena,19 a 20-year old activist, founded the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan20 (RAWA) in 1977. RAWA’s mission was to aid and to empower women as well as to create a free and secular democratic society for all Afghans (Brodsky 2004:55-57).

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19 Brodsky mentioned throughout the book that last names are not common in Afghanistan and the use of them is relatively new. Further, Meena often changed her name for security reasons and her own safety. Thus, to refer to Meena as just Meena is common. However, for Western media requests, Meena had a surname of Keshwar Kamal. A right-wing conservative group assassinated Meena on February 4, 1987.

20 RAWA, which still operates today, is the oldest political/social organization of Afghan women struggling for peace, freedom, democracy and women's rights in Afghanistan (www.rawa.org).
In 1978, loyalists of the PDPA supported by the Soviet Union led a military coup against Daoud, assassinating him. From 1978 to 1979, the PDPA then controlled the country, also promising democracy, reform, and freedom. Yet, even within this political group, disagreements and fighting occurred between the Khalq and Parcham branches\(^{21}\) (Brodsky 2004:50). While the group continued with modernizations to Afghanistan, they executed the changes with violence and killed “scores of innocent people” (Qazi 2009).

In 1979, the Soviet Union formally invaded Afghanistan and for the next 10 years, much of Afghan society suffered from the war violence. The Soviet regime and the *Mujahideen*\(^{22}\) committed human rights atrocities against the Afghan population (Human Rights Watch 2005). In addition to the brutal violence and torture against political adversaries, the Soviet regime suppressed academic freedom through the indoctrination of Soviet and Marxist studies, suppressed civil liberties, considered anyone with American ties as a potential CIA threat, trained spies in the workforce and schools, and repressed the individual (Helsinki Watch 1984). Furthermore, Human Rights Watch estimates that during the 1980s, Afghanistan received more light weapons than other country and has more landmines than any other country (Human Rights Watch 2005; Hartman 2002). It is estimated that 1.9 million Afghans, both fighters and civilians, died in the 10-year conflict with the Soviet Union (Brodsky 2004:52). Starting in 1980, the United States continuously funded factions of the Mujahideen, with the intention of

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\(^{21}\) Khalq and Parcham were both different factions in the PDPA. Much of the resentment and fighting dealt with the difference in ideology. Khalq believed strongly in Marxist/Leninist theory while Parcham believed in a gradual change to socialism.

\(^{22}\) *Mujahideen* in Arabic literally means “holy warriors” (plural term of *mujahid*). During the Soviet invasion, Mujahideen referred to the various Soviet-resistance groups in Afghanistan. After the Soviet departure, some groups started to refer to the Mujahideen as the *jehadis*.
making the Soviet Union fail (Kolhatkar and Ingalls 2006). Moreover, the CIA provided training to the Mujahideen, helping to create “some of the deadliest urban guerilla warriors in the world” (Hartman 2002). In fact, President Ronald Reagan, depicted the Mujahideen forces as the “as the moral equivalent of the Founding Fathers of the United States” (Jaggar 2005).

Under control of the Soviets, rural and urban Afghanistan experienced different political environments. For example, in rural areas, uneducated and armed Mujahideen predominately fought against the Soviets and experienced most of the “all out war.” In the urban areas, educated independent groups executed protests, delivery of political propaganda, assassinations, and guerilla bombs against the Soviets and Pro-Soviet supporters (Brodsky 2004:62). Additionally, the urban Afghans also experienced “political oppression, governmental violence, and police state tactics” as Kabul marked one of the only areas where Soviet forces and supporters retained control (Brodsky 2004:63). While some Mujahideen fought for patriotic reasons, others fought to gain fundamentalist control and used Sharia Law23 against those who failed to obey (Brodsky 2004:59). Many in the Soviet resistance groups had no abilities to govern, only in how to fight and those who emerged as rural leaders and warlords often represented the “the most fundamental, brutal, and anti-democratic” leaders, especially against Afghan women (Brodsky 2004:60).

After the Soviet withdrawal in 1989, President Najibullah, the Soviet-backed leader, took power in Afghanistan and the country emerged into a civil war. After three years of the civil war, seven factions of the Mujahideen overthrew Najibullah in April

23 Islamic religious law.
1992. Due to the division between the seven groups, the civil war continued and none of the groups could successfully stabilize a central government (Amnesty International 1995). The resistance groups included the Taliban. During this time, these different groups committed “gross violations and massacres” against all Afghan people, but especially against women (Qazi 2009).

4.4: The Taliban Political Environment

After years of civil war, the Taliban emerged as the leaders of Afghanistan in 1996. Some Afghans believed that the Taliban would bring stability to the war-torn region. However, in their strict interpretation of Islam, the Taliban committed human rights violations against all Afghans, but especially against Afghan women, who received the brunt of discrimination in the Taliban’s edicts. Many of the Taliban leaders observed Wahhabism, an orthodox form of Sunni Islam, which they used to justify their human rights violations, oppress women, and to ban television, laughter, kite flying for children, as well to jail men whose beards were too short. To maintain laws against what the Taliban defined as un-Islamic behavior, the Department for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice (DPVPV), the Taliban’s religious police, used force and violence. The international community grew extremely critical of the Taliban and their countless human rights violations. Despite the fact the that the Taliban controlled over 90 percent of the country, only Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, and the United Arab Emirates recognized the Taliban as a legitimate government (Bruno 2009).

4.5: The Post-Taliban Political Environment

In October, 2001, the United States invaded Afghanistan and dismantled the

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24 Taliban literally means “students” or “students of Islam.” Plural version of Talib.
Taliban. Since 2001, the political environment of Afghanistan has changed dramatically; however, the country remains war-torn and violent. In 2001, the United States aligned with the Northern Alliance, a group of warlords with similar undemocratic and fundamentalist views as the Taliban. In the beginning of the post-Taliban era, the Northern Alliance warlords held control over Afghanistan. In December 2001, militia forces, like the Northern Alliance, exiled leaders like former King Mohammad Zahir and others signed the Bonn Agreement against the Taliban. Additionally, the Bonn Agreement planned the steps in the Afghan political process, such as the June 2002 Emergency Loya Jirga. In this meeting, the groups chose the two-year transnational government, including naming Hamid Karzai as the interim President (Human Rights Watch 2004).

In 2004, Afghanistan adopted their new constitution and emerged as an Islamic Republic. The wording of the Afghanistan Constitution offers new rights to all Afghans, regardless of gender and ethnicity. In addition, the constitution guarantees Afghan women representation through quotas. Conversely, the same guarantee does not exist for the several different ethnicities in Afghanistan. In 2004, Afghanistan held its first free democratic election, where one woman ran for President and Afghanistan formally elected Hamid Karzai as President.

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26 Grand Council.
Despite the signs of democracy, the Karzai administration lacks central control. Because of this, corruption is rampant and many in the West and within Afghanistan refer to Hamid Karzai as “the mayor of Kabul” (Adeney 2008:554). In August 2009, Afghanistan held its second Presidential election. While many Western countries, including the United States, called the election a success, one Afghan woman politician, Malalai Joya, said the “election changes nothing” as warlords and fundamentalists largely control the country. Joya also stated that she fears for her life, and to be safe, she must hide (Joya 2009). Amid speculations of fraud, President Karzai agreed to a run-off election on November 7, 2009, between himself and his main challenger, Abdullah Abdullah. However, in early November 2009, Abdullah Abdullah withdrew himself from the race, giving Hamid Karzai another term as the President of Afghanistan.

5.1: Introduction to the Pre-Taliban Era

In 1973 in Kabul, one historian described the cultural atmosphere for urban women as one with “Western capitalist cultural influence.” The historian described the typical urban Afghan girl as:

experiencing a new freedom in living and in new ways of dressing. Instead of dressing in the ways her mother did at her age, an educated Afghan girl slips quickly into exactly the kind of costume worn by her counterpart in London, Paris, or New York. Instead of plaitsing her hair, she bobs it in European fashion, pulls on some fine nylon stockings, pushes her feet into moccasins, and dabs her smiling lips with bright red lipstick. (Emadi 2002:22)

At this time, many referred to Kabul as the “Islamic Paris” as it shared both European and Asian influences (Daoud 2002:103). In 1972, Afghanistan hosted their first and only Miss Afghanistan Pageant, which focused on “intellect and poise but not beauty or swimsuits.” To many Afghan women, this represented a step towards modernization. In Kabul, modern nightclubs and prestigious hotels opened. Often, these same hotels hosted fashion shows for women that featured Western-style dress. In the “Nixon Market” of Kabul and other cities, women could purchase mini-skirts or sleeveless dresses in shopping centers. In the early 1970s, fashion represented one of the greatest “Westernization trends” in urban Afghanistan.

However, while the rural areas never experienced this “trend,” it still ignited opposition by rural clerics and conservatives who protested against the “Marxist influence” and “Western immorality” (Emadi 2002:22-24). Zohra Yusuf Daoud, Miss

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27 In the 1972 Miss Afghanistan, there was no swimsuit competition or emphasis on appearance in the pageant. The winner, Zohra Yusuf Daoud, described the pageant as a sign of Afghanistan “joining the global community.”
Afghanistan 1972, traveled throughout cities to advocate for the growing literacy programs for women. During her trip, she met poverty-stricken and illiterate women. Further, she visited jails full of women who had run way from forced marriages. Regarding her travel throughout the country and the status of women, she said:

Although all women had the right to vote, not all women were allowed to exercise this right. Although theoretically women had the choice not to wear the veil, not all women were permitted to make that choice. Although theoretically all Afghan women had a chance of an education, not all women could seize that opportunity. Islam wasn’t keeping these women from moving forward; the traditionalists and cultures were women’s greatest obstacles in their quests for equality. (Rostami-Povey 2007:12)

Hafizullah Emadi classified Afghan women at this time as either revolutionaries or liberals. In making this distinction, he points out that each group viewed “women’s emancipation” differently. While the revolutionaries believed that women’s emancipation completely changed the current system, including its ideology, politics, and culture, the liberals viewed it as superficial changes in accepting certain Western cultural behaviors of dress and appearance (2002:24). It is important to recognize the style of dress worn by some Afghan women in this era since often many Westerners associate Afghan women as historically wearing only burqas. In the 1960’s and the 1970s, urban Afghan women walked without a burqa as it was not compulsory (Rostami-Povey 2007:11). In fact, only in 1992 did the Mujahideen parties issue a compulsory order forcing women to wear the hijab²⁸ (Kumar and Stabile 2005).

From 1973 to 1995, each regime in power engaged in rhetoric about either “emancipating Afghan women” or “protecting Afghan women.” Both the Daoud Administration and the PDPA regime promised policy aimed to improve the status of

²⁸ Hijab literally translates into “modest clothing” for both men and women. It is often culturally specific among different Islamic countries. In 1992, the hijab referred to a full body black garment with veil on the head.
Afghan women. While Daoud implemented policies in the name of women’s freedom, he failed to offer any women positions in his cabinet. Consequently, liberal groups and members of Women’s Democratic Organization of Afghanistan (WDOA) attacked the Daoud administration for not improving women’s status effectively. However, often these same groups failed to make real connections on a grassroots level to women, especially in rural areas (Emadi 2002:99). In 1978, the PDPA overthrew Daoud in a military coup in the Saur (April) Revolution. One of their primary political objectives was the “emancipation of women.” The PDPA also proclaimed equality for women and men in social, economic, civil, political, and cultural worlds (Emadi 2002:100).

Under the Communist regime, the Soviets viewed women as oppressed by Islamic customs and argued that their invasion would “emancipate women” from the patriarchal culture. While fighting the Soviets and during the civil war, the Mujahideen used the “language of jihad as protecting the purity of Afghan women and Islamic values” (Coleman 2004:2). According to the Physicians for Human Rights (1998), after 1992 women became even more oppressed than before. However, under each regime in the Pre-Taliban era, improving the status of Afghan women represented either a secondary or a rhetorical goal.

5.2: Women’s Status in the Constitution

According to the 1964, 1976, 1987, and the 1990 Constitutions, Afghan women were equal to Afghan men. However, Afghan society, especially in the rural areas, often abided by patriarchal customs and informal, tribal laws. In the 1964 Constitution, Article

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29 The women’s arm of the PDPA, founded in the mid 1960s.

30 The Saur Revolution is named for the Afghan calendar month (April) when the military coup took place.
25 stated, “All Afghan people without any discrimination or preference have equal rights and obligations before the law.” While Article 25 did not specifically use the word “women” in the 1964 Constitution, scholars have noted that the use of “All Afghan people” implied both women and men and was a progressive statement for that time. The 1964 Constitution also marked the beginning of a democratic Afghanistan, rather than an aristocratic society. For the first time, the Afghan political system included a new democratic process through an elected parliament, in which women could participate through voting and running for parliament. In fact, the Advisory Committee for the 1964 Constitution included two women. The Constitution also stated that the Queen could rule as a “regent” in place of an absent King and stated that, “although Islam was the sacred religion of Afghanistan, the secular legal systems would take precedence over Sharia Law” (Vorgetts 2002:95).

The 1976 Constitution declared Afghanistan to be a republic. Additionally, the language of the Constitution used “women and men” rather than “all people.” In fact, Article 27 specifically granted “both women and men, without discrimination and privilege, equal rights and obligations before the law.” Two women, Alia Hafeez and Fatima Kayfi, of 41-person committee, worked to formulate the 1976 Constitution.

Under the communist regimes, both the 1987 and 1990 Constitutions granted men and women equal rights. In both Constitutions, Afghanistan remained a communist republic. In the 1987 Constitution, Article 28 stated:

Citizens of the Republic of Afghanistan, both men and women, have equal rights and duties before the law, irrespective of their national, racial, linguistic, tribal, educational and social status, religious creed, political conviction, occupation, wealth, and residence. Designation of any illegal privilege or discrimination against rights and duties of citizens are [sic] forbidden. (Nawabi 2003:20)
Additionally, Article 33 stated, “The citizenship of the Republic of Afghanistan is equal and uniform to all citizens” (Nawabi 2003:20). In the 1990 Constitution, both Articles 28 and 33 remained the same, granting equality to both men and women.

Prior to the Soviet withdrawal, the Mujahideen disregarded the Constitution. Once the Mujahideen gained control, they abolished the Constitution and created the Islamic State of Afghanistan (ISA) (Amnesty International 1995). While the country still lacked a central authority, leaders of seven opposing factions divided positions within the fragmented Afghan government. Eventually the various factions created the Northern Alliance, who further eroded the rights of Afghan women with their misogynistic policies (Kumar and Stabile 2005). These battling factions dismantled much of the judicial system, creating a system of complete lawlessness and no justice for the multitude of abuses against women (Human Rights Watch 2003). In some parts of the country, warlords created courts, where Islamic clergy, provincial shuras, or the warlords themselves, acted as the judges (Amnesty International 1995). In 1994, the Supreme Court of the Islamic State of Afghanistan implemented an “Ordinance on Women’s Veil.” Under this new ordinance, the Supreme Court required Afghan women to wear full body veils and stay in their homes to protect them from “sedition” (Human Rights Watch 2003).

5.3: Violence Against Women

Universally, there is no standard definition of what constitutes gender-based violence. According to the United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women, gender-based violence is “any act that results in, or is likely to result in,
physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such act, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or private life”\(^{32}\) (United Nation’s Development Fund for Women 2006). Moreover, The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women\(^{33}\) (CEDAW) defines gender-based violence as violence "directed against a woman because she is a woman or that affects women disproportionately" (United Nation’s Development Fund for Women 2006). CEDAW classifies gender-based violence into three categories of physical violence, sexual violence, and emotional/psychological violence (United Nation’s Development Fund for Women 2006). In the pre-Taliban era, women experienced all three classifications of violence in tragic measures. As discussed earlier, historically in war, women often receive the brunt of the violence, and, even in modern warfare, it is estimated that women and children comprise 80 percent of the casualties (Mohanty et al. 2008:9).

During the years of the Soviet invasion, the Soviet-controlled government committed serious human right violations against all Afghans. In rural areas, where the bulk of the fighting took place, the Soviet fighters would torture women for information against the resistance groups. In the urban areas, women who peacefully protested against communism risked incarceration, torture, and even execution (Helsinki Watch 1984). The Afghan branch of the KGB\(^{34}\) infiltrated Afghan classrooms, women’s

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\(^{33}\) The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) is an international agreement adopted in 1979 by the UN General Assembly. CEDAW includes a preamble and 30 articles that define what constitutes discrimination against women and offers recommendations to end discrimination. CEDAW is sometimes referred to as an international bill of rights for women.

\(^{34}\) The KGB was the abbreviation for the security agency of the Soviet Union government.
meetings, and youth organizations to listen and search for opposition to their ideology. Due to government opposition, RAWA members often were the target of searches by the police, and many RAWA members served time in jail or they were forced into hiding (Brodksy 2004:67). Male jail guards, employed by the communist government, would sexually molest jailed women, often in front of the male prisoners (Helsinki Watch 1984). The WDOA, the only women’s organization that supported the Soviet invasion, never condemned the human rights violations (Maley 1996).

After the Soviet withdrawal, the lawlessness and the civil war created an even more violent, brutal, and dangerous environment for women, especially in the rural areas. According to Amnesty International (1995), during this time women were “spoils of war, being raped by armed guards or sold into prostitution.” For some women, the violence was so unbearable they chose to commit suicide rather than endure it (Amnesty International 1995). The opposing factions would use women as weapons against their rivals by raping, threatening, or killing their daughters or wives (Amnesty International 1995). Some armed guards would attack the homes of civilians and create a torture center in their home. In this torture center, guards would physically assault, torture with extreme cold or heat temperatures, and deprive prisoners of food and water. The armed guards would rape and sexually assault women and children (Amnesty International 1995). Other armed guards would force women into marriage with violence, and if the male family leaders attempted to protect their wife or daughter, the armed guards would kill the woman in front of her family. Some reports stated that if the woman gave into the demand, the family still never would see the woman again (Hardy 2001).
To the leaders of the armed factions, rape was an effective tool to defeat populations, reduce resistance, and to reward soldiers (Amnesty International 1995). Women and children, especially in the rural areas, lived in fear of rape, violence, kidnappings, or forced marriages without any laws or judicial authority to protect them. During this time, there are no data to confirm the vast number of rapes and the degree of violence perpetrated by the Mujahideen. In fact, many sources believe that the period of the civil war was more violent for women than under the Taliban due to the extreme numbers of murders and rapes by the Mujahideen (Rostami-Povey 2007:26).

Under the Mujahideen, the Islamic State of Afghanistan, declared a *fatwa*\textsuperscript{35} to kill any women who worked for humanitarian organizations (Kumar and Stabile 2004). Likewise, the Mujahideen government started to restrict the mobility of women to attend school or work through force and intimidation (Amnesty International 1999). Specifically, they threatened professional women employed in education and welfare sectors. However, the Mujahideen lacked organization and did not consistently enforce their laws, especially in the urban areas. Therefore, while the Mujahideen issued various declarations against women in the workforce and schools, many urban women maintained their public life (Amnesty International 1999).

5.4: *Women’s Status in Education*

The 1964 Constitution granted free education for all Afghans from primary school to university level. While urban women started to make small gains in education and in the labor force, the lives of rural women were largely unaffected by any changes. On a whole, much of the Afghan population ignored the new educational opportunities, even

\textsuperscript{35} Islam decree or Islam order.
when the Afghan government made education compulsory. Due to gradual capitalist development and minor industrialization, the education system slowly grew, although with resistance and violence. In the early 1970s, followers of Gulbuddin Hekmatyar\textsuperscript{36} threw acid on the faces of unveiled girl students (Hartman 2002).

By the early 1970’s, 111 co-educational schools existed in Afghanistan. In Kabul, there were 51 co-educational schools, 7 girls’ middle schools, and 5 girls’ high schools. Outside of Kabul, there were 36 middle schools in 19 provinces and 11 girls’ high schools in 10 provinces. From the early 1970’s until 1992, school enrollment slowly increased (Emadi 2002:73). In Kabul, 42 percent of women completed a formal education (Brodsky 2002:37). However, nationally in 1975, only 8 percent of girls attended primary school, compared to 44 percent of boys. Moreover, only 2 percent of girls attended secondary schools compared to 13 percent of boys (Moghadam 2002). Additionally, in 1975, in comparing the total enrollment of students in primary school and secondary school, girls comprised just 15 percent of the total primary school student enrollment and 11 percent of the total secondary school student enrollment (Emadi 2002:53). However, these percentages accounted only for enrollment in school, not the completion of school.

Oftentimes, rural girls simply lacked access to high schools and universities as most of the institutions were located in the capital of a province. In 1978, girls could access just 13.1 percent of the schools (EFA 200). Additionally, in rural areas, it was not traditional for families to allow their daughters to live without their parents until

\textsuperscript{36}Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, former Afghan Prime Minister from 1993-1994, is the founder of Hezb-e-Islami, one of the most radical and fundamental Islamic political parties. He is responsible for horrific human rights violations and violence against women in Afghanistan in the past three decades. As of 2009, he is on the United States’ most wanted terrorist list.
marriage. This made it difficult for a rural girl to attend beyond primary school. Additionally, a family’s economic situation affected a girl’s education for two primary reasons. First, many families could not afford to send all of their children to school. With minimal resources, most families would choose to send their sons over their daughters. A family dealing with poverty deemed educating their daughters as “unimportant in their struggle for survival” (Emadi 2002:74). Second, children of low-income families often contributed to the family’s overall income by working in whatever employment was available to them or assisting with the domestic duties (Emadi 2002:74).

From 1973 to 1978, the Daoud regime attempted to create social and development programs for women. For example, the Ministry of Education implemented literacy programs for women while the newly constructed Women’s Coordinating Committee “promoted the cause of women and encouraged their participation in public affairs” (Emadi 2002:98-99). To advance women’s status, the groups organized educational programs on subjects like family affairs and issues on Radio Afghanistan. At this time, the government controlled all media outlets, including Radio Afghanistan (Emadi 2002:99).

According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), in 1975 women comprised 100 percent of the pre-primary school teachers, 18 percent of the primary school teachers, 13.4 percent of the secondary school teachers, 6.5 percent of the two-year and technical schools’ faculty, and 5.6 percent of the universities’ faculty (Emadi 2002:79). According to Emadi (2002:74-75), social discrimination of women in the workforce was part of the reason for the low
percentage of female teachers. Additionally, women could teach only at girls’ schools, which gave them fewer opportunities since more boys’ schools existed (Emadi 2002:75). Under the PDPA, many teachers and college faculty were suspended or incarcerated if they did not agree with the politics of the PDPA. Political repressions led to educators leaving Afghanistan. The PDPA replaced prior education staff with party-members or party supporters to teach in the schools (Emadi 2002:75). For example, members of the Khalq Organization of Afghanistan Women (KOAW)\textsuperscript{37} served as teachers.

The PDPA also implemented massive literacy programs for women. In an attempt to use women for their socialist societal goals, the PDPA started literacy classes and night schools that often focused on Marxist political indoctrination. Often the curriculum would criticize the traditional and cultural models as “backwards,” which created further backlash from rural conservatives against the literacy programs. To combat resistance from Afghans, the state mandated men to send their daughters and wives to literacy centers through force and violence. Male teachers, employed by the PDPA, often sexually abused their female students without any retribution by the government (Emadi 2002:102).

By 1979, the PDPA claimed their literacy programs provided basic education for over 18,000 Afghan women. Yet, according to Education for All (EFA) (2009), the adult literacy rate for females was just 5 percent in 1979. UNESCO estimated that in 1979, 88.2 percent of urban women over the age of 25 had no schooling while 99.2 percent of the same aged rural women had no schooling (Emadi 2002:52). By the late 1970’s, urban

\textsuperscript{37} The Khalq Organization of Afghanistan Women (KOAW) was the Women’s Democratic Organization of Afghanistan. The state renamed the organization after the Khalq faction took control of the Parcham faction.
attitudes started to shift slowly and more women were accepted in educational institutions. In some studies, women started to outnumber male students in Kabul (Physicians for Human Rights 1998). Conversely, men also started at this same time to join resistance groups, which allowed women more opportunities in school and in the labor force.

Under the Soviet control, war disrupted the education system and resulted in the closing of several educational institutions. In 1983, the Afghan Foreign Minister told the United Nations "that 50 percent of schools in Afghanistan were destroyed" (EFA 2000). However, the communist government utilized education as the groundwork to earn support for their “long-term social, economic, and political reform” (EFA 2000). The government sent over 50,000 Afghans of every age to the Soviet Union for education and training (EFA 2000).

According to the World Bank in 1980, only 12 percent of girls attended primary school while 54 percent of boys attended primary school (Amiri, Hunt, and Sova 2004). Throughout the country, illiteracy remained high, despite the goals of the Soviet regime to eradicate illiteracy. In fact, 95 percent of the women were illiterate in 1980 (EFA 2000). Five year later, in 1985, only 8 percent of Afghan women were literate compared to 39 percent of males and only 11 percent of females attended primary school (Moghadam 1992).

Many Afghans viewed the Soviet’s education policy as too fast, especially in rural areas, for a population not ready for fundamental societal change (Vorgetts 2002:96). One former member of the WDOA, Fahima Vorgetts (2002), stated,

My colleagues and I were especially disturbed by their (Soviet-controlled communist government approach) to education. Teachers were sent to rural areas
where there were high rates of illiteracy, especially among women. They often arranged classes in peoples’ homes and the local authorities forced women and daughters to attend. Many Afghans saw these trends as a threat to their family life and identity. Education became associated with humiliation, foreign domination, and everything that was un-Islamic and anti-Islamic. (P. 96)

To fight against the un-Islamic education system, the Mujahideen fighters often engaged in attacks against co-educational schools and girls’ schools (Hartman 2002). For example, in 1980, anti-Soviet fighters violently bombed a school South of Kabul and then forced students to watch while resistance troops cut off the teacher’s head (Hartman 2002). However, the Mujahideen and other Soviet-resistance groups were not the only groups attacking female students. In 1980, a group of female students organized a peaceful protest against the Soviet invasion. Rather than allowing the peaceful protest, the regime troops shot at the group, killing a number of them, including the leader of the demonstration (Maley 1996).

In the 1980s, historians estimated that approximately 444,000 female students attended school and 11,000 female teachers taught in schools (Amiri et al. 2004). Prior to the Taliban, Afghan women comprised 70 percent of the country’s teachers (Human Rights 2004). By 1989, 65 percent of the students attending Kabul University were female (Amiri et al. 2004). Additionally, small numbers of women students started to break the gender boundaries in their field of study. For example, construction represented one area where Muslim society generally shut out women. Yet, some women not only entered the faculty of construction, they received financial aid through the department and the Democratic Youth Organization to study construction (Moghadam 2002). By 1990, the literacy rate for women had improved to an estimated 14 percent, with still the overwhelming majority of women not being able to read (U.S. Department

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of Commerce 1993). Approximately 19 percent of Afghan women attended school in 1990 and the girl’s enrollment culminated at 214,561, which was 34.1 percent of the total enrollment (EFA 2000). In addition, girls had access to 20 percent of the schools, which showed an improvement in availability. However, access to school was still disproportionate to the population. The northern region, where 27 percent of the population lived, housed 36 percent of the country’s primary schools (EFA 2000).

After the Soviet withdrawal and under the Mujahideen, education enrollment declined for both male and female, but especially for women. By 1993, girls’ access tumultuously decreased to 13.2 percent, as the civil war and Mujahideen forced the closure of girls’ schools. In some areas, the various factions prohibited women from attending school and working outside the home. By 1993, this resulted in girls’ attendance dropping to 11 percent and female teachers comprising only 12.6 percent of the teaching force, compared to the 70 percent it reached in the Soviet period (EFA 2000; Human Rights Watch 2004). In some cases, the Mujahideen used violence to prohibit women’s education. For instance, in a Peshawar Refugee Camp, a town located on the border of Pakistan and Afghanistan, the forces shot at a girls’ school (Kumar and Stabile 2005).

While an urban and rural divide existed under the Soviet occupation, it was even more prominent after the Mujahideen gained control. Prior to the Soviet withdrawal, in 1988, the educational institutions in Peshawar discriminated against girls and women. For example, boys had access to 486 primary schools, 161 middle schools, and 4 high schools, while for girls only 76 primary schools, 2 middle schools, and no high schools existed (Moghadam 2002). In 1990, urban women still had access to education,
including Kabul University. Conversely, in rural areas like Peshawar, women had access only to schools instructed by mullahs. In addition, mullahs allowed girls to study only in religious schools, but just until the age of nine (Rashid 1990). For urban women, mullahs or religion did not preclude their education. The ongoing war and consequences of the war, like lack of electricity, precluded their education (Rashid 1990).

5.5: Women’s Status in the Labor Force

As early as the 1940’s, urban women held positions in education, health, and government (Amiri et al. 2004). Especially after 1964, since the Constitution opened the doors for education and professional careers to women. Women in limited numbers held positions as doctors, engineers, flight attendants, radio announcers, and TV journalists. Like education, these new changes were limited mostly to the urban and elite women, not rural women. Similarly, like education, the gradual capitalistic development and industrialization in the early 1970s, helped to create more employment for women in the industrial and manufacturing sectors (Emadi 2002:79). While the number of women in the manufacturing sectors increased, it was still low in proportion to the population. Furthermore, many of the employers in manufacturing viewed women’s labor as “cheap” and often cited their goal as including women in the socioeconomic development of Afghanistan, while exploiting them (Emadi 2002:79). In 1976, women dominated industries like carpet weaving, rug weaving, and embroidery. In fact, women comprised 92.4 percent of the carpet weaving, 91.5 percent of rug weaving, and 99.4 percent of embroidery (Emadi 2002:79-80). Due to tradition, many women could not work in positions that required overnight travel as husbands and fathers would prohibit it (Emadi 2002:79).
By the early 1970s, 42 percent of women worked outside their homes (Brodsky 2002:37). In 1976, women comprised a small percentage of health professionals. Nationally, there were 150 female physicians, 572 female nurses, and 400 midwives (Emadi 2002: 79-82). A few urban women, generally from middle and upper class families, also held prestigious positions within law schools and the legal profession. For instance, in the early 1970s, two female professors taught at Kabul University, one female judge sat on the High Central Court, and seven women held positions on the lower statutory tribunals (Emadi 2002:87). Additionally, women started to enter law enforcement agencies (Emadi 2002:87). While these women made significant gains, they represented a very small urban minority of professional women.

Besides social discrimination that existed against women in the workforce, many women were not educated to perform in these occupations. In the private sector, men earned higher salaries than women earned, partially because of their higher educational achievement. In government positions, men and women received similar salaries, but these positions did not offer women any advancement. Women’s lack of education and discrimination often led to lower-paying jobs with no upward mobility. Moreover, many women did not wear a veil, as it would interfere with their work (Emadi 2002:79-80).

Under the PDPA and the Soviets, women experienced more employment opportunities. First, as more men joined the Mujahideen and resistance groups, more manufacturing and industrial positions opened up to women. Second, more urban women had greater access to public space through education, which led to more employment opportunities. However, the government created some positions for women in an attempt to win their support. For example, the communist regime even controlled portions of the
entertainment industry and recruited women to take part in this sector. Then, the PDPA recruited women singers who would record music written by the communist establishment (Emadi 2002:103).

According to Valentine Moghadam (2002), feminist scholar, activist, and writer, who spent time in Afghanistan during this era, women served in the military, security and intelligence areas, and in the Defense Ministry. By 1990, women comprised 34 percent of the formal labor force (Amiri et al. 2004). In the late 1980s and early 1990s, women constituted 70 percent of the country’s teachers, 50 percent of the civil servants, and 40 percent of the doctors (Human Rights Watch 2004). As with education, the labor force gains occurred mostly in the urban areas. When the Mujahideen took control, they issued several orders forbidding women in the public space. However, in the urban areas, especially Kabul, some women continued to work. In urban Afghanistan, women often worked in places without segregation and utilized non-segregated transportation. Conversely, in the rural areas, non-related women and men could not work side by side, if women were even allowed to work. In places like Peshawar, mullahs forbade all women from the public space (Rashid 1990).

5.6: Women’s Status in Political Representation

As early as 1964, as the result of the Constitution, Afghan women entered politics in small numbers. In 1964, King Mohammad Zahir named two women to his cabinet. In 1965, four women, members of the DOAW Party, were elected to the country’s first Parliament (Lederman 2002:48-49). From 1965 to 1972, women comprised 9 percent of the Cabinet, 1.8 percent of the Representatives, and 2.6 percent of the Senate (Emadi 2002:85). Most women who ran for office came from Kabul or another urban area.
Additionally, Emadi (2002:85) named the following requirements for a woman to run for political office: a ruling class background, wealth, and an association with a political-economic organization.

In the early 1970’s, elites and urban women, like wives of bureaucratic and government officials, used their newfound right to vote in rather large numbers. Most women voters resided in Kabul, while in rural areas, politics and participation in public affairs represented an area “exclusively male” (Emadi 2002:86). Moreover, if rural leaders encouraged women to vote, it was often to help the local leader win his election. While there were few examples of women leaders in rural areas, generally, it was considered a male domain.

After Daoud took control, he failed to offer any women positions in his cabinet. However, his administration did include 54 women in the Presidential Secretariat, 91 in the Office of the Ministry of State, and 3 at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Emadi 2002:98). Many of these positions did represent junior-level positions within the government. Under the Daoud Administration, seven women held positions at the Ministry of Defense and eight women held positions at the Ministry of the Interior.

In the 1977 elections, four women were elected to political office, comprising 1.82 percent of the representatives. In 1977, women also comprised 15 percent of the Loya Jirga (Amiri et al. 2004). In addition, leaders like Babrak Karmal, 38 appointed more women to key governmental positions. Some women saw this as a façade to

38 When the Soviet Union formally invaded Afghanistan in 1979, the Soviets installed Babrak Karmal as President of Afghanistan. He served from 1979 to 1986 under the era of the Communist Democratic Republic of Afghanistan. In 1986, he was replaced by Dr. Mohammad Najibullah.
attempt to gain more support from Afghan women for communism. By the late 1980’s, women held various positions within areas of the government, except the Council of Ministers. By 1989, seven women were elected to the National Parliament. Women also held leadership positions within the Central Committee of the PDPA (Moghadam 2002). However, rural women often could not relate to the urban women who held these offices. Politically, most women who served in governmental roles were members of the WDOA or showed sympathy to the communist vision. At this time, women’s participation still represented one of the lowest worldwide in the political process (Amiri et al. 2004).

5.7: Women’s Status in Marriage and Family Policy

Historically, in the patriarchal culture of Afghanistan, marriage represents an area considered as part of the public world and therefore, a decision deliberated and negotiated by a male family member. Despite the early attempts in the nineteenth century to abolish arranged marriages and bridal dowries as well increase the minimum age for marriage, most of the country largely ignored these reforms. In fact, fundamentalists and clerics often fought against any reform. From a patriarchal perspective, marriage and bride price represent an economic exchange between households, a segment of property relations, and a way to gain social status (Moghadam 2002). In Afghanistan culture, forced or voluntary marriage, often serves as a way to build political alliances or gain financial wealth. In some regions, families exchange cows, bull, sheep, goats, or furniture in an exchange for the bride (Emadi 2002:39). Forced marriages also serve as settlement of family feuds. For example, a family will give a young woman as compensation for their crime to the victim’s family (United Nation’s Development Fund for Women 2006).
In 1977, the Daoud administration launched a civil code regarding relations between women and men. First, this code enacted the minimum age to marry for women as 16 and for men as 18. Second, it gave both men and women the freedom of choice in deciding their marriage partner. Third, it changed the law in divorce, which still gave men an exclusive right to choose divorce while limiting the reasons women could use to file for divorce. Under this code, women could file for divorce only if her husband had contracted an incurable disease, had declined to support her financially, was incarcerated for over five years, or had hidden another marriage from his wife (Emadi 2002:97-98).

Next, the government created a family court that would resolve issues in Kabul, Herat, Kandahar, and Qunduz provinces. Daoud also selected a woman, Soraya Parwiz, a graduate of Kabul University, to be in charge of the family courts. The PDPA regime attempted to gain support from women by enacting decrees focused on marriage reform. Decree 7 aimed to change “fundamentally the institution of marriage” (Moghadam 2002) and contained six articles regarding marriage habits and wedding ceremonies. First, it outlawed men marrying women in exchange for money or commodities at the time of the marriage. Second, it placed restrictions on the mahr, the payment given to the bride’s family, to 300 afghani (AFA) (Emadi 2002:100). Third, it outlawed forced marriages and instead required that both parties needed to provide consent (Emadi 2002: 100). This also extended to widows, who often were forced to marry male relatives of deceased husbands (Moghadam 2002). This article also stated that families could not stop the marriage and prolong the engagement to accumulate “engagement expenses” (Emadi

39 Mahr is the marriage dowry given to the bride from the groom and the groom’s family.

40 Afghani is the currency of Afghanistan. In 1978, 300 afghani (AFA) equaled approximately six USD.
Fourth, it no longer encouraged the groom and his family in giving obligatory gifts to the bride and bride’s family at religious holidays or the New Year. Fifth, it reinforced the previous law of the minimum marrying age of 16 for women and 18 for men. Last, it enforced punishment for violators that included jail time of six months to three years and the seizure of any items illegally obtained such as money or commodities (Emadi 2002:100-101).

However, the decree did not address any punishment against domestic abuse. Nor did it address polygamy or divorce laws. Women still could file for divorce under limited circumstances and men could still marry up to four wives (Emadi 2002:101). Furthermore, many top officials still forced their daughters into marriage and ignored the decree. While nothing in law involved Islam, many conservatives labeled the law “anti-Islamic” (Emadi 2002:101). Even if Decree 7 had granted women exclusive rights to seek divorce, divorce was not a real option for most Afghan women. First, in Afghan society, divorce is viewed as a “social stigma” and by divorcing her husband; a woman would “dishonor” her family (Emadi 2002:98). Second, divorce affected child custody laws. If a woman did seek a divorce, she could then maintain custody of her children only for limited time. The law limited custody for a son until the age of seven and for a daughter until the age of nine, with a potential extension of another two years if the court believed it was the “child’s best interest” (Emadi 2002:98). Moreover, if a woman chose to remarry or the court deemed her behavior as “inappropriate,” she could lose all rights to custody. Last, a husband often completely economically supported his wife and it would be difficult for a woman to support herself financially (Emadi 2002:98).
In addition to Decree 7, the PDPA passed Decree 6 and Decree 8. Decree 6 focused on eliminating land mortgages while Decree 7 focused on laws regarding “confiscation and redistribution of land” (Moghadam 2002). The PDPA promised these new decrees would free “hardworking peasants from the bonds of oppressors and money lenders, ending the sales of girls for goods . . . as no one would be entitled to sell any girl or women in the country” (Moghadam 1992). Decree 6 and Decree 7 created even more resentment from the traditional rural community and the fundamentalists. Many feared that the combination of the marriage reform and literacy classes would create a situation where women would not submit to the male patriarchal structure (Moghadam 1992). These fears led to the widespread opposition and organization against the new government by tribal leaders and Islamist leaders.

5.8: Women’s Status in Health

Historically, the gender discrimination against Afghan women has adversely impacted their health status. Prior to the Soviet Invasion, Afghan women maintained one of the lowest social statuses in health (Ask 1998). In many provinces, health centers were solely located in the capitals, making access difficult for rural women (Emadi 2002:47). Often, husbands would not consider healthcare important for their wives and thus, women were ill without access or permission to visit doctors. Prior to the Taliban, many conservative families would not allow females to see male healthcare professionals. As noted, these same conservatives did not view education as important for women either, which led to the lack of female doctors. Even in emergencies, the male family member would serve as the liaison between the male doctor and his wife or daughter.
This meant that doctors would need to diagnose and prescribe treatments without ever meeting their female patients (Emadi 2002:47).

In 1975, according to World Bank figures, women had a life expectancy of just 37-years old, the total fertility rate was eight children per woman, and the infant mortality rate was 135 deaths per 1000 births (Moghadam 2002). Oftentimes, high levels of infant mortality go hand in hand with a lower age of life expectancy (U.S. Department of Commerce 1993). By 1979, women had a life expectancy of 40, a slight increase, while men had a life expectancy of 42. In this period, Afghanistan represented one of the few countries where men had a higher life expectancy than women (Ask 1998). By 1979, the fertility rate also decreased to an average of 6.9 children per woman (Emadi 2002:47). In contrast, the fertility rate differed in rural and urban areas. In urban areas, the fertility rate was lower at 5.8 children per woman while in rural areas the fertility was higher at 7.3 children per woman (Emadi 2002:48). In this same year, women between the ages of 20 to 30 often had the highest fertility rates, with a short time in between each birth.

Patriarchal tradition, lack of education, and economic dependence on children to contribute to a family’s income served as reasons for such a high fertility rate for women. Even if a woman attended some primary school, subjects on health or nutrition were often not part of the curriculum. In addition, the frequency of children also affected a woman’s ability to work and to attend school. Many poor rural families lacked access to appropriate nutrition for their children and themselves. Often, infant mortality was even higher in rural areas than urban areas. According to Moghadam (2002), who cites Veronica Doubleday, who resided in Herat from 1972 to 1977, Afghan women’s complaints centered around two issues: sickness and restrictions on mobility. While
women complained about backaches, low energy, headaches, and other symptoms, husbands would not allow their wives to seek medical care (Moghadam 2002). The combination of restrictions on mobility, the lack of nutrition, the lack of education, and the lack of medical care contributed to the high rates of both infant mortality and low life expectancy of women (Emadi 2002:48).

In the late 1960s, the Afghan Family Guidance Association (AFGA), a non-governmental, non-profit, and non-political organization was established (Emadi 2002:93). This group believed that the high fertility rates served as the “prime cause of women’s suffering (Emadi 2002:93). By 1973, the AFGA established six clinics in Kabul and thirteen branches throughout the rest of the country. In the clinics, the AFGA aimed to educate women on family planning, the use of contraceptives, and even abortion. Since their mission conflicted with much opposition, they promoted their clinics through only grass-roots efforts and never in a public campaign. For example, women would visit other women by going door-to-door and educating women on family planning (Emadi 2002:93). Even in the late 1960s to early 1970s, Planned Parenthood and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) also operated in Afghanistan, funding family planning clinics. Interestingly, the Soviet regime forced their closure in 1979 and regarded them as “objects of imperialism” (Brodsky 2004:26).

Despite the efforts of these groups on family planning and contraceptives, many Afghan women, especially in rural areas, did not use contraceptives. First, even if a woman wanted to use contraceptives, her father or husband would not allow it. Second, many women could not afford nor knew how to use contraceptives (Emadi 2002:93). Conversely, urban women were more likely to use contraceptives over rural women.
Besides having more access to family planning clinics, urban women also had more education and understanding regarding contraceptives.

To improve the status of women’s health, the Daoud Administration did enact legislation intended to help women and children. Under the new legislation, a husband could receive tax exemptions for his wife, first five children, and his unemployed parents. The intent was that families could then afford family health plans (Emadi 2002:99). However, no data was secured to understand if this legislation brought any improvements to Afghan women.

According to the Physicians for Human Rights (1998), in 1992, when the Mujahideen took control, a range of organizations and facilities still provided healthcare services for women. For instance, one physician stated that in Kabul, 32 maternal and child health clinics (MCH) operated that provided free care healthcare to women. A female head nurse interviewed by the Physicians for Human Rights (1998) stated that:

my hospital did not have the new and modern technology, but we had the necessary medical tools and equipment. We had qualified female and male doctors. There was no segregation of health care providers and patients. Female nurses took care of male patients and male doctors treated female patients.

Despite the war, by 1992, men still outlived women. The sex ratio favored men with 106 men to every 100 women (U.S. Department of Commerce 1992). Further, the life expectancy of women was only 43 years old and the fertility rate barely lowered to an average of 6.4 children per woman (U.S. Department of Commerce 1992). Additionally, in 1992, Afghanistan still had one of the highest rates of infant mortality, 156 deaths per 1000 births (U.S. Department of Commerce 1992).

6.1: Introduction to the Taliban Era

In 1981, Meena, RAWA’s founder, traveled throughout Europe to create awareness of women’s rights in Afghanistan, and of the RAWA organization. In a taped interview, Meena stated that the “anti-Soviet forces would win . . . but the ultimate cost would be to the country because the most heavily funded of these forces were fundamentalist, antidemocratic, and anti-women,” (Brodsky 2004:32-33). Meena predicted this outcome 11 years prior to when the Mujahideen controlled Afghanistan and fifteen years before the Taliban took control of the country. As early as 1994, Taliban commanded parts of Afghanistan. The promise of “restoring peace,” coupled with giving financial rewards and other incentives to opposition leaders, allowed the Taliban to gain support from the Afghan people.

On September 28, 1996, the Taliban seized control of Kabul. Immediately, on Radio Sharia (previously named Radio Afghanistan), the Taliban broadcast their new proclamations by the Commander of the Faithful, Mullah Mohammad Omar, regarding women. Their initial edicts stated that women must leave the public space of work and be outside only when “absolutely necessary” (Physicians for Human Rights 1998). In defense of their regressive policies, the Taliban issued the following statement: “the fact of the matter is that no other country has given women the rights we have given them. We have given women the rights that God and his Messenger have instructed, that is to stay in their homes and to gain religious instruction in seclusion” (Emadi 126).
In their religious interpretation, the Taliban claimed their policies as protecting women rather than as oppressing women. According to the Physicians for Human Rights (1998), the Taliban’s primary policy goal was “to place women back under the responsibility of their male family members.” To reach this goal, the Taliban instantly issued the following four edicts. First, they forced women to wear the burqa, second, they forced women to leave the workplace, third, they forced women to leave the education system, and fourth, they would not allow women to be in public without a \textit{mahram}^41 (Physicians for Human Rights 1998). The Taliban used their attacks and repression on women to influence two different audiences. First, they wanted to appeal to their followers and other Islamic fundamentalists. Second, they capitalized on the attacks to scare and intimidate the civilian population into restoring “moral conduct in the cities” and creating uniformity (Physicians for Human Rights 1998).

As one activist said, “Everything that constitutes human rights, but life itself, had been swept away from Afghan women by the Taliban” (U.S. Department of State 2001). The Taliban’s edicts critically affected every part of women’s lives, even further lowering their economic, education, health-related, legal, political and social status. According to the Physicians for Human Rights (1998), no other country has ever “deliberately deprived half of its population under its control of jobs, schooling, mobility, and healthcare.” All regressive edicts by the Taliban led to an even more deteriorated status of Afghan women, significantly affecting every part of a woman’s public and private existence. The edicts violated essentially every basic and fundamental human right like the right to freedom of expression, association, and assembly, the right to work, 

\footnote{Mahram means close male relative.}
the right to education, and the right to health care. It is important to realize that each edict consequently affected an Afghan woman as a whole, not just part of her life. For example, the edicts on mobility and education affected a women’s access to healthcare. Alternatively, if a woman chose to make rugs or carpets in her home, the edicts on mobility precluded her from selling her products, which affected her economic well-being. Each edict was connected to another consequence, creating an ultimate deprivation of liberty.

When a woman disobeyed an edict, the Taliban’s religious force inflicted beatings, assault, rape, imprisonment, and even death. In fact, most Afghan women interviewed by the Human Rights Watch, either received or witnessed the brutality, thus acknowledging this as a common norm in their lives under the Taliban (Human Rights Watch 2001). Regarding the treatment of women and edicts enforced by the Taliban, RAWA (2009) stated the following:

The Taliban treated women worse than they treated animals. In fact, even as Taliban declared the keeping of caged birds and animals illegal, they imprisoned Afghan women within the four walls of their own houses. Women had no importance in the Taliban’s eyes unless the women occupied or produced children, satisfied a male’s sexual needs or attended to the drudgery of daily housework.42

6.2: Rural and Urban Divide in the Taliban Era

Since urban women often comprised the groups of educated and professional women, the new edicts instantly affected their lives. For instance, the closure of Kabul University affected urban women more than anyone, as they represented the majority of students who attended (Hardy 2001). In urban areas, it created more poverty by forcing

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42 I modified this quote grammatically. The original quote can be found on the RAWA website at http://www.rawa.org/rules.htm. See Bibliography.
previously employed women to beg or turn to prostitution. Additionally, most of the protests and demonstrations organized by women against the Taliban occurred in Kabul, Herat, or another urban area. For example, in Herat, over 150 women protested the closures of public baths to women, insisting for their reopening. Of the 120 women, the Taliban arrested 20 (Ask 1998). Moreover, the Taliban enforced their edicts much more strictly in the urban areas than in the rural areas. Oftentimes, the Taliban specifically targeted professional women, who vastly resided in Kabul or other urban areas (Human Rights 2001).

In the rural areas, however, Taliban rule did not significantly change the lives of some women as many of them already lived in *purdah*.\(^{43}\) Since tradition and custom precluded these rural women to public life, the edicts and proclamations affected them less. Of course, the restrictions affected all women, including poor women or rich women, educated women or uneducated women, rural women or urban women. While the Taliban brought some level of stability to Afghanistan, it halted any lasting social, economic, or political progress and negatively affected all members of society, including boys and men (Amnesty International 1998). For example, many boys could not attend school due to the shortage of teachers with the Taliban’s ban of women in the workforce.

6.3: *Women’s Status in the Constitution*

Under the Taliban, no Constitution, no rule of law, or independent judiciary existed in Afghanistan. In 1997, the Taliban changed the name of the country to the *Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan* and named Mullah Omar as the Supreme Head of State. Thus, Mullah Omar and the Supreme Council in Kandahar issued all official decrees and

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\(^{43}\) Literally, “curtain.” Purdah refers to the practice of preventing women from being seen by men through seclusion and wearing a full-body veil.
proclamations. According to the Taliban, their rule of government would be “neither parliamentary nor presidential, but Islamic” (Physicians for Human Rights 1998).

Rather than independent courts, municipal and provincial leaders interpreted law through the Taliban’s analysis of Sharia and traditional tribal law (Physicians for Human Rights 1998). Additionally, Afghan women possessed no legal options to crimes against them. First, a court considered a woman’s testimony as half a man’s testimony. Second, a woman had no access to appeal to the court directly; rather a male in her immediate family needed to intervene on her behalf (RAWA 2005). While Afghan society did not always recognize the law in the Pre-Taliban era, women still possessed rights and status. In the Taliban era, women had absolutely no rights nor legal status.

6.4: Edicts Against Education

One of the first edicts ordered by the Taliban was the prohibition of women’s education. By January 1997, the Taliban closed 63 schools, preventing 103,000 girls and 148,000 boys from attending school and 11,200 teachers from working. Of these teachers, nearly 70 percent were women44 (Rashid 2001:108). This edict completely forbade women from studying at schools, universities or any other educational institution.

Through outside aid from humanitarian groups like the United Nations or other non-governmental organizations, hundreds of privately funded girls’ schools were created in private homes. In many cases, these schools focused on teaching women skills like sewing or weaving. According to the Physicians for Human Rights (1998), the schools taught thousands of women these skills, which often women used to contribute to the

44 In “Chapter 8: A Vanished Gender: Women, Children, and Taliban Culture,” Rashid wrote that the closure of the schools affected 11,200 teachers, of whom 7800 were women. This equated to affecting 69.64 percent of women teachers.
family’s overall income. Other schools operated to teach women basic literacy skills like reading and writing. In June 1998, the Taliban closed all home-based schools and vocational training programs in Kabul, as the Head of the DPVPV (Taliban’s religious police) charged these schools with disseminating anti-Taliban propaganda (Amnesty International 1998). In some cases, women refused to close the home school and attempted to operate in secrecy. If caught by the Taliban, the DPVPV would publicly punish the woman through beatings, torture, incarceration, and even death (Humans Right 2001). For example, in early 2001, the Taliban shot a woman in her head in front of her 40 girl students when she defied them and kept her home school open.

According to the Taliban, the ban on education was only temporary and “in principle their movement was not against education and employment for women” (Physicians for Human Rights 1998). In fact, the Taliban provided a myriad of reasons for not allowing education as well as employment for women. For example, they claimed that when they gained full control of Afghanistan or when the country was peaceful and secure, schools for girls would reopen. The Taliban insisted that if they allowed education for women, Taliban supporters would protest in other parts of the country (Physicians for Human Rights 1998). Additionally, the Taliban cited the shortage of funds to build segregated schools as another reason for the ban (Amnesty International 1998). As the UN Special Rapporteur explained, these reasons collided with what the Taliban touted as their two biggest accomplishments, restoring security and protecting women (Physicians for Human Rights 1998).

To outside critics, especially in the Islamic world, the education edict arguably served as one of the most controversial since other Islamic countries allowed women’s
access to education. In fact, countries like Iran and Saudi Arabia criticized the Taliban’s interpretation of Islam as rationale for denying education to women (Hardy 2001).

Eventually, the Taliban changed the policy to allow girl’s education up to the age of eight but restricted the education to only religious studies (Physicians for Human Rights 1998). Similarly, other critics argued with the Taliban that the ban on education affected the entire economic and social development of Afghanistan. Being that females held 70 percent of teaching positions, the educational and employment ban for women consequently affected boy’s access to education, as this created a shortage of teachers and deprived a generation of basic education.

In a December 1998 report, UNICEF stated that Afghanistan’s educational system was in “a state of total collapse” (Rashid 2001:108). At that point, just one out of ten girls attended school, while one out of three boys attended school (Rashid 2001:108). By 2000, the World Bank estimated that the enrollment of boys in school was just 3 percent while for girls it was near zero (Amiri et al 2004). Further, Amnesty International (1998) reported that the literacy rate decreased to as low as 4 percent for women during the Taliban era.

6.5: Edicts Against Mobility

The Taliban’s edicts against women’s mobility centered on their belief that “women should not be seen or heard because they drove men away from the proscribed Islamic path and into wild temptation” (Rashid 2002). The Taliban forbade women from even standing outside on their balconies in their homes and forced women to paint each window in their home black, so men could not see women from the outside (RAWA 2009a). If a woman traveled without a mahram, the religious police would publicly beat
and humiliate the woman on the street. In addition, if a woman attempted to escape Afghanistan with an unrelated male, the Taliban would charge the woman with adultery and punish her though a public execution of stoning or flogging (Physicians for Human Rights 1998). According to RAWA (2009a), throughout the Taliban era, they issued other repressive edicts that even further prohibited women’s mobility. These edicts included: a ban on women dealing with male shopkeepers, a ban on women laughing, a ban on talking or shaking hands with unrelated males, a ban on riding a taxi without a mahram, a ban on public gatherings unless the Taliban required attendance, a ban on riding bicycles or motorcycles, even with a mahram, a ban for women publicly celebrating any occasions, like Eids or any other recreational purpose, a ban on women washing clothes next to rivers or in a public place, and a ban on female baths. These authoritarian edicts on mobility affected all facets of an Afghan woman’s status, including her access to healthcare, her hygiene, her economic, social, mental, and physical well-being, and the welfare of her children.

Even prior to the Taliban, widowed women experienced immense difficulty in supporting themselves and their children. According to Brodsky (2004:136), for Afghan women, “to be without a man is nothing.” Even aside from the Taliban influence, most women were uneducated and considered by society as “half of a man.” Children without a father, even when their mother was alive, were considered orphans (Brodksy 2004:136). Under the Taliban, life for Afghan widows became even more difficult, especially if their deceased husband’s family did not offer financial assistance. For example, the restrictions on mobility were even more burdensome for widowed women. This restriction on mobility precluded women from picking up any food or humanitarian
assistance without a mahram, making it almost impossible for widows. Additionally, according to Physicians for Human Rights (1998), approximately 6 percent of their respondents in their study ever received any humanitarian assistance. By 1998, the Physicians for Human Rights (1998) estimated that in Kabul alone, there were more than 30,000 widows.

The Taliban’s edict on the burqa also restricted women’s mobility for physical and economical reasons. First, the edict banished any part of a women’s body from visibility in public, with the exception of their eyes, limiting their physical mobility. In addition, women received beatings if they revealed their hands, their ankles, or lifted their veil simply to see. Second, in addition to the physical and psychological stigma, the compulsory burqa also generated an economic burden for many women, as they could not afford to purchase a burqa. With this, women in neighborhoods would often share, forcing them to wait before they could depart from their homes (U.S. Department of State 2001).

In the West, many assume that the Taliban “invented” the burqa. Historically, the burqa originated from the Pashtun culture, outside the realms of Islam (Hardy 2001). According to Lila Abu-Lughod (2002), the burqa represented one of many types of head or body coverings to symbolize a woman’s respectability and modesty. Besides Afghanistan, women throughout the subcontinent and Southwest Asia have also worn the burqa or similar coverings (Abu-Lughod 2002). Nevertheless, prior to the Taliban and even during the Mujahideen, only some rural Afghan women chose to wear the burqa. Conversely, in the cities, most women that chose to wear a veil wore something similar to
the Iranian type of *chador*\(^{45}\) (Hardy 2001). To urban women, the burqa was a foreign concept (Hardy 2001). Although the burqa created problems for Afghan women’s mobility, health, and economical well-being, it was not one of their main problems compared to the other oppressive edicts (Brodsky 2004:101). In fact, in some cases, the burqa allowed women’s groups, like RAWA, opportunities to expose the Taliban by concealing their identity and by hiding items in the burqa, like cameras, which the Taliban forbade in the country.

For instance, in 1999, RAWA members risked their lives by secretly taping the chilling public execution of Zarmeena,\(^{46}\) a mother of seven, charged with the murder of her husband (Brodksy 2003:13). Members of RAWA transported the video camera by hiding it in their burqa. This video marked one of the only public records of the public executions conducted by the Taliban. While RAWA shared the horrific video with Western media, but only after September 11, 2001, did networks like CNN, BBC, and ABC air the footage of the execution.

Besides the burqa, the Taliban controlled and issued other edicts regarding Afghan women’s appearance and dress. The Taliban prohibited women from wearing makeup, including nail polish, any bright colored clothing, as the Taliban believed that it was “sexually attracting,” flared leg pants, even underneath the burqa, white shoes or white socks as it was the same color of the Taliban flag, and high heels or any shoes that

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\(^{45}\) According to Jacky Hardy, an Iranian type of chador is a scarf that covers the hair but leaves the face in full view except for the forehead and can be altered to cover the face, if necessary. Dictionary.com defined the chador as “the traditional garment of Muslim and Hindu women, consisting of a long, usually black or drab-colored cloth or veil that envelops the body from head to foot and covers all or part of the face.”

\(^{46}\) As mentioned early, author Anne Brodsky stated in Afghanistan that last names are not common and the use of them is relatively new in Afghanistan. At the time of Zarmeena’s execution, she was referred to as only Zarmeena.
clicked or made noise, as the Taliban believed that a man must not hear a woman’s footsteps (RAWA 2009a). Additionally, like any other perceived violation, the DPVPV would punish the perceived wrongdoer with physical whippings, often with leather batons reinforced with metal studs (Human Rights 2001). For example, if a woman wore nail polish, the Taliban would cut her fingers off as a punishment. Women also received whippings, beatings, and verbal abuse for wearing the wrong clothing or for exposing their ankles (RAWA 2009a).

6.6: Edicts Against Employment and Healthcare

By 1999, the United Nations stated that socioeconomic and health conditions of Afghanistan were one of the worst in the world (Amnesty International 1999). As mentioned, the Taliban forbade women from working outside the home, with the exception granted to some female physicians and nurses. However, the Taliban prohibited traveling midwives from working and closed projects established for widow healthcare (Amnesty International 1998). The Taliban also enforced an edict that prohibited doctors from giving medical care to women without a male relative escort (Physician for Human Rights 2009). These two edicts made it extremely difficult for widows to receive healthcare. Moreover, the Taliban banned women from examinations by a male doctor, including in medical emergencies. The edict also created immense complexity for a woman doctor or nurse to practice medicine. Additionally, since the Taliban restricted education for women and closed Kabul University, it precluded new students, especially women, from learning medicine, worsening the shortage of medical professionals.
In January, 1997, the Taliban introduced a new policy of segregated hospitals. In September, 1997, the Taliban started to administer this new policy strictly. At this time, the Ministry of Health ordered all but one hospital in Kabul to refuse treatment to women. The single facility for women, Rabia Balkhi, lacked clean water, surgical equipment, X-ray machines, suction, and oxygen (Physicians for Human Rights 1998). Additionally, while half a million women resided in Kabul, this hospital contained just 35 beds (Physicians for Human Rights 1998). Even worse, the new policy restricted all women health professionals, including physicians, doctors, nurses, and pharmacists, from working in Kabul’s hospitals (Physicians for Human Rights 1998). After backlash from the international community and discussions with the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), the Taliban reversed parts of the policy. In November, 1997, the Taliban allowed women access to additional hospitals and authorized some women health professionals to practice again (Physicians for Human Rights 1998). However, by May, 1998, the Taliban allotted 70 percent of the available hospital beds to males only (Physicians for Human Rights 1998). In the Physicians for Human Rights 1998 study, 53 percent of women participants acknowledged situations in which they were seriously ill and unable to seek healthcare.

While the Taliban granted permission for female healthcare professionals to work, the religious police still harassed and intimidated the women healthcare practitioners (Physicians for Human Rights 1998). The result meant that less female healthcare providers practiced medicine as the Taliban threatened them with violence, intimidation, and even death. In an interview by the Physicians for Human Rights (1998), one Afghan female physician explained the difficulty she experienced each day in traveling to work,
I now restrict my actions quite a bit, despite the fact that I am working in a clinic and leave the house every day. I am always worried about getting arrested or beaten. Working outside the house, even though we have permission from the Ministry of Health, is still a big risk. The Taliban are very unpredictable. One day the religious police may stop me on the street and ask where I am going. At that point, the fact that I have “permission” may mean nothing to him; he can beat me or harass me or arrest me at his whim. Every day, I leave my house I pray that I might get back home safely at the end of the day. Another woman physician indicated that the Taliban threatened, “to hang her” if she and her husband failed to close their medical clinic.

While many of Afghan’s professionals already left the country due to the wars and two decades of violence, an increasing number of doctors fled during the Taliban era. Many doctors cited insufficient pay as forcing them to leave Afghanistan. One pediatrician reported that some doctors who worked in public clinics earned the equivalent of five USD per month (Physicians for Human Rights 1998). Besides the shortage of trained medical professionals, many facilities lacked medical supplies, water, electricity, blood banks, medical tools, gloves, proper sterilization, and basic medicine. In fact, much of the population lacked access to clean water. In 2000, only 17 percent of the rural population had access to clean water compared to 38 percent of the urban population (Rasekh et al. 1998). Additionally, the Physicians for Human Rights (1998) reported that patients needed to purchase their own medical supplies, like IV fluids or syringes for injections. For many Afghan patients, this was not an option.

To ensure their edicts were followed, many Taliban forces infiltrated medical facilities. For female doctors and nurses, the Taliban guards or the religious police would physically assault them for not being covered properly. This made it even more difficult for female physicians to treat their patients. In the cases where male physicians would
treat women, they often would examine a woman patient only with her burqa on or would diagnose through the male relative explaining the symptoms.

Considering the high fertility rate in Afghanistan, these edicts drastically affected pregnant women. In 2001, an estimated 45 women died each day from pregnancy related causes (Human Rights 2001). In 1998, approximately 10 percent of Afghan women received any kind of prenatal or maternal care while less than 6 percent of women had deliveries by trained professionals (Physicians for Human Rights 1998). One female nurse told the Physicians for Human Rights (1998) that “it was very difficult for pregnant women since male doctors are prohibited from seeing pregnant women and performing delivery. A lot of pregnant women died at home and in hospital and clinics.”

Before the Taliban, Afghanistan had one of the highest maternal mortality rates in the world. In 2001, Afghanistan still had one of the highest maternal mortality rates in the world (1600 deaths per 100,000 births). Moreover, the infant mortality rate was 152 deaths in every 1000 births and life expectancy for a woman was 44 (Rasekh et al. 1998). In the 1998 study by Physicians for Human Rights, the women respondents consistently discussed high levels of poor health and a decline in their health since the Taliban took control. In fact, 66 percent of the respondents reported a decline in her health status in the first two years of Taliban control and 87 percent reported a decrease in their access to healthcare (Physicians for Human Rights 1998). In 1998, 97 percent of respondents showed symptoms of major depression (Physicians for Human Rights 1998). According to the World Health Organization, 65 percent of Afghan women expressed suicide ideation and suicide attempts among Afghan women ranked higher than most countries in the world (Rasekh et al. 1998).
For professional Afghan women outside the healthcare field, working under the Taliban was very difficult, especially in the cities. While the Taliban permitted women to work in their homes, the Taliban limited their access to sell their items without an accompaniment of male relative. By 1998, 74 percent of Afghan women were unemployed (Physicians for Human Rights 1998). Approximately 40,000 women, comprising professional women, bakers, and domestic workers, forcibly lost their jobs (Gallagher 2004). Due to this, many women turned to begging and even prostitution to make an income.

According to Brodsky, in Afghanistan prostitution is viewed far beyond the disrespect associated in Western society. The Afghan and Islamic society views it with an incredibly negative connotation (2004:283). In August, 1999, RAWA issued preliminary research that showed hundreds of women, especially young widows, selling their bodies for an income since economic opportunities and income generated from begging declined (RAWA 1999). In 1999, RAWA estimated that 25 to 30 active brothels existed. For security reasons, the brothels changed locations and residences every few months. While the punishment for prostitution was execution by public stoning, interviewed prostitutes named members of the Taliban as their clients (Brodsky 2004:283).

6.7: Violence by the Taliban

According to Human Rights Watch (2001), the Taliban guards abducted, raped, and forced marriage with violence upon many women. However, it is important to consider that rape is a “significantly underreported” crime on a global scale (United Nation’s Development Fund for Women 2007a). In particular, rape in Afghan culture is
more than “underreported,” it is viewed as “shameful” for both the victim and the family. Given that, Human Rights Watch did not corroborate individual cases or provide statistics for the number of these violent sexual acts. According to their 2001 report, fears and rumors regarding these acts were rampant. While most of the violence was directed towards women, the Taliban jailed, tortured, and killed thousands of men as well (Physicians for Human Rights 1998). The Taliban beat and imprisoned men for their beard length, political views, or ethnicity.

In the Taliban era, every Friday marked the day of public punishments against perceived criminals in the Kabul Sports Stadium (Physicians for Human Rights 1998). On these days, the Taliban forced mandatory attendance of the population to watch public executions by “floggings, shootings, hangings, beheadings, and amputations” or other cruel and unusual punishment (Physicians for Human Rights 1998). For example, under Taliban law, if a person allegedly committed adultery, the Taliban stoned them to death. If a person stole, the Taliban amputated their limbs. No Afghan was immune to the terror imposed by the Taliban. The Taliban forced women, children, and men into the Kabul Stadium, and prior to the executions the Taliban would preach about Sharia law. At these executions, ordinary Afghans would sell food or drinks while beggars, mostly women, would ask for money (Brodsky 2004:18).
CHAPTER 7: STATUS OF AFGHAN WOMEN SINCE THE U.S. INVASION
(October 2001-December 2009)

7.1: Introduction to Women’s Status Since the U.S. Invasion

On November 17, 2001, just five weeks after the start of the U.S. and NATO military intervention in Afghanistan, First Lady Laura Bush\textsuperscript{47} delivered the weekly Presidential Radio Address. In the speech, she stated,

and the people of Afghanistan, especially women, are rejoicing. Afghan women know, through hard experience, what the rest of the world is discovering. . . . Because of our recent military gains in much of Afghanistan, women are no longer imprisoned in their homes. They can listen to music and teach their daughters without fear of punishment. Yet the terrorists who helped rule that country now plot and plan in many countries. And they must be stopped. The fight against terrorism is also a fight for the rights and dignity of women.

(American Presidency Project 2001)

The United States defeated the Taliban in three months and formed a coalition with the Northern Alliance to complete this mission. The United States’ key warlord allies shared parallel beliefs with the Taliban regarding women. The U.S. policy of overlooking the warlords’ fundamentalist stance on women conflicted with one of its paramount objectives for invading Afghanistan. To many Afghan women, the promise of freedom or liberation seemed unlikely under the change in leadership from the Taliban to the anti-women and anti-democratic Northern Alliance. As Zoya stated in her book, \textit{Zoya’s Story: an Afghan Woman’s Struggle for Freedom}, “No one was sorry to see the Taliban defeated, but neither did they rejoice when the Northern Alliance [mainly Mujahideens] took over. They too had blood on their hands” (Zoya 2002:226).

By 2006, Kabul showed superficial images of progress and development with a new five-star hotel, coffee bars, and a shopping center that sold Apple iPods, mobile

\textsuperscript{47} This marked the first time in U.S. history that a First Lady delivered the entire weekly Radio Presidential Address.
phones, and flat screen televisions. Yet the only individuals that utilized these new developments included Western and Japanese contractors and a few advantaged Afghan citizens (Rostami-Povey 2007:44). For many Afghans, electricity is still a hopeful promise. In the city, electricity is so unreliable and intermittent that both businesses and homes also utilize small generators. In 2007, 53 percent of the population lived in poverty (Rostami-Povey 2007:43). In the urban areas, 61 percent of individuals could access clean water and in the rural areas, a mere 31 percent of Afghans could access clean water. Furthermore, there is no sewage system, which means sewage just runs on the streets. A septic tank is considered a privilege, as only wealthy Afghans own them (Mitchell 2004).

In a 2009 survey completed by Women for Women International,48 security marked the largest concern for women in Afghanistan followed by economics. According to the survey, 66.2 percent of women respondents named security as the first problem that needs to be addressed by the central government (Women for Women 2009). While lack of security certainly affects all Afghans, it significantly impacts women. In fact, some women have reported that they have even less access to the public sphere than when the Taliban controlled the country (Coleman 2004). The fundamentalist members in the Afghan government certainly factor in women’s access to the public sphere.

The narcotics trade in Afghanistan represents another critical factor as it threatens the democracy, the stability, and security of the shaken country. In fact, the UN, the United States, and NATO believe that the narcotics trade serves as “the gravest threat to

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48 Women for Women International is a 501 (c) (3) non-profit organization headquartered in Washington, DC.
the security of the Afghanistan‖ (Human Rights Watch 2006). The drug trade also creates more corruption within the already weak central government.

Since the invasion of 2001, record-breaking harvests continuously have flourished to exceedingly high levels (United Nations 2007). In 2009, Afghanistan produced 92 percent of the world’s opium (United Nations Office on Drug and Crime 2009). Due to a fragile economy that relies on foreign aid, many Afghans look to poppy cultivation as their only choice for economic survival. In fact, 61 percent of poppy farmers named “the high sale price” as their reason for cultivating poppy, despite the government ban (United Nations Office on Drug and Crime 2009). According to Barnett Rubin, an expert on Afghanistan, “the livelihoods of the people of this impoverished, devastated country are more dependent on illegal narcotics than any other country in the world,” (Human Rights 2006).

However, most of the narcotics money does not benefit ordinary Afghan farmers. In fact, 80 percent of the opium trade revenue funds drug traffickers, corrupt government officials, the Taliban, and even Al Qaeda (United Nations 2007). The opium drug trade not only provides the Taliban with finances, it arguably serves as the primary reason for their resurgence. By 2008, the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR) estimated that the Taliban controlled 72 percent of the country (Bruno 2009). Not surprisingly, the provinces with the highest levels of poppy production, mostly in the southern and western part of Afghanistan, also possess the highest levels of security incidents (United Nation 2007). In fact, some of these areas lack any soldier or coalition presence, which fortifies the Taliban and even, creates parallel Taliban states (Rubin 2007). The combination of
the Taliban resurgence and fundamentalists in power adversely affects the goal of improving women’s rights and women’s status.

Despite the rhetoric of liberating Afghan women, the past eight years of war has not instantly improved the status of women. In fact, one analyst stated, “. . . the deteriorating security situation has severely negatively affected women’s ability to enjoy the rights and opportunities promised to them by the international community” (Library of Parliament 2008). Moreover, the higher the presence of the Taliban increases the already dangerous situation for women. Without security, women’s rights organizations and development projects cannot operate safely. In many cases, Taliban attacks or threats resulted in the closures of schools, offices, health facilities, and development projects.

According to the 2007 Afghanistan Human Development Report, Afghanistan had the second to lowest Gender Development Index (GDI) (CPHD 2007). The GDI, a United Nations indicator of status, measures the inequalities between men and women in categories of a long and healthy life, knowledge, and a decent standard of living. In 2007, the GDI for Afghanistan was .310, with Niger as the only country behind Afghanistan. According to the report, this GDI score showed the immense barriers that preclude Afghan women from education, employment, and healthcare. However, the report also acknowledged that the GDI fails to show all the inequalities regarding human rights violations, political representation, violence, and lack of access to justice (CPHD 2007).

Despite the dangerous security issue and the tremendous hurdles women face, there is a small window of optimism. According to The 2009 Asia Foundation Survey of
Afghan People, when asked about the direction of Afghanistan, 42 percent of respondents stated that Afghanistan “is moving in the right direction.” On the contrary, 29 percent of respondents stated that Afghanistan “is moving in the wrong direction” (Asia Foundation 2009). This represents a slight increase since 2008, where 38 percent responded the country was moving in the right direction. Additionally, Women for Women International (2009) also reported that women respondents in their survey “felt optimistic” regarding their future.

7.2: Rural and Urban Divide Since 2001

Historically, as documented, a deep rural and urban divide has existed in Afghanistan. For many women in Afghanistan, the deep patriarchal nature and tribal powers have precluded any attempts to access the public sphere in the rural areas. Regarding the urban and rural divide since 2001, Edna Mitchell (2004), an education specialist in Kabul, stated the following:

Using Kabul, the capital, as the prime example, the disparity between the attitudes and lifestyles in the dense but far from modern city, and that of the lives of children and families dispersed through the 33 provinces of mountainous Afghanistan is almost as wide a gap as that between the 17th and 20th centuries. In 2004, many in rural Afghanistan view Kabul and other urban areas with “suspicion” and as places for “potential cultural and moral degradation.”

Rural Afghanistan leaders project themselves as the moral fiber of the country and contest modernization attempts to improve women’s status as un-Islamic. Provincial leaders believe these values are not Afghan values, but instead the values of foreigners. Additionally, many rural leaders also view Kabul as the “center of a weak government” (Mitchell 2004).

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49 Headquartered in San Francisco, the Asia Foundation is a non-profit committed to the development of the Asian-Pacific region. The Asia Foundation has been conducting this survey since 2004.
Thus far, most improvements in women’s status have affected urban women more than rural women. For example, regarding the health of Afghan women, one rural respondent in the Women for Women International (2009) report stated the following, “Keeping healthy is so important and vital, but unfortunately lack of hospitals in rural areas, no potable water, pollution, dust on the road and streets and having no control on markets threatens the health of every Afghan.”

According to the RAND Corporation, 75 percent of the population resides in the rural areas (Godges 2007). However, other reports show even higher percentages of Afghans residing in rural areas.\(^5\) Besides the deep patriarchal structure and tribal based laws that preclude improvements for women, the increasing Taliban resurgence also affects women’s status. In these rural areas, the Taliban capitalize by waging informational campaigns that include threatening leaflets, storing weapon caches outside villages, and publicly hanging leaders who cooperate with U.S. or Afghanistan government (Godges 2007). According to Seth Jones, political scientist at the RAND Corporation, “. . . .the cities are held by the military forces. But, there is deep penetration of the Taliban in rural areas,” (Godges 2007).

7.3: Women’s Status in the Constitution

Many world leaders and institutions praised the 2004 Afghanistan Constitution. For example, then-U.N. Secretary General, Kofi Annan, labeled the new constitution as a “historic achievement,” while then-U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan, Zalmay Khalilzad, called it “one of the most enlightened constitutions in the Islamic world,” (Shah 2005).

\(^{5}\) For example, in Transition within Tradition: Women’s Participation in Restoring Afghanistan, Rina Amiri, Swanee Hunt, and Jennifer Sova estimated that 85 percent of the population resided in rural areas while 15 percent resided in urban areas.
Likewise, Human Rights Watch wrote that the constitution “. . . included significant provisions, notably women’s rights” (Shah 2005).

Article 22 legally embraces gender parity by stating that “the citizens of Afghanistan, whether man or woman, have equal rights and duties before the law.” Naming women specifically aimed to protect their legal status. Furthermore, Article 44 aimed to reduce the literacy disparity between women and men by declaring, “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.” Subsequently, the constitution guarantees a certain percentage of women elected in the lower house and upper house of the Afghanistan parliament. The constitution also attempts to abolish traditional customs that often precluded women’s rights in Article 54. In this article, the constitution says, “The state adopts necessary measures to ensure physical and psychological well being of family, especially of child and mother, upbringing of children and the elimination of traditions contrary to the principles of sacred religion of Islam.” For example, this might include the mistaken interpretation of Islam that precludes women and girls from an education, forced early marriages and dowries, health practices, or the most severe example of honor killings (Shah 2005). Additionally, the Afghan Constitution also established the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission, which serves as the supervisor for watching human rights and abolishing the discrimination against women. Moreover, Afghanistan has agreed to several international human rights instruments like the CEDAW (Library of Parliament 2008:5).
Conversely, other parts of the Constitution, specifically Article 3, concerned some feminist and human’s rights organizations. Article 3 states, “In Afghanistan, no law can be contrary to the beliefs and provisions of the sacred religion of Islam.” The constitution also grants the Supreme Court as the ultimate authority on this interpretation. For example, while Human Rights Watch praised certain provisions, it questioned how conservative groups could interpret Islam in ways that would violate human rights. Others suggested this potentially could lead to a religious interpretation that would justify discrimination against women, according to Sharia Law (Library of Parliament 2008:3).

This ambiguity between Article 3 and Article 22 led to both global and Afghan backlash when the Afghan parliament passed the 2009 Shia Personal Status Law. According to the Human Rights Watch, the Shia Personal Status Law regulates marriage, divorce, and the inheritance for Afghanistan’s Shia population (Human Rights Watch 2009). This law imposes “Taliban-like” restrictions on women. These restrictions include: 1) asking permission to leave the house, except on urgent business, 2) a duty “to make herself up” or “dress up” for her husband when demanded, and 3) a duty not to refuse sex when her husband wants it (Human Rights Watch 2009).

In Afghanistan, the Shia Muslim population comprises 20 percent of the Muslims compared to the 80 percent that are Sunni Muslim (Adeney 2008:538). According to the Minority Rights Group International (2009), the Shia Personal Status Law was potentially legislated to “protect the rights of a religious minority community.”

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51 No Afghan women sit on the Supreme Court.
52 In Afghanistan, 99 percent of the population is Muslim. As documented, 80 percent of the Muslim population is Sunni compared to the 20 percent of the Shia. Additionally, while Shia is the minority Muslim religion, they often are the minority ethnicity as well. Generally, Hazaras, a historically oppressed ethnicity in Afghanistan, comprise the Shia population.
even though it simultaneously infringes on the rights of Shia women. This law signifies that even though Article 22 grants women and men freedom, women still experience discrimination, even within the boundaries of the Afghanistan Constitution.

Besides the uncertainty between the interpretation of Islam and its effect on Article 22, other confusion exists between formal laws and customary laws. In many cases, customary laws hinder women, especially uneducated and rural women, in understanding their rights, especially regarding violence or property. In Afghanistan, like in many developing nations, abused women often accept both their inferior status and the patriarchal structure (Cohen 2006:261). For example in 2003, a study by UNIFEM revealed that two-thirds of women surveyed in Morocco and Algeria believed that domestic violence could be justified at times (Cohen 2006:261).

7.4: Women’s Status in Education

After the fall of the Taliban, the United States and the international community named education as one of the paramount objectives in Afghanistan. To even countries that sympathized with the Taliban, the deprivation of education was seen as a violation of human rights. Since 2001, Afghanistan has improved their educational system for girls and women through international assistance in creating infrastructure and by simply granting the right for them to gain an education again. However, many obstacles exist within the education system, especially for girls and women. In fact, the 2009 Asia Foundation Survey of Afghan People labeled education and illiteracy as one of the biggest problems still facing Afghan women. As the Human Rights Watch (2006) reported, “the situation is far from what it could or should have been, particularly for girls.”
By the end of 2001, just two months after the U.S. invasion, 774,000 children attended school. In 2002, 1.5 million of the estimated 4.4 million school-aged children returned to the classrooms (Chatterjee 2002). By 2004, 4 million girls attended school, although mostly in Kabul, not in the rural areas (Human Rights Watch 2004). By 2005, the Ministry of Education projected that 5.2 million children attended school and were officially registered in primary, middle, or high school (Human Rights 2006). Additionally, another 4,000 to 5,000 girls and women attended vocational, Islamic, or teacher’s education programs (Human rights Watch 2006). By 2007, an estimated 43 percent of girls attended school (Coleman & Charney 2007). In 2009, RAWA estimated that of the 6 million students that attend public schools, females comprised 34 percent (RAWA 2009a).

Yet, in 2004, most primary school-aged girls did not attend primary school and a mere 5 percent of girls attended secondary school, compared to the 20 percent of boys (Human Rights Watch 2006). From 2004 to 2005, girls comprised just 20 percent of the total enrollment in primary and secondary schools (Human Rights Watch 2006). By 2007, there was one girl student for every two boy students at the primary level (United Nation’s Development Fund for Women 2007a). Additionally, in 2007, boys were twice as likely to finish primary school as girls (United Nation’s Development Fund for Women 2007a).

Even with the creation of new schools, there is a still in a disparity in access between urban and rural areas. In fact, one-third of districts still have no girls’ schools and the majority of Afghan girls do not attend school at all (Human Rights Watch 2006). For example, in cities like Kabul, Herat, or Mazur, girls are almost equal in attendance to
boys. Conversely, in rural provinces, like Zabul, 55 percent of boys attend compared to 1 percent of girls (Coleman 2004). However, this era still represents the highest enrollment of children, especially for girls, in school than any other era in Afghanistan (Human Rights Watch 2006).

Security serves as the primary obstacle for education for all Afghans, but especially for girls and women. According to the Human Rights Watch, two significant security concerns affect the education system. First, the insurgents, including the Taliban and other opposition groups, have threatened or attacked teachers, students, and schools, forcing the schools’ closures. Second, these same groups have also attacked Afghan government officials and NGO aid workers. These problems coupled with the lack of government control not only force school closures through threats or destruction, but also preclude the opening and creation of new schools. Additionally, this dangerous situation also creates fear for students, particularly girls and women, to attend any open schools and forces them to drop out (Human Rights Watch 2006).

In 2006, President Hamid Karzai acknowledged the dangerous impact of the insecurity on school attendance. On International Women’s Day, he stated that, “From fear of terrorism, from threats of the enemies of Afghanistan, today as we speak, some 100,000 Afghan children who went to school last year, and the year before last, do not go to school,” (Human Rights Watch 2006). One Afghan mother of two spoke with Human Rights about how the danger and threatening tactics forced her community of Kandahar City to stop sending their daughters to school,

During Ramadan [late 2005], the girls were still going to school. There was a letter posted on the community’s mosque saying that “men who are working with NGOs and girls going to school need to be careful about their safety. If we put acid on their faces or they are murdered, then the blame will be on the parents.”.
After that, we were scared and talked about it, but we decided to let them keep going anyway. But after Eid, a second letter was posted on the street near to there, and the community decided that it was not worth the risk and stopped all girls over age ten from going to school. . . . My daughters are afraid and they are telling us “we’ll get killed and be lying on the streets and you won’t even know.” (Human Rights Watch 2006)

Besides night letters or threats, some members of the Taliban and opposition groups have violently attacked teachers, in front of their students or their families. In one horrific incident in Zabul Province, a rural area, armed opposition forces decapitated the headmaster of a school in his home in front of his children (Human Rights Watch 2006). In the Southern regions, 35 percent of the schools closed due to suicide bombings and Improvised Explosive Devices (IED) attacks (Rubin 2007). From January 2005 to May 2006, the Human Rights Watch reported 204 attacks on Afghan students, teachers, and schools (2006). In some neighborhoods, the community closed all the schools for safety reasons.

Security is not the sole obstacle for girls and women to attend schools. Besides the disparity of access in rural areas, there is a disparity in access to available girls’ schools. While boys have access to 86 percent of schools, girls have access to 49 percent of schools (Human Rights Watch 2006). Of these schools, UNIFEM reported that in 2007 a mere 19 percent of schools were designated as girls’ schools. While many schools claim to be “co-educational,” they will not grant access to girls. Further, many parents will not send their daughters to co-educational schools. Even within Kabul, the struggle to balance Afghan traditional culture with educational advancement exists, as some parents believe it is unsuitable for girl students to attend the same school as male

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53 Due to the security concerns and difficulty in conducting research, the Human Rights Watch stressed this underestimates the correct numbers.
Moreover, to increase the number of Afghan girls attending school, the system would not only require more girls’ schools, but more female teachers. In many cases, families forbid their daughter to learn from male teachers (Library of Parliament 2008).

While some primary schools allow co-education until grade three, secondary education must be separate for boys and girls (Human Rights Watch 2006). In many instances, girls in grades eight or higher have no access to secondary schools. By 2007, there was one female student to every five to six male students at the secondary level (United Nation’s Development Fund for Women 2007a). In fact, certain provinces have no girls’ secondary schools (Human Rights Watch 2009). This means that the small percentage of girls who attend school stop their education by grade eight or lower. This lack of education among girls translates to a profound negative impact on the future of Afghan women and their participation in the political, economic, and social segments of Afghan society. As one women leader stated, “This young generation can be trained well but what about older girls? They will remain illiterate. An illiterate woman cannot be a teacher. How can she train the next generation?” (Human Rights Watch 2006). Another factor to consider, especially among girls who would attend secondary school, is the young age of marriage and the high fertility rate. Oftentimes, girls marry at very young ages. In 2007, UNIFEM reported that 57 percent of girls were married before the legal marriage age of 16. Additionally, pregnancy often stops women from pursuing an education.

Cultural resistance, poverty, and the shortage of teachers also play a huge role. The lack of security directly contributes to each of these obstacles. For example, in 2004
to 2005, women comprised 28 percent of the teachers. In 2007, UNIFEM estimated that women still comprised only one quarter of all the teachers in Afghanistan. However, the majority of female teachers taught in Kabul. Besides the low salary for teachers, qualified women cannot travel nor live in some rural areas due to the lack of security, resulting in no female teachers for rural girls (Human Rights Watch 2006). Like in the pre-Taliban era, many times low-income families simply cannot afford to send both sons and daughters to school. In these cases, families choose to send their sons over their daughter. These families cannot afford transportation to ensure security for their daughters and they expect their sons to earn future higher earnings than their daughters (Human Rights Watch 2006).

While the international community promised funding for girls’ education, it oftentimes is inadequate and does not meet the needs. For example, from 2004 to 2006, the USAID funded $100 million USD to girls’ education. However, most of funding was allocated directly to the construction of the infrastructure and significantly underfunded the budget for teacher training and salaries (Coleman 2004). Additionally, the funding often never included any strategies to address rural education or alternative education (Coleman 2004).

Different reports show conflicting numbers on Afghan women’s literacy levels since 2001. In 2001, an UN Gender Advisor estimated the literacy level for women was at just 4 percent (Amiri et al. 2004). By 2004, UNESCO reported a higher literacy level for women at 20 percent. Conversely, Isobel Coleman noted in her study that many individuals disputed that number as too high (Coleman 2004). From 2002 to 2007, UNICEF (2009) reported the literacy level for women aged 15 through 24 at 18 percent.
Human Rights Watch stated that in 2006, 86 percent of women could still not read or write, meaning that a mere 14 percent of women were literate. In the *2007 Afghanistan Human Development Report*, the Centre for Policy and Human Development (CPHD) estimated that just 12.6 percent of women were literate compared to 32.5 percent of men.

In comparing this data to neighboring countries, the report stated that the female to male literacy ratio was 0.4, which was lower than both Pakistan (0.6) and Iran (0.8) (CPHD 2007). Additionally, it reported that the overall adult literacy average decreased from 28.7 percent in 2003 to 23.5 percent in 2005 (CPHD 2007). However, also in 2007, both UNIFEM and the Gender Entrepreneurship Markets (GEM) projected women’s literacy levels at even higher percentages. While UNIFEM estimated women’s literacy levels at 15.8 percent compared to men’s literacy levels at 31 percent (2007), GEM estimated women’s literacy level at 18 percent compared to men’s literacy level at 50 percent (2007). In 2009, an UNESCO press release stated that four out of every five women cannot read or write (Sadiqi 2009). Last, according to RAWA (2009), UNESCO reported the literacy level at 18 percent for women in 2009.

Nevertheless, all the reports indicate that Afghanistan has one of the lowest literacy rates in the world, especially for women. Without an improvement in education and literacy, it is difficult to improve other factors in a women’s status. Indeed, it is universally accepted that increasing girls and women’s access to education not only improves their literacy but advances their health and economic growth. For instance, Human Rights Watch (2006) reported that increasing girls’ education by one year would result in a 5 percent to 10 percent reduction in infant mortality. Thus, while the status of
women in education shows signs of progress, it still is far behind, which consequently affects all other factors of women’s status.

7.5: Women’s Status in the Labor Force

Security barriers, low literacy levels, low education attainment, and societal norms drastically affect women’s participation in the labor force. Without an education, many women do not possess the needed skills to contribute in the broader economy, especially in professional positions and in leadership roles. In many areas, especially the rural provinces, the same security issues that prevent women from attending school, preclude their participation in the workforce. This equates to women to working inside in their home, rather than in the public sphere. Additionally, while there is no legal or formal restriction on mobility, women in rural areas still are “culturally constrained” from working outside the home (CPHD 2007). In fact, according to the 2009 Women for Women International Survey, 55 percent of male respondents believed that women should not work outside of their home. Last, the high fertility rate and constant pregnancy often prevent women from entering the workforce.

In 2007, Afghanistan’s female labor force participation ranked at the bottom in the South Asian region, at just 35.8 percent (GEM 2007). While some urban educated women have returned to their careers as teachers, doctors, judges, and lawyers, most women, especially those in rural localities, work at home in informal sectors like agriculture, livestock management, and as caregivers (CPHD 2007). In Afghanistan, 80 percent to 90 percent of the total economic activity happens within the informal sectors (CPHD 2007). In 2007, women comprised 65 percent of the agricultural workers in Afghanistan (GEM 2007). According to the CPHD (2007), while these at-home positions
generate income, they are not remunerated. In their 2009 Survey, Women for Women International reported that women respondents griped about the shortage of job opportunities. By 2007, some studies showed that one in every seven women had a job, representing 14 percent of the female population (Charney & Coleman 2007). In comparing women’s literacy level to the percentage in the labor force, there is a parallel.

The educated minority of women who comprise the formal economy generally are employed in the education and health sectors (GEM 2007). Yet, in these positions, men overwhelmingly dominate women. For example, 40 percent of basic health facilities report a shortage in female staff. Analogous to education, the inadequate number of females in the health field restricts many women from seeking healthcare. Meanwhile, in positions that are traditionally male dominated, women’s participation is severely limited. For example, women comprise less than 1 percent of the police or military forces. In 2007, women represented just 0.6 percent of the Afghan National Army. Of the 43,000 Afghan military members, only 259 were women. Likewise, in 2007, only 233 women were police in Afghanistan (United Nation’s Development Fund for Women 2007a).

While many cultural barriers exist regarding women-owned businesses, by 2005 women comprised 11 percent of business owners in Afghanistan. Women often owned businesses in the agricultural, handi-craft, and service sectors. Still the minority, some women own shops or businesses like bakeries, beauty parlors, tailoring shops, or jewelry-making stores (GEM 2007). Interestingly, women comprise the majority of micro-finance loan recipients. In fact, 85 percent of micro-finance recipients are women (GEM 2007). These loans are vital to Afghan women as they often lack in their ability to access land, equipment, and materials (GEM 2007).
Like many countries, Afghanistan has huge disparity between female and male incomes. In 2007, UNIFEM reported that women earned just 50 percent to 60 percent of the male wage (2007). In 2009, Women for Women International stated that women were likely to earn just one-third of what their male counterparts earned. Additionally, it was estimated that just in Kabul over 50,000 war widows support an average of six dependents in their families (Women for Women International 2009).

7.6: Women’s Status in Political Participation and in the Justice Sector

In December 2001, women took part in the Bonn Agreement, which signified the start of Afghanistan’s new political process. However, women delegates said they received intimidation and threats from criminals and warlords regarding their involvement. The women delegates blamed the warlords’ participation for undermining additional changes to improve women’s status. Likewise, women delegates received nominal time to voice their opinions and even reported their microphones being cut off, while powerful warlords received endless time to speak (Human Rights Watch 2004). In the December 2003 Constitutional Loya Jirga, Malalai Joya, the youngest parliamentarian ever elected in Afghanistan, was verbally attacked and threatened after she challenged the warlord’s dominance (Coleman 2004). Even an alleged moderate, Sebaghatulla Mojaheddi, the Chairman of Constitutional Loya Jirga, said to Joya that “women in Islamic law are only worth half of men and should know their place,” (Coleman 2004).

As mentioned, the Afghanistan Constitution grants 25 percent of the lower-house seats and 17 percent of the upper-house seats to women. In 2004, more than 300 female candidates actually ran for office, including a female Presidential candidate. Due to the constitutional quotas, women representatives must comprise at least 24 percent (or 84
members of 351) of the National Assembly. Women exceeded the quota requirement by 3 percent and in 2007 comprised 27 percent of the National Assembly (United Nation’s Development Fund for Women 2007a). In January 2005, one woman was elected as the first governor of a province (Amnesty International 2005). Moreover, the electoral law mandates that women must comprise 25 percent of the provincial council candidates. In August 2009, the Office of the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) reported that women held 28 percent of the provincial council seats nationwide (SIGAR 2009).

Despite these successes, many female Parliamentarians indicated that men still maintained the power, especially the warlords. Many of the male politicians, specifically the warlords, do not support women. For example, in May 2006, the National Assembly suspended Malalai Joya for voicing her opposition to the warlords in the Afghan government (Library of Parliament 2008). Additionally, most rural areas still are not open to women in the political sphere. In 2007, only one female minister held a cabinet position, which was the Minister of Women’s Affairs. In 2009, women comprised just 22 percent of government employees and a mere 9 percent were in a decision-making role (Women for Women International 2009).

In the 2004 election, 10.5 million women registered to vote and women represented 43 percent of the total voters, although mainly in the urban areas. For instance, in the Pashtun and rural provinces of Helmand and Oruzgan, women comprised just 2 percent and 7 percent of the respective electorate (Library of Parliament 2008). Besides security and threats, the Library of Parliament (2008) stated that women’s “lack of citizenship education” served as one of the many barriers in women’s voting
participation. Further, the conservative and patriarchal culture precluded many women from voting. According to UNFEM, 87 percent of Afghans, comprising both men and women, indicated that women require men’s’ permission to vote. Only 35 percent of women believed that women did not need a male relative’s permission (United Nation’s Development Fund for Women 2007a). In 2004, 18 percent of men stated they would not permit their wives to vote (United Nation’s Development Fund for Women 2007a).

In the August 2009 elections, women’s turnout dropped to 38.7 percent of electorate, largely due to the horrific security issues (SIGAR 2009). According to SIGAR, while security was a huge problem for the entire population, it was even a bigger issue for women (SIGAR 2009). Additionally, two women, Shahla Ata and Dr. Frozan Fana, ran for President of Afghanistan in the 2009 Election, compared to one women candidate in 2004. However, both women stated “they feared for their lives and suffered abuse” (SIGAR 2009). Approximately 32,199 Afghans casted their votes for one of the two women candidates, and jointly they received just 0.7 percent of the total votes (SIGAR 2009). Women also comprised 10 percent of the provincial council candidates, which was an overall increase since 2004. However, Afghan women candidates truly risked their lives in running for office, as one female candidate was assassinated, two female candidates were kidnapped, and one female candidate was the target of a failed assassination attempt (SIGAR 2009). Female politicians and candidates are in so much danger that some female parliamentarians indicated that unless security improves, they would not be able to run in the 2010 National Assembly Elections54 (SIGAR 2009). As one former woman National Assembly candidate said,

54 The 2010 National Assembly Elections are scheduled for May 22, 2010.
Security is different for men and women. Men candidates have put their pictures everywhere in the bazaar. Women candidates can’t do that, because they are afraid. Somebody might come during the night and kill them. Anything can happen. Warlords are ruling. They can do anything they want. Commanders have lots of guns. (Human Rights Watch 2005)

While statistically women voters, women candidates, and women elected officials comprise greater numbers than ever before, security, cultural constraints, and structural barriers preclude them from an even larger political participation. Even in 2009, eight years after the U.S. invasion, women still are systemically excluded from the political process. In addition, women are largely absent from the judicial arena as well. In 2007, of 1,547 judges in Afghanistan, only 62 were women (roughly, 4 percent). In the law profession, only 6.1 percent of lawyers were female. Similarly, not one female member sits on the Supreme Court Council. Without women working in the justice system, women often cannot seek recourse for their grievances.

7.7: Violence Since 2001

Despite the symbolic legal gains the constitution affords women, Afghan women face serious challenges in protection and justice, especially against violence. While women endured multitudes of human rights abuses, including rapes and beatings under the Taliban and the Mujahideen, women still face of a life of systemic sexual, psychological, and physical violence. In fact, the 2007 Afghanistan Human Development Report stated, “violence against women in Afghanistan has reached ‘epidemic proportions’” (CPHD 2007). Regarding the lives of women, Malalai Joya, Afghan female politician said,

We do not have human rights now in most provinces. It is as easy to kill a woman in my country as it is to kill a bird. In some big cities like Kabul, some women
have access to jobs and education, but in most of the country, the situation for women is hell. Rape, kidnapping and domestic violence are increasing. These fundamentalists during the so-called free elections made a misogynist law against Shia women in Afghanistan. . . . All these crimes are happening under the name of democracy. (Hedges 2009)

According to a study by Womankind Worldwide, a United Kingdom non-profit, 80 percent of Afghan women were affected by domestic violence (Women for Women International 2009). In 2007, Afghanistan Online reported that one in three women endured physical, psychological, or sexual violence (2007). From March 2007 to March 2008, there was an increase of reported domestic violence by 40 percent (RAWA 2008). According to Amnesty International (2005), brothers, husbands, and fathers often commit violence against their female relatives. In fact, 92 percent of the time the victim knows the perpetrator (Women for Women International 2009). Suraya Subhrang, a commissioner on the rights of women at the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC), stated that, “Our findings clearly indicate that despite over six years of international rhetoric about Afghan women’s emancipation and development, a real and tangible change has not touched the lives of millions of women in this country” (RAWA 2008).

Nevertheless, even these startlingly high numbers most likely do not reflect the actual amount of violent incidences. Between the universal trend in under-reporting domestic violence and the deep social stigma Afghan women face, most domestic violence cases are unreported (United Nation’s Development Fund for Women 2006). In addition, Afghan women not only face severe limitations in seeking justice through the law, but often the police or law officials are corrupt, leaving women with no redress. In some cases, the police may actually also abuse women (CPHD 2007). In fact, only an
exceedingly minimal amount of domestic violence offenders ever receive any judicial punishment, leaving women with no recourse but to tolerate the mistreatment. The AIHRC reported that in 2007, there were more reported cases in Kabul or Herat than in Kandahar, a Taliban stronghold (Afghanistan Online 2007). One can infer that women in urban areas would be more likely to breach the “social taboo” and report violence than women in more conservative rural areas. Additionally, UNIFEM (2006) stated that as women become more conscious of their legal rights, they are more likely to report violent incidents. Conversely, in conservative Afghanistan, families and communities often shun women who attempt to seek protection from domestic violence and sexual violence, like rape.

UNIFEM stated that Afghan women face numerous issues of violence, like forced marriage, child marriage, domestic violence, sexual harassment, human trafficking, and even death in honor killings (United Nation’s Development Fund for Women 2006). Despite the fact child marriages are illegal and a criminal offense according to Article 517 of the Afghan Penal Code, Womankind Worldwide reported that over 60 percent of marriages are forced and 50 percent of Afghan girls are married before the age of 16 (Women for Women International 2009). In forced marriages, women are often treated as either financial transactions or commodity exchanges for a family to either settle a debt or resolve a financial hardship (Women for Women International 2009). For instance, in a Washington Post article, one Afghan father explained that because he could not repay a $165 loan to buy sheep, he sold his 16-year old daughter (Tang 2007). Some families trade their daughters as young as six or seven. These young child brides then often are
victims of sexual abuse not only by the groom but also by older men in the groom’s family (United Nation’s Development Fund for Women 2006).

The horrific physical and mental hardships women endure from violence also can lead to self-immolation, suicide, prostitution, narcotics addiction, and violent behavior towards children (United Nation’s Development Fund for Women 2006). In just the Kandahar province in 2006, at least 64 women attempted to commit suicide and 36 women poisoned themselves with toxic chemicals like rat-poison (CPHD 2007). From May to July 2006, 106 women and girls in Kabul and Herat set themselves on fire, with 82 percent of the victims in Kabul dying from the self-immolated burns (United Nation’s Development Fund for Women 2006). In 2007, the AIHRC reported that 626 women attempted suicide, through self-immolation, slitting their veins, or drug overdoses, with 130 succeeding in taking their lives (RAWA 2007). In fact, Afghanistan is one of the only countries where the suicide rate is higher for women than for men.

7.8: Women’s Status in Health

In July, 2009, Dr. S. M. Amin Fatimie, the Afghan Minister of Health, said that, “the health of Afghan women and children is in a better state today than in 2002 . . . but much remains to be done,” (Fatimie 2009). Afghan women have historically had one of the lowest health statuses in the world. Despite improvements, women still face many barriers in improving their health status, especially in reproductive health areas. While the security situation and lack of education play a huge role in this low status, women endure other challenges like societal barriers and lack of access. Additionally, the healthcare facilities lack proper supplies, trained personnel, and trained women.

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55 Self immolation is practice of burning oneself in an attempt to commit suicide.
Like other concerns, urban women have seen some improvement, especially in access. While the Ministry of Health reported an increase in overall health facilities, rural areas still lack facilities, infrastructure, and transportation (Fatimie 2009). Depending on how distant the rural area is from the province capital, UNIFEM (United Nation’s Development Fund for Women 2007) projected that between 30 percent to 90 percent of rural women cannot access healthcare. For these reasons and the societal barriers against women’s health, rural women often are in poorer health than urban women. For example, the 2007 Afghanistan Human Development Report estimated Afghanistan’s maternal mortality rate (MMR) as 1600 per 100,000 live births. However, while Kabul had a lower MMR of 400 per 100,000 live births, Badakhshan, a distant rural district, had a much higher MMR of 6500 per 100,000 live births (CPHD 2007).

In 2003, the Ministry of Health established the Department of Women and Reproductive Health. Yet, in 2008, the UN estimated the maternal mortality rate range as 1600 to 1900 out 100,000 women, which was the world’s second highest maternal mortality rate. Only Sierra Leone had a higher maternal mortality rate than Afghanistan (RAWA 2008). In total, approximately, 26,000 Afghan women die from childbirth or related infections, like hemorrhaging or obstructed labor (Grady 2009). Even if the mother lives during the childbirth, obstructed labor often kills the infant without a Caesarean section (Grady 2009). Of these deaths, The Lancet estimated that 78 percent were preventable (Grady 2009). According to UNIFEM (2007), this tragically equates to about one woman dying every 29 minutes in childbirth.

In 2007, the fertility rate was 6.6 children (United Nation’s Development Fund for Women 2007a), with approximately just 10 percent of Afghan couples reporting using
contraceptives (Grady 2009). Approximately 80 percent of women gave birth without skilled medical professionals or midwives. However, this does indicate an increase from even 2003, where the United Nations (2003) reported that just 5 percent of women gave birth with trained personnel. Still, just one-third of women received any medical care during their pregnancy (Grady 2009). Moreover, the 2007 Human Development Report stated that the infant mortality rate decreased from 165/1,000 to 135/1,000. While Afghanistan still has one of the highest infant mortality rates in the world this decrease resulted in 40,000 more successful births (CPHD 2007). In 2006, approximately 100,000 Afghan women suffered from untreated fistulas56 (Motherland Afghanistan 2006).

According to the documentary Motherland Afghanistan, the conditions of Afghan health facilities for women are deplorable and unsanitary. Besides there being a shortage of basic medical equipment like hospital beds, working bathrooms, IVs, surgical stitching, pain pills, or anesthetics, hospitals also lacked funds, which required patients to purchase their own IVs or stitching (Motherland Afghanistan 2006). In a PBS interview, Dr. Qudrat Mojadidi, an OB/GYN who worked for the United States in training Afghan

56 According to the Fistula Foundation, a fistula is defined as a “hole.” While fistulas were generally eradicated in industrialized countries in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, women in developing countries in Africa and Asia still experience fistulas. The Fistula Foundation defines an obstetric fistula as “a hole between a woman's birth passage and one or more of her internal organs. This hole develops over many days of obstructed labor, when the pressure of the baby's head against the mother's pelvis cuts off blood supply to delicate tissues in the region. The dead tissue falls away and the woman is left with a hole between her vagina and her bladder (called a vesicovaginal fistula or VVF) and sometimes between her vagina and rectum (rectovaginal fistula, RVF). This hole results in permanent incontinence of urine and/or feces.” Further, due to their infertility and foul odor, many women with untreated fistulas experience spousal abandonment and isolation from their community. The Fistula Foundation, http://www.fistulafoundation.org/aboutfistula/faqs.html.
doctors, believed that the health conditions are not improving for Afghan women (Motherland Afghanistan 2006).

From 2001 to 2009, the average life expectancy of women has varied from 42 to 44, approximately 20 years shorter than the world average (Library of Parliament 2008; United Nations Children’s Fund 2009). Despite the years of war, men still outnumber women by 104 to 100 (Library of Parliament 2008). In fact, Afghanistan is one of the only countries where men outlive women. The 2007 Human Development Report attributed the low life expectancy to the lack of access to health care, poor nutrition, and the regularity of young marriage (before the age 15) (CPHD 2007). In 2007, women comprised 83 percent of the 50,000 Afghans who died from tuberculosis (United Nation’s Development Fund for Women 2007a). While tuberculosis and malaria cases have decreased, Afghanistan still ranked 17 out of the 22 countries with the highest tuberculosis incidents (CDHD 2007). Further, UNIFEM (2007) reported almost half of Afghan women are iron-deficient.

Despite many potential HIV risk indicators, including the common heroin usage in Afghanistan, no data showed prevalence of HIV or AIDS existing in Afghanistan as in other developing countries. For example, in many developing countries, women with low gender status, high illiteracy, violence, and sexual abuse often are infected with HIV in higher numbers (Bergenström 2003). Additionally, during the Taliban era, more women joined the sex trade. These behaviors and the uncommon use of contraceptives are high-risk habits for a potential HIV epidemic. In neighboring countries, like India and Bangladesh, there is a higher risk of HIV than in Afghanistan. While Afghan women
already face many health challenges, many global organizations worry about the potential
HIV/AIDS epidemic that could exist in Afghanistan, especially amongst Afghan women.
CHAPTER 8: WESTERN FEMINIST ORGANIZATIONS’ CAMPAIGNS

8.1: Introduction to Western Feminist Organizations’ Campaigns

In March 2009, Eleanor Smeal, President of the Feminist Majority Foundation, spoke on FMF’s latest campaign, Campaign for Afghan Women and Girls. Smeal said, “We warned in 1998, and over and over again ever since, the women and girls in Afghanistan are the canaries in the mine. We cannot forget them if we are ever to gain peace and global stability” (Feminist Majority Foundation 2009). In the same press release, Dr. Sima Samar, chairperson of the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission, discussed her annoyance with the portrayal of Afghanistan as a fourteenth century culture and reiterated that she received her medical degree from Kabul University, which was once a leading medical center in Central Asia (Feminist Majority Foundation 2009).

This notion of Afghanistan as a fourteenth century culture can be viewed as a product of cultural essentialism. In some cases, Western feminists and organizations have engaged in cultural essentialism and the victimization of Afghan women and their plight. Even prior to 9/11, the oppression of Afghan women was the subject of many feminist organizations’ campaigns and online petitions (Kolhatkar and Ingalls 2006:169). Historically, this would not serve as the first time Western feminists have victimized, implicitly or explicitly, non-Western women. In fact, this perceived victimization has been criticized within the feminist discourse. Through both a practical and theoretical lens, this chapter explores the campaigns and literature produced by Western feminists, which includes individual scholars and feminist organizations, on Afghan women.
8.2: Feminist Campaigns in the Three Eras and the Obsession with the Burqa

In Women for Afghan Women, Gloria Steinem briefly discussed her protest to the U.S. government policy of supporting the Mujahideen in Afghanistan in 1980. According to Steinem, the United States disregarded her and other feminists’ protests and continued to fund $3 billion dollars to “religious extremists and gender apartheid” (Steinem 2002:66). Conversely, Moghadam (2002) shared a different recollection. Instead, she questioned the “curious silence of feminists” during the civil war and Mujahideen periods in the 1980’s and early 1990’s. Moghadam (2002) said,

One would have thought that feminists around the world, including American feminists, would have rallied around the idea of equality for Afghan women, criticized the Mujahidin and even the Kabul government, and come to the aid of Afghan women, as they did in the mid-1990s in the case of Bosnia. Unfortunately this did not occur.

Moghadam provided two reasons for the “curious silence” of feminists during the Mujahideen era. First, she argued that some feminists did not view the Mujahideen as misogynistic fundamentalists but instead as liberators from the Soviet Union (Moghadam 2002). According to Moghadam, some female journalists and activists wrote books and literature in support of the Mujahideen. Second, Moghadam argued that in this era, Western feminists associated “women’s rights” with Western women, not Eastern women. Moghadam (2002) believed feminists debated heavily over cultural relativism and universalism as it pertained to “women’s rights.”

After the Taliban gained control, international and U.S. feminist organizations started to take notice and formulated several campaigns regarding Afghan women’s oppression. Most notably, in 1997, the Feminist Majority Foundation launched the “Stop Gender Apartheid in Afghanistan Campaign.” Spearheaded by Mavis Leno, this
campaign was largely successful on a variety of fronts. First, the campaign created immense public awareness on the human rights violations by the Taliban against Afghan women. Second, it played a role in pressuring both the United States and the United Nations in not recognizing the Taliban as an official government (Gallagher 2004). According to Smeal (2002), the 1997 campaign created more communication to the State Department and Clinton Administration than any other foreign policy issue in the Clinton Presidential years. Third, this campaign, along with other protests from mainstream feminist organizations, was instrumental in precluding the Unocal Corporation from constructing a pipeline across Afghanistan that would have financially benefited the Taliban (Kolhatkar and Ingalls 2006:170).

By 2000, over 70 celebrities, Glamour Magazine, and even primetime television shows like Seventh Heaven focused on the oppression of Afghan Women (Reif 2000). While these campaigns produced largely successful results in terms of awareness, they also oversimplified the burqa as the sole visual symbol of oppression. Unfortunately, this trend of the burqa as the poster-symbol of oppression continued after 9/11 and the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan.

In the 1997 Gender Apartheid Campaign, the Feminist Majority Foundation also sold tiny particles of mesh cloth, meant to symbolize the eyepiece of the burqa on their website (Kolhatkar and Ingalls 2006:179). The campaign urged American women to wear a “Symbol of Remembrance for Afghan Women” that could be purchased in an individual packet or in packets of 10 or 20 “eyepieces” (Kolhatkar and Ingalls 2006:179). While the FMF said, “This swatch of mesh represents the obstructed view of the world
for an entire nation of women who were once free,” Kolhatkar and Ingalls (2006) argued this wordage instead seemed as if it were a “tribute to the dead.”

Although the campaign intended to foster awareness of Afghan women’s oppression, it also serves as an example of cultural essentialism within Western feminist campaigns. First, it created an essentialist image of “all” Afghan women as burqa-clad, helpless, and needing to be saved. As stated prior, Afghan women are not monolithic and these marketing tactics reduce them to an “all.” Second, this largely ignored the work of RAWA and other women or women’s organizations within Afghanistan. As documented in Brodsky’s With All Our Strength, RAWA has been extremely active in promoting women’s rights and democracy since the late 1970s. Third, this campaign also insinuated that women were free prior to the Taliban and ignored the abuses committed by the Mujahideen, whom the United States financially supported in the 1980’s (Kolhatkar and Ingalls 2006:179).

Since the 1990s, many Western feminist organizations and human rights organizations have utilized images of burqa-clad Afghan women in direct mail and media campaigns intended to shock and visually appeal to their Western audiences (Reif 2000). After 9/11 and the fall of the Taliban, veiled images of Afghan women appeared in greater numbers. According to Kolhatkar and Ingalls (2006:180), “there was a sudden proliferation of the ‘Blue Burqa Books’.” Meaning, books written by a Western feminists with the word “veil” or “veiled” in the title and the cover featuring an Afghan woman wearing the infamous “cornflower blue burqa” (Kolhatkar and Ingalls 2006:180). Additionally, networks like CNN and the BBC repeatedly broadcast documentaries like Beneath the Veil by Saira Shah.
The focus on the burqa extended far beyond just campaigns and literature. In fact, the burqa served in key policy discourse regarding Afghan women. For instance, during an October 2001 Congressional hearing, Smeal provided testimony as the “voice” for Afghan women. In her testimony, she focused part of her statement on the “burqa” and on the public executions committed by the Taliban. However, in her testimony, she never credited RAWA for videotaping the notorious execution of Zarmeena (Fluri 2008: 148-149). This particular execution marked the first video documentation orchestrated by RAWA. In other occasions, Smeal failed to recognize RAWA for risking their lives to document this execution. This is important to note as omitting RAWA’s work helped to perpetuate the cultural and gender essentialist image of Afghan women as helpless, weak, and “needing to be saved.”

While one can understand that creating awareness on a complicated topic requires effective marketing, using the burqa as the single symbol for oppression has created long-lasting problems. First, it has continued the age-old essentialist message of “other women needing to be saved by Western men and women” (Kolhatkar and Ingalls 2006:179). As one critic said in Bleeding Afghanistan (2006),

The Western feminists, human rights, and even the Afghan women’s groups unwittingly played to Western stereotypic images of Islam and Afghanistan in pressing their cases. Many of those sympathetic to Afghan culture and to Islam worried about the sensationalism surrounding the campaigns. . . . In public forums, Afghans and other Muslims often raised the issue that anti-gender apartheid itself was more harmful than beneficial because it was contributing to widespread negative stereotypes. (Pp. 179-180)

Hence, it continues with the practice of Western cultures engaging in cultural superiority over Eastern cultures. Second, in reducing Afghan women and their oppression to the burqa, it ignores the true oppression and violations of human rights that they endured. As
mentioned, the burqa represents the least of Afghan women’s problems in any of the eras. Third, it fails to understand the history or cultural significance behind the burqa (Abu-Lughod 2003).

While there is arguably a difference between being forced or choosing to wear the burqa, the Western world defined “unveiling” as the beginning of women’s liberation in Afghanistan from the Taliban. Again, this makes the historically inaccurate assumption that Afghan women’s oppression began with the Taliban and neglects to discuss the Mujahideen violations. Once more, as Lila Abu-Lugod (2003) has explained, this also assumes that the Taliban created the burqa. As discussed in Chapter 6, the burqa originated from the Pashtun culture, not Islam or the Taliban. Additionally, to some Afghan women and other women throughout Southwest Asia, the burqa represents “modesty and respectability,” not oppression (Abu-Lughod 2003). In many cases, Western campaigns fail to understand that some Afghan women view “unveiling” as giving up their cultural definition of modesty (Abu-Lughod 2003). As Abu-Lughod acknowledged, Western women also possess “societal fashion norms.” Culturally, Western women understand the proper dress for certain social and religious occasions. For example, while many Christian women may attend church wearing informal clothing, there is a reason for the term “Sunday’s best.” One might argue this represents a cultural notion of “respectability” within Western religious customs.

8.3: Saving Afghan Women from What?

Sonali Kolhatkar, Vice President of Afghan Women’s Mission and co-author of *Bleeding Afghanistan*, criticized Smeal and Helen Caldicott, author, journalist, and anti-nuclear advocate, for incorrectly labeling female genital mutilation (FGM) as a prevalent
cultural practice in Afghanistan. According to Kolhatkar, during an interview with Caldicott, she (Caldicott) drilled her with questions about “all Afghan men as misogynistic” and about the practice of FGM in Afghanistan (Kolhatkar 2002). In addition, Kolhatkar criticized Smeal over her assumptions that Afghan women experienced FGM and by implying that their “oppression stems from not being able to have an orgasm” (Oliver 2007:54). Theoretically, these assumptions reduce Afghan men to a cultural essentialist “all,” and reduce “all” Afghan women as “sexually oppressed.” As Kelly Oliver (2007:54) questioned, why is the leader of the Feminist Majority Foundation “conflating women’s freedom with sexual freedom?” Moreover, FGM is not even a practice that occurs in Afghanistan nor is it part of their culture (Kolhatkar 2002). Thus, this questions what these campaigns strive “to save Afghan women from” if they focus on incorrect practices and essentialist symbolism.

Abu-Lughod argued against using language like “saving the women of Afghanistan” as it perpetuates a Western image of arrogance (Abu-Lughod 2003:6). Through this lens of cultural essentialism, U.S. feminists have often framed Islam as the “single greatest violent threat to women.” Therefore, their (U.S. feminist organizations) actions or campaigns illustrate a sense of “American women as saviors and rescuers of oppressed women” (Puar 2008:49-50).

In some cases, the Feminist Majority Foundation and other feminist groups used the same “liberation rhetoric” of “saving Afghan women” as a reason to wage war (Kolhatkar and Ingalls 2006:170). For example regarding the invasion, Smeal stated, “Next time women speak about international issues, they’ll (the U.S. government will) listen. . . . Our credibility will have gone up” (Kolhatkar and Ingalls 2006:171). Even
with the best intentions of classifying the U.S. invasion as a “just war,” one would ask why many Western feminists have not focused more closely on the warlords within the Afghan government. Specifically, why have Western feminists not questioned the policies which have granted political power to the Northern Alliance and have negatively affected Afghan women. For example, rather than focusing on the burqa or the alleged practice of FGM, Western feminists have often failed to highlight the historical abuses committed by Mujahideen and the Northern Alliance. As discussed in previous chapters, the Northern Alliance committed vast atrocities against the population, but especially against women. Most alarming is that these same warlords hold positions within the Karzai government, and yet the burqa has remained the central focus within many campaigns and literature.

In all three eras feminist groups like the Feminist Majority Foundation deserve praise in creating awareness and, ultimately, shifting certain policies in Afghanistan (i.e. Unocal). Creating effective awareness campaigns often relies on the utilization of simplistic messaging. However, the burqa obsession has led to dangerous consequences and has created historically inaccurate messages. Moreover, these culturally essentialist positions have reinforced the stereotype of “Western superiority” over “Eastern backwardness.” Finally, it is important to question why the feminist campaigns fail to highlight how policy decisions (i.e. Northern Alliance) negatively affect the women in Afghanistan.
CHAPTER 9: FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

9.1: Introduction to Findings and Analysis

“Men’s and women’s experiences of violence during military conflicts are often shaped by gender and intersected by race, ethnicity, socioeconomic class, location and/or dislocation” (Fluri 2008:143). In all three eras of this case study, gender and culture have shaped the status of Afghan women economically, legally, politically, and socially as well as in their access to education and health. In addition, the location of urban or rural residency has played a constant role in affecting Afghan women’s experiences and status in each era. While statistics were vital to compare Afghan women’s status in all three periods, the theories of gender and cultural essentialism helped to demonstrate the historical continuum of internal and external forces using essentialist stereotypes to legitimatize their actions. Most notably, these actions included the rationale for violence and military conflict. Through this theoretical context, gender and cultural essentialism offered insight on the consistent rhetoric of “saving” Afghan women as well as their low status in each period. While the internal and external forces in Afghanistan have changed throughout each era, often these forces implicitly or explicitly applied the same essentialist attributes. Theoretically, gender and cultural essentialism served as the groundwork for the continued oppression in the lives of Afghan women.

Gender and cultural essentialism demonstrate how Afghan women have served as perpetual pawns to Afghan leaders, the PDPA, the Soviet Union, the Mujahideen, the Taliban, and the United States. While Western feminists have not directly used Afghan women as pawns in war, one could argue they have served as pawns in their marketing campaigns. Historically, one understands that use of saving women to justify violence
follows past patterns. Hence, the three eras of different actors trying “to save” Afghan women is not new. Despite the rhetoric of policy and action meant to improve the status of Afghan women, their status in each era has ranked consistently as one of the lowest in the world. Feminist scholars explain that the use of women to justify violence marginalizes them both politically and socially. Furthermore, it fails to provide concrete improvements to the lives of women (Fluri 2008:144-145). Thus, the status of Afghan women in each era of this case study is consistent with this feminist scholarship.

Besides evaluating the status of Afghan women in each era, the intention of this thesis was to provide a more holistic perspective through the application of gender and cultural essentialism. In returning to the four original research questions, the intention was to explore the following: (1) How have women’s rights improved in Afghanistan since the U.S. invasion compared to under the Taliban and before the Taliban? (2) If “liberating” (or saving) Afghan women is important, why do some policies negatively affect or overlook women? (3) How can the application of gender essentialism and cultural essentialism provide insights on why policy decisions often negatively affect or overlook Afghan women? (4) How can the application of gender essentialism and cultural essentialism provide insights on the justification for war in the name of “saving” Afghan women? The sections of this chapter address these four research questions.

Section 9.2 How Have Women’s Rights Improved in Afghanistan Since the U.S. Invasion discusses how and if Afghan women’s lives have improved since 2001 by comparing their status in each era. Next, Section 9.3, Theoretical Analysis: Insights from Gender and Cultural Essentialism, discusses research questions two through four.
9.2: How Have Women’s Rights Improved in Afghanistan Since the U.S. Invasion?

Introduction. An interesting dichotomy emerges when addressing this first research question. In the research, some areas observed show that life for Afghan women has improved compared to the preceding eras while other areas remain relatively the same or even worse. Despite some true improvements intersected with symbolic emblems of improvement, Afghan women still had the second to lowest GDI in the world in 2007 (CPHD 2007).

Regarding an improved status for Afghan women, it is important to distinguish between two categories of improved status: 1) symbolic improvements for Afghan women and 2) actual improvements for Afghan women. In some areas, it is much easier to tout the symbolic improvements as actual improvements. For example, since 2001, the burqa has emerged as the symbolic measurement of “liberation” and freedom for Afghan women. As discussed in earlier chapters and to be discussed in the proceeding theoretical analysis, the burqa is not and has never been an indicator of improved or deteriorated status for Afghan women. Additionally, in many cases, an improvement could be classified as both a symbolic and as an actual improvement. Education serves as an example that falls into both classifications. For instance, since 2001, Afghan women have legally obtained the right to gain an education. Compared to the Taliban era, this represents an actual improvement by simply granting women and girls the right to attend school, something forbidden or restricted by the Taliban edicts. Conversely, this also

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57 As discussed in Chapter 7, the GDI stands for the Gender Development Index and is the UN indicator of status. The GDI for Afghanistan was .310 with Niger as the only country ranking behind Afghanistan. This report showed that Afghan women experienced immense barriers in education, employment, and healthcare. Conversely, the GDI fails to show the barriers regarding human rights violations, political representation, violence, and lack of access to justice (CPHD 2007).
represents a symbolic improvement, as even in 2006, the majority of girls did not attend school for various reasons, most notably due to safety concerns (Human Rights 2006). As discussed in Chapter 7, the issue of security serves as a major obstacle in any facet of a woman’s public life, especially education. In fact, in 2008, the problem of security and attacks forced about 700 schools to close (RAWA 2009b). Besides security, there is a huge disparity in access between rural and urban provinces. As mentioned, the 2009 Asia Foundation Survey of Afghan People labeled education and illiteracy as one of the biggest problems that Afghan women still face. Thus, while symbolically girls and women can attend school, in actuality several barriers preclude this right. This section discusses both classifications of improvements and compares the three eras by examining the statistical differences in social status presented in Chapter 5, Chapter 6, and Chapter 7. Last, this section analyzes whether women’s rights have improved since the U.S. invasion compared to the preceding eras.

**Education and economic status.** There have been some improvements since 2001 in the educational status of Afghan women. In comparing literacy, the rate in the first era ranged from 5 percent in 1979 (EFA 2009) to an increased 14 percent in 1990 (U.S. Dept. of Commerce 1993). In the Taliban era, literacy reached the lowest point with just 4 percent of Afghan women being literate (Amnesty International 1998). Since 2001, there has been an increase in literacy compared to the Taliban era and a small increase since Soviet control. While Isobel Coleman (2004) noted that some disputed the percentage as too high, UNESCO reported the literacy of Afghan women increasing to 20 percent in 2004. However, other reports, like the 2009 UNESCO report, showed the literacy rate for women at 18 percent (RAWA 2009b). Nevertheless, despite slight improvements,
low literacy was a constant in each era, and as of 2009 Afghan women remain one of the least literate groups in the world (RAWA 2009b).

When comparing school attendance rates for the three eras, this final era has shown improvements. Despite some rural provinces that reported just 1 percent of girls attending school (Coleman 2004), this period represents the highest enrollment of girls in school of any other period in Afghanistan (Human Rights Watch 2006). In fact, in 2009 girls comprised 34 percent of the 6 million students enrolled in Afghan public schools (RAWA 2009b). However, most improvements are relative to location. As in the preceding periods, most change has occurred in urban areas, not in rural areas. Moreover, many of the same issues that plagued the pre-Taliban era are still prevalent. In addition to security, conservative customs, poverty, shortage of schools, shortage of women teachers, and insufficient funding are still major barriers. Additionally, early marriage or forced marriage especially precludes girls from attending secondary school. Thus, to restate the Human Rights Watch (2006) regarding education, “the situation is far from what it could or should have been, particularly for girls.”

Regarding employment, Afghan women have started to enter the labor force again, which the Taliban either forbade or limited, as discussed in Chapter 6. In some respects, Afghan women have seen improvements regarding their labor force participation. For example, in 2005, women represented 11 percent of business owners in Afghanistan and represented 85 percent of the micro-finance recipients (GEM 2007). While this shows signs of progress, employment and shortage of job opportunities is a huge concern for women (Women for Women International 2009). In 2007, some reports indicated that just one in seven women held a job, representing 14 percent of the female
population (Charney and Coleman 2007). Like the pre-Taliban era, much of the formal employment occurs in the urban areas, especially for professional women and the majority of women are employed in the informal sector. While there is an improvement compared to the Taliban era, it is hard to distinguish if women fared better in the pre-Taliban era or since 2001. First, in many cases, many of the pre-Taliban era professional women fled the country during the years of war. Second, while education was limited in the pre-Taliban era, the Taliban prohibited education for careers like education, law, or medicine, contributing to the shortage of women in these needed professions.

In comparing different professional careers, some areas show higher percentages of women’s participation in the pre-Taliban era. For instance, in the 1980s and 1990s, women comprised 70 percent of the teachers (Human Rights Watch 2006), while in 2007 women comprised just one quarter of the teachers (United Nation’s Development Fund for Women 2007a). While in the pre-Taliban era, women represented 50 percent of the civil servants (Human Rights Watch 2006), in 2009 women comprised just 22 percent of government employees. In both eras, only small numbers of women held decision-making roles. Moreover, Afghan women still earn significantly lower pay than Afghan men earn, in some cases earning up to only one-third of what a man earns (Women for Women International 2009). Finally, like the pre-Taliban era, security barriers, low literacy, low education attainment, high fertility rates, and societal norms preclude more women from participating in the workforce.

From a holistic perspective, education and literacy are paramount in improving the status of Afghan women as a whole. First, increasing the number of literate women helps to increase the number of women teachers, and therefore girl students. Second,
improving other status areas is contingent on improving education & literacy levels. Lack of education limits their access to the economic sphere; it also limits their access to health and improving their health. For instance, one can infer that educating more women then increases the number of women employed in healthcare, and thus increases the number of women who seek medical care. Additionally, as mentioned in Chapter 7, Human Rights Watch (2006) reported that increasing girls’ education by just one year would result in a 5 percent to 10 percent reduction in infant mortality. Likewise, education is also vital to advance Afghan women’s legal, political, and social status. For example, as mentioned, women largely have no recourse for legal grievances due to their low presence in the judicial arena. Again, education is the only way to increase the number of women in the judicial, legal, and political spheres.

_Consitutional and political status._ Categorically, the constitutional rights given to women in the 2004 Afghanistan Constitution represent both a symbolic and an actual improvement. In comparing women’s constitutional rights since 2001 to the Taliban era, their constitutional rights immediately changed symbolically by simply granting women a legal status. As mentioned, under both the Mujahideen and the Taliban, women had no rights or legal status. Like the 1964, 1976, 1987 and 1990 Constitutions, the 2004 Constitution promises equality to women and men. While the language differed in each constitution, the written guarantee of equality has been consistent. Unlike the earlier constitutions, the 2004 Constitution includes articles that specifically aim to combat the literacy disparity between Afghan women and men (Article 44) as well as to abolish traditional customs and mistaken interpretations of Islam that often precluded their rights in previous periods (Article 54). Moreover, the 2004 Constitution instituted the
Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC) to protect women from human rights violations and discrimination. Regarding political representation, the 2004 Constitution also included a quota that grants women 25 percent of the lower-house seats and 17 percent of the upper-house seats. In these regards, the 2004 Constitution provides women with more rights, freedoms, and opportunities than in any other era and thus is an improvement, albeit symbolically.

Yet, despite several accolades given to the 2004 Constitution by foreign governments, institutions, and organizations, in actuality many of the rights are largely ignored or enforced. This echoes the earlier constitution’s failure to follow through on the promise of equality for Afghan women, especially in rural Afghanistan. For example, in 2008, a commissioner for the AIHRC, Suraya Subhrang, said that, “Our findings clearly indicate that despite over six years of international rhetoric about Afghan women’s emancipation and development, a real and tangible change has not touched the lives of millions of women in this country” (RAWA 2008). While the written freedoms and rights serve as an improvement, they are largely just symbolic if women do not experience these freedoms in their daily lives.

Likewise, after the 2004 elections, the Bush Administration claimed the elections to be successful, especially for women who used their “new freedom” to vote. While women did represent over 43 of the total voters, urban women comprised the vast majority of this percentage. In the 2009 elections, women’s turnout dropped to 38.7 percent due to the greater risks to their security. Besides the fears of security and threats, illiteracy and low education attainment, also factor in their low political participation. As the Library of Parliament (2008) labeled it, women lack in “citizenship education.”

While the percentages of women voting show signs of progress, these percentages also falsify the reality of an equal democracy for both women and men. Largely, these percentages are symbolic and not reflective of the women’s population on a whole. Additionally, since 2001, more women have run for political office. However, these women candidates risk their lives by facing death threats and intimidation for campaigning, something that their male counterparts do not experience.

While the constitutional quotas require that women represent at least 24 percent of the National Assembly, women actually exceeded that quota by 3 percent and in 2007 comprised 27 percent of the National Assembly. This is an actual improvement in political representation compared to the pre-Taliban era. For example, while women did hold political positions in the pre-Taliban era, they were largely restricted to women affiliated with the WDOA or sympathetic to communist goals. However, even though women hold a higher percentage in political representation than in any other era, many female Parliamentarians report that they are powerless and that many male politicians, especially the warlords, do not support them and hold the power. For instance, the case of Malalai Joya illustrates this reality. After she spoke out against the warlords in the Afghan government, the National Assembly suspended her (Library of Parliament 2008). Thus, while the increased number of women in politics represents a sign of progress, it is only symbolic if they hold no real power. Like education and the constitution, political representation counts as both an actual improvement and a symbolic improvement.

Violence. Comparing the amount of violence in each era is difficult. First, as mentioned, statistics on violence are often inaccurate and vastly underreported. Furthermore, in both the pre-Taliban era and the Taliban era, no specific data on the
number of violent incidents were collected. According to Elaheh Rostami-Povey (2007:26), many sources consider the civil war era more violent for women than the Taliban era, largely due to the high numbers of rapes and murders by the Mujahideen. Prior to the civil war, both the Soviet Union and the Soviet resistance fighters used rape and violence as a method to seek information, revenge, or reward soldiers (Amnesty International 2005). Since 2001, more data is available on the number of violent incidents and rape. However, even that is presumed to be a low estimation of the true number of violent incidents that Afghan women endure. In 2007, it was reported that one in three women experienced physical, psychological, or sexual violence (RAWA 2008). From March 2007 to March 2008, the number of reported domestic violence incidents increased by 40 percent (RAWA 2008). As stated earlier, the 2007 Afghanistan Human Development Report reported that, “violence against women in Afghanistan has reached ‘epidemic proportions’” (CPHD 2007).

The types of violence that Afghan women have experienced in all three eras includes forced marriages, child marriages, domestic violence, sexual harassment, human trafficking, and even death in honor killings. In 2009, Womankind Worldwide reported that over 60 percent of marriages were forced (Women for Women International 2009). Oftentimes, in forced marriage, families regard women as financial transactions or commodity exchanges to pay off a debt or resolve a financial hardship (Women for Women International 2009).

As in the preceding eras, Afghan women still experience a life of systemic sexual, psychological, and physical violence. While the research cannot conclude that women experience more violence since 2001, it also cannot conclude that women experience
less. Perhaps one can infer that the increased numbers of reports do offer some sign of progress in women rejecting the social taboo of not reporting violence. However, since 2001, the research can conclude that women still live in a violent climate and that violence is inflicted upon them from family and external sources, with very little or no legal recourse. Furthermore, women that attempt to lead a more public life, through education or politics, are oftentimes more at risk.

**Health.** In all three eras, Afghan women have maintained one of the lowest health statuses in the world. As in prior eras, men continue to outlive women, an opposite to most countries in the world (Library of Parliament 2008). From 2001 to 2009, the average life span of women has varied from 42 to 44, which is 20 years lower than the global average (Library of Parliament 2008; United Nations Children’s Fund 2009). This is consistent with the preceding eras, which shared the same life expectancy ranges. However, in this study, the pre-Taliban period marked the lowest recorded life expectancy of 37 in 1975 (Moghadam 2002).

While the Taliban completely restricted and sometimes, banned women’s access to healthcare, rural Afghan women in all three eras experienced huge disparity in access compared to urban Afghan women. Since 2001, the access issue is still a major issue, and often rural women have an even lower health status than urban women. As indicated, between 30 to 90 percent of rural women cannot access healthcare, depending on their proximity to Kabul (UNIFEM 2007). In all three eras, infant mortality and maternal mortality ranked as one of the worst in the world. According to the UN, the maternal mortality rate in Afghanistan was the second to highest in the world in 2008 (RAWA 2008). Even though it still maintains one of the highest infant mortality rates in
the world, the 2007 *Human Development Report* stated that the infant mortality rate decreased from 165 per 1,000 to 135 per 1,000, which resulted in 40,000 successful births (CPHD 2007). The fertility rate has been consistently high in Afghanistan, and in 2007 the average fertility rate was 6.6 children (UNIFEM 2007a). According to the Library of Parliament (2008), this was the highest fertility rate in the world.

While there have been some improvements to healthcare for women since 2001, it is hard to distinguish healthcare as measurably better than the pre-Taliban era. Like the pre-Taliban era, the lack of access to healthcare, lack of education, societal barriers, insufficient funding, insufficient supplies, and shortage of trained women in the medical profession negatively affect healthcare. Dr. S. M. Amin Fatimie, the Afghan Minister of Health, said that, “the health of Afghan women and children is in a better state today than in 2002 . . . but much remains to be done,” (Fatimie 2009).

Concluding discussion. In 2009, Women for Women International reported that women respondents “felt optimistic” regarding their future. While the feeling of optimism cannot be compared to the other eras statistically, these sorts of survey questions should not be dismissed. From a symbolic sense, women’s rights have drastically improved in Afghanistan since the U.S. invasion compared to both preceding eras. Beyond being granted a legal status, Afghan women theoretically possess more rights than ever before. However, in their daily lives, women still suffer constant abuses domestically, sexually, and socially, and maintain one of the lowest social statuses in all areas. Thus, in actuality, not much has changed for women, especially compared to the promises guaranteed by the international community. Additionally, much of the funding promised to Afghan women or their needs is either non-existent or insufficient. For
example, consider the $2.5 million allocated to the U.S.-Afghan Women’s Council (UAWC) to create 14 provincial Women’s Resource Centers. Despite the hype of this allocation, it is insignificant compared to the funds that aid military projects (Kolhatkar and Ingalls 2006:175-177). Moreover, while the UAWA is a public-private alliance and has received positive press regarding its success, the organization receives no formal budget and according to Kolhatkar and Ingalls (2006:177), “makes no negligible difference,” to the life of Afghan women. Since 2001, the lack of funding to strengthen women’s programs and improve their status has been consistently problematic. Despite the increased funding for military projects, security still is one of the biggest concerns for women.

While time certainly is needed to improve Afghan women’s status, there is not much statistically that shows that their status has improved much more than symbolically compared to the two preceding eras. It is difficult to define an improved status as actuality when the same barriers and horrific security conditions comprise the everyday lives of Afghan women. An improved status would signify far beyond just small increases in literacy, the number of women parliamentarians who hold little (or no) power, and millions of Afghan women voting on election days. At the same time, it is important to point out that some improvements have occurred in all realms. Yet, in many cases, the same pattern of change solely reaching the urban areas is repeating itself in this era. Thus, this research concludes that little measurable change has occurred since 2001 for women. Moreover, all factors of social status are deeply connected. Until security and education improve, the other factors will not improve significantly either.
9.3: Theoretical Analysis: Insights from Gender and Cultural Essentialism

Introduction. The application of gender and cultural essentialism showed similarities in rhetoric and promises that emerged from the various actors in the three eras. The actors discussed in the research included the Daoud Administration, the PDPA, the Soviet Union, and the Mujahideen in the first era, the Taliban in the second era, and the United States in the third era. Additionally, some women’s organizations and Western feminists, especially in the Taliban era and since 2001, serve as implicit or explicit actors in using gender or cultural essentialism in their campaigns and literature. Without the use of gender and cultural essentialism in this thesis, these commonalities might not be as evident among these different groups. Thus, gender and culture essentialism provide valuable insights on the historic and contemporary use of “saving Afghan women.”

Moreover, the commonality of war and conflict itself adds to the reinforcement of gender essentialism in each era. Besides the exaggerated essentialist traits that war often assigns to women and men, “wartime femininity” also strengthens the need “to save” Afghan women (Fluri 2008:144). According to Jennifer Fluri, feminist scholar, (2008:144), wartime femininity “requires the protective force of violent masculinity to secure its fragility and feminine representation of the homeland/motherland.” In this aspect, gender and cultural essentialism then defines Afghanistan itself as “metaphorically feminized” and needing to be saved or liberated by the United States (or in the first era, the Soviet Union), who are “metaphorically masculinized” as the protector (Oliver 2007:43).
This section focuses on the final three research questions. These questions included: (2) If “liberating” (or saving) Afghan women is important, why do some policies negatively affect or overlook women? (3) How can the application of gender essentialism and cultural essentialism provide insights on why policy decisions often negatively affect or overlook Afghan women? (4) How can the application of gender essentialism and cultural essentialism provide insights on the justification for war in the name of “saving” Afghan women? Throughout this section, these questions are central to the analysis. Additionally, this section examines portions of Section 9.2 through a theoretical view.

_Same Rhetoric, Different Era._ Consistently, in all three eras, the different regimes portrayed Afghan women as victims that needed “to be saved,” in order to justify war, violent conflict, and military action. For the Soviet Union and the United States, this cultural essentialist justification served as a “noble ideal” and “civilizing mission” that rationalized the destruction of Afghanistan and its infrastructure (Kumar and Stabile 2005). As discussed earlier, gendered stereotypes are often amplified during war and conflict situations. Beyond just the exaggeration of gendered stereotypes, Fluri (2008:143-144) suggests that gendered stereotypes are also “altered for the purpose of powerful political actors.” Meaning that besides “saving Afghan women” serving as the “moral rationale” for war, it simultaneously marginalizes women as weak, helpless, and oppressed in both their political and social worlds (Fluri 2008:143-144). Through this lens of exaggerated gender essentialism, men and war serve as both the “protectors” of Afghan women, while simultaneously serving as the “perpetrators” against Afghan women (Fluri 2008:143).
In each era, Afghan women have served at the center of the rationale used by each regime to legitimize their actions. While each group engaged in gender essentialism, cultural essentialism was often utilized in consistent pushback between the external actors (Soviet Union and United States) and the internal actors (Mujahideen, Taliban, and conservative rural leaders/warlords). For example, to all actors, Afghan women are helpless victims who need to be saved (gender essentialism). However, to the PDPA, Soviet Union, and United States, Afghan women are helpless and oppressed victims due to the backwards culture of Afghan men and Islam (cultural essentialism). Meanwhile, to the Mujahideen and Taliban, Afghan women are the “receptacles of honor” (Ahmed-Gosh 2003:3) whom they must rescue from the immoral cultural influence of the West (or in the first era, the Soviet Union). Additionally, in some cases, the use of cultural essentialism then inflated gender essentialist stereotypes of Afghan women to both the external and internal forces. Afghan women symbolize an exaggerated sense of oppression due to their culture (the culture of being Third World, Islam, and backwards), while simultaneously symbolizing an exaggerated sense of purity to retain culture against foreign influence (reverse cultural essentialism).

In all three periods, men served as the “protectors” of Afghan women as well as the “perpetrators” against Afghan women. Metaphorically, protector is understood in the essentialist context of women as helpless victims who need to be “saved.” However, the term perpetrator extends beyond the violent and criminal context of the word. First, the term perpetrator includes the multitudes of violent incidents, rapes, and assaults against Afghan women by soldiers and guards. As discussed, in war, women often symbolize “weapons of war” (Amnesty International 1998) and sadly, Afghan women’s bodies
served as “another battleground for belligerent parties” (RAWA 2005). To the soldiers and guards, women’s bodies became political tools used to reward their own soldiers or to shame the other side in their lack of “protection” of “their” women. The use of rape and sexual assault reduces the capacity of people to resist military advances and serves as a means of dishonoring the community (Amnesty International 1998). Metaphorically, the dishonored women and men in the community are feminized as weak, while the male perpetrators are masculinized warriors (Eisenstein 2008:37).

Second, “perpetrator” also means the retention of Afghan women in a low social status by the different actors’ or regimes’ policy decisions (or lack thereof). For example, the Daoud Administration and the PDPA both pledged their policies would improve the status of Afghan women or “protect Afghan women.” While the Daoud Administration implemented some policies that benefitted women, they also failed to offer any women positions in their cabinet. In response, members of the PDPA and the WDOA attacked the Daoud Administration for not following through on their promises. After the PDPA overthrew Daoud in a coup, the PDPA, as the “protector of Afghan women” touted the “emancipation of women” as one of their chief aspirations (Emadi 2002:100). Yet, the PDPA as the “perpetrator” continued to engage in essentialism in what emancipation should like for women and often women worked in positions that were stereotypical female (Brodsky 2004:45). Both the Daoud Administration and the PDPA promised increased freedoms to women as a method to rally support for their own political goals without providing substantial changes. Simply, as in the proceeding eras, their rhetoric did not match their policy.
When the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan, their rationale included “discourses of ‘saving’ Afghan women from Afghanistan’s patriarchal social structures” (Fluri 2008:144) and thus, they also promised “to protect” Afghan women. From a gender and cultural essentialist view, the Soviets cast Afghan women as needing protected from Afghan men, who were misogynist and backwards (unless they were members of the PDPA or sympathetic with the Communists). Yet, while the Soviet Union did include some literacy programs and increased the number of women in the workforce, it was solely in tandem with their goals. Arguably, the Soviet Union used education for women as a façade to indoctrinate women with communism, not to improve their social status. Thus, to the Soviets, Afghan women just served as political pawns in the Soviet’s broader scheme. As the perpetrators, the Soviets also retained women in the same social status and engaged in violence and sexual assault against Afghan women who did not agree with their policies or Communism.

In response to the Soviet Union, the Mujahideen also promised to save and protect Afghan women, from the “military and ideological invasions of the Soviets” (Fluri 2008:144). The Mujahideen connected with many Afghans by framing themselves as the “icon of warriors engaged in jihad\(^{58}\) against kafir\(^{59}\) invaders” (Ask 1998). In this context, the Mujahideen serve as the “protectors” of Afghan women and as the preservationists of women’s values (Ask 1998). As discussed in Chapter 5 and earlier in this chapter, many sources said it was the Mujahideen who committed the most human rights atrocities against women, and offered no status to women at all.

\(^{58}\) Holy War.

\(^{59}\) Infidel.
In fact, the Taliban also promised to protect Afghan women from the human rights crimes, rapes, and lawlessness perpetrated by the Mujahideen (Fluri 2008:144). Moreover, the Taliban’s promises to protect and save women served as one paramount reason for their early support in recruiting more Afghan men to join the Taliban and increased their power in the province of Kandahar (Fluri 2008:149). Yet, while the Taliban promised peace and to “save Afghan women,” they instilled the most misogynistic policies of all eras, denying women all liberties and freedoms. In that context, the Taliban was the worst of all the perpetrators.

In the post-Taliban era, the United States built the case as the “protector” for invading Afghanistan by “saving women” from the “misogynistic Taliban.” Through a cultural essentialist lens, it is important to consider the political framing of the war. For example, consider Karen Hughes, a counselor to President George W. Bush and Undersecretary of State for Public Diplomacy, and how she indirectly stated that they (Bush Administration) aimed to capitalize on the oppression and suffering of Afghan women to indirectly legitimate war (Kolhatkar and Ingalls 2006:171). Regarding Afghan women, Hughes said, “I thought focusing on the plight of Afghan women and girls was a way to highlight the cruel nature of the people we were up against” (Kolkatkar and Ingalls 2006:171). This political framing paints Afghan women as ALL oppressed while painting Afghan men as ALL misogynistic. Through both a gender and cultural essentialist lens, the United States framed the burqa and the Taliban as the chief sources of Afghan women’s oppression. As discussed, both of these testaments are historically inaccurate and riddled in both gender and cultural essentialism. Additionally, it fails to mention the United States’ role in funding the Mujahideen and indirectly helping the
Taliban rise to power. Thus, in this theoretical context, the United States reversed its roles. First, the United States acted as the silent perpetrator by funding misogynistic groups and second, as the protector of oppressed women from misogynistic groups.

After 9/11, the United States portrayed itself as the protector of Afghan women by invading Afghanistan and rescuing them from the Taliban. While certainly no one would argue against the Taliban being removed from power, the United States chose to align with the Northern Alliance, a group which shares parallel views with the Taliban regarding Afghan women and that is equally undemocratic and misogynistic. In the theoretical context, the United States acts again as the silent perpetrator by the policy choice of aligning with the Northern Alliance. Instilling power in the Northern Alliance contradicted the rationale for war and serves as the reason for the retention of the women’s low social status since 2001. As in the preceding eras, the protector was also the perpetrator.

*Women’s rights defined by dress.* As discussed, the veil and burqa simultaneously symbolize the oppression and the purity of Afghan women. In this essentialist context, the burqa symbolizes women’s oppressed sexuality and forced seclusion. Theoretically, the burqa and the importance placed on Afghan women’s dress highlights the cultural essentialism ping-pong used to stereotype Afghan/Islam culture as backwards and oppressive or as “traditional against modernization and Westernization” (Oliver 2007:51).

While the Taliban forcibly made Afghan women wear the burqa and restricted their appearance, the Taliban also forced men to dress in Islamic clothes and a cap, maintain their beard at a certain length, and forced boys to wear turbans if they desired to
attend school (RAWA 2009a). After the fall of the Taliban, men cutting their beards or boy students relinquishing their turbans were not indicators of liberation. However, through the lens of gender essentialism, Afghan women’s freedom is associated with dress and “the freedom to reveal their bodies in public” (Oliver 2007:51). The symbol of the burqa strongly contrasts with how the West defines “women’s independence and liberation” (Fluri 2008:148).

Thus, in many ways, the burqa was both a cultural and political tool to garner public support for the war in Afghanistan (Fluri 2008:145-152). For example, in a U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee meeting, Senator Barbara Boxer depicted the burqa as one of the vital things “to rally public opinion against the Taliban” (Fluri 2008:147). Besides the unfortunate distraction of this symbolism, it also continues the age-old essentialist image of defining women by their appearance. Perhaps, most importantly, as Fluri stated, “bombs do not distinguish by gender.”

*Same Rhetoric, Same Status.* Throughout the three eras, the rhetoric of “saving Afghan women” remained the same, while their status also remained the same. From a theoretical viewpoint, this notion of “saving Afghan women” hinders their progress, rather than improving their status. Moreover, the constant cultural essentialist pushback and figurative ping-pong metaphor offers insights on Afghan women’s low status in each era. Even before the first era, any initiatives for education or other modern progressions were viewed by rural Afghanistan as being foreign values and not of Afghan values.

Historically, this traces back to colonialism and is consistent with other colonized and

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60 Senator Barbara Boxer said this in response to Karl Inderfurth, then U.S. Assistant Secretary of South Asian Affairs, in the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee in 2000, “The Taliban: engagement or confrontation?” Hearing of the Near Eastern and South Asian Affairs Subcommittee of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, July 20.
conflict nations. In this context, Afghan women symbolize the “emblems of cultural integrity” (Jaggar 2001:1). Thus, Afghan women become the keepers of “moral order” (Jaggar 2001:1) and represent purity in the cultural norms of Afghanistan (in comparison to the West). Simultaneously, this pushback against modernizations in the name of the purity of women then denies them an improved status.

For example, rural Afghanistan leaders project themselves as the moral fiber of the country, and even in 2004 viewed Kabul and other urban areas as “potential cultural and moral degradation” (Mitchell 2004). Thus, the conservative or reformists groups portray attempts to improve women’s status as un-Islamic and as reflective of foreign values, not Afghan ones. Conservative or reformists groups then utilize women as their response to the foreign occupation and vow to protect women’s honor and purity in all public and private areas (Oliver 2007:50-51).

This pushback only harms women as it retains their low status through the essentialist attributes assigned to Afghan women in both gender and culture. It also allows the same patriarchal control over aspects of women’s lives. For example, it maintains the acceptance of women as “uneducated” and views education as “unimportant in their struggle for survival,” compared to Afghan families and society viewing education as more important for boys (Emadi 2002:74). It also maintains the patriarchal dominance of women viewed as economic exchanges in marriage and human trafficking, outlets for reproduction, and property exchanged for debts or family crimes.

Most importantly, the use of women as victims only marginalizes them into a more gender essentialist image of persons weak, helpless, and needing to be saved by men (domestic or foreign). Thus, after the “rescue,” Afghan women retain the same
image as oppressed. For example, Fluri (2008:147) argues that by the United States using Afghan women as a “political tool” to gain public support for the war, Afghan women then become “marginalized victims in need of saving from an outside power, rather than addressing and celebrating the agency, resilience, and resistance of Afghan women’s and feminist organizations prior to and during the Taliban regime.”

In that aspect, gender essentialism offers a rationale for why the different regimes forced RAWA to work in secrecy, discredited their organization, or ignored their efforts. Since Afghan women are cast in essentialist language of being burqa-clad, helpless, oppressed, and needing to be saved, the strength and endurance of RAWA members does not fit the image. For example, if the PDPA and the Soviet Union both wished to “emancipate women,” RAWA should have served as a partner, not as a group whose members they jailed. To the Mujahideen and Taliban, RAWA were emblematic of representing foreign values and seen as corrupt. Moreover, these groups believed that RAWA would force them to lose their patriarchal power and control over Afghan women. Finally, the United States and Western organizations largely ignore the work of RAWA in empowering Afghan women.

One could argue that RAWA is dismissed as their accomplishments and longevity challenge the essentialist portrayal of Afghan women. As one young RAWA member said, “RAWA is a candle in the dark night. We follow but there is always a wind that is trying to blow it out” (Brodsky 2004:269). Theoretically, RAWA should be an organization that works in tandem with the Afghan government, Western feminist organizations, and the United States to implement the new democratic objectives. Instead, RAWA is largely ignored, discredited, and receives little funding from U.S.-
based organizations (Kolhatkar and Ingalls 2006:191-195). RAWA’s ability to withstand over 30 years of conflict shows the strength of their organization, while also showing the strength in gender and cultural essentialism. RAWA collided with the essentialist rhetoric of the internal and external regimes and does not fit the image of Afghan women as helpless, oppressed, or needing to be saved.
CHAPTER 10: CONCLUSIONS AND LIMITATIONS

10.1: Conclusions

This case study shows that Afghan women have been continuous pawns in each era. In all three eras of this case study, women have served as the rationale for war or violence by the different actors discussed. From the Soviet Union to the Mujahideen to the Taliban and the United States, Afghan women have been touted as the moral justification for war and violence. As stated by First Lady Laura Bush in November 2001, “the fight against terrorism is also a fight for the rights and dignity of women” (American Presidency Project 2001). Similar to this example, Afghan women have been used as the moral justifications by each regime in this case study. These moral justifications of war or violence have included the promise of improving the lives of Afghan women. The case of “saving” Afghan women is not unique and instead, much of the rationale and victimization of Afghan women has been consistent in each era. Thus, history has repeated itself from both a theoretical and practical standpoint.

From a theoretical standpoint, this case study showed the dangers in gender and cultural essentialism. In each era, the gender and cultural essentialist attributes assigned to Afghan women remained relatively unchanged. As warned by Fuss (1989:3), an essentialist vision is an “unbroken continuum that transports across cultures and times.” Through this lens, essentialism explains the continued historical discrimination and oppression of Afghan women. Furthermore, the perpetual essentialist pushback has precluded much social change for Afghan women as it has been labeled an immoral Western influence.
From a practical standpoint, despite all the rhetoric by the different regimes to improve the lives of Afghan women, their status has remained relatively unchanged and consistently one of the lowest in the world. While Afghan women have been at the center of each conflict as the rationale, improving their status has not served at the forefront of any regime or policy. As stated by the Governor of Kandahar Province in an interview with Amnesty International (2005) in 2004, “At the moment, there are more pressing issues . . . a civil servant has too much on his mind to deal with women’s rights. It’s a matter of priorities.” This quote embodies much of the reality experienced by Afghan women in each era. Simply, Afghan women have been perpetual political pawns while never serving as a policy priority.

10.2: Limitations to the Study

First, the war and unrest in Afghanistan served as a limitation in the research regarding the data collection. It is impossible for all data to be reported and likely that some data regarding women is not available or included in the primary and secondary sources chosen. Second, the case study as the research design itself also served as a potential limitation, since no causal effects or hypothesis testing could be implemented. Third, defining the status of Afghan women came from a Western and First World perspective. This could limit the study as what I, a Western female researcher, defines, as a “better status” may be defined differently from an Eastern and Third World researcher. The fourth limitation specifically pertains to the third period of the U.S invasion. While the United States led the coalition, this study did not explore the policies of NATO or any of the other countries in the alliance. This limitation is important as reviewing the literature and policy regarding NATO or the alliance countries could
corroborate or discount some conclusions. Fifth, I, the researcher, speak English and not any native Afghan language. Any research conducted in a native Afghan language and translated into English may have lost its part of its original meaning. Sixth, this research dealt exclusively with the discrimination and the status of women, not with religious or ethnic minorities within Afghanistan. Further research on the role ethnicity might play would be useful. This is important to consider as Afghanistan is a country with incredible diversity of ethnicities that include Pashtun (the plurality), Tajiks, Hazaras, Uzbecks, and other tribal/community ethnicities. The theory of cultural essentialism could offer greater insight when applied to relations between the Afghan ethnicities.

10.3: Concluding Discussion

Despite the tremendous obstacles that Afghan women face in each aspect of their life, there are reasons to be optimistic regarding a better future and better status for Afghan women. This optimism is beyond Western media reports and organizational surveys that indicate Afghan women respondents “feel optimistic” regarding their future (Women for Women International 2009). Instead, the optimism is because of the strength of Afghan women. This strength is evident in Afghan women such as the members of RAWA or Parliamentarian Malalai Joya. These strengths are revealed by removing the essentialist attributes often assigned to Afghan women.

The goal of this research is to show a holistic perspective by using feminist theory and to dig deeper into the historical and theoretical context of the three eras. As stated earlier, Angela Y. Davis (2008:20) explains that feminist methodology forces one to explore associations not necessarily visible and to connect items together that appear separate. By applying gender and cultural essentialism, organizations and regimes that
seem opposite instead show similarities. Without the use of gender and cultural essentialism, these commonalities might not be as evident among these different groups. From a historical and theoretical perspective, gender and cultural essentialism help to identify the similarities in rhetoric by each regime with the similarities in outcome of continued low status. Through feminist theory, the lens shows that using women or “trying to save them,” instead only marginalizes their political and social worlds, without ameliorating their lives (Fluri 2008:144-145).

The theories of gender and cultural essentialism provide insights to the perplexities of Afghanistan’s history since 1973. While much mainstream literature discusses the conflict and war in Afghanistan for over 30 years, the common thread of Afghan women as the rationale is not always at the forefront of that discussion. By examining each period through this theoretical lens, the similarities in each regime emerge and reveal the same essentialist pattern. History repeats itself and gender and cultural essentialism continue to be utilized, in an implicit or explicit cyclical manner.
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APPENDIX 1: MAP OF AFGHANISTAN

Figure 1: Map of Afghanistan

Source: CIA World Fact Book,
APPENDIX 2: AFGHAN WOMEN’S LITERACY RATES IN THE THREE ERAS

Table 1: Lowest and Highest Literacy Rates in the Three Eras

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<th>TALIBAN ERA</th>
<th>POST TALIBAN ERA</th>
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<tr>
<td>LOWEST LITERACY</td>
<td>5 percent</td>
<td>4 percent</td>
<td>4 percent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>YEAR</td>
<td>1979</td>
<td>1998</td>
<td>2001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SOURCE*</td>
<td>UNESCO</td>
<td>Amnesty International</td>
<td>United Nations (Amiri et al.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HIGHEST LITERACY</td>
<td>14 percent</td>
<td>Data not found</td>
<td>18 percent*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>YEAR</td>
<td>1990</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>2009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SOURCE**</td>
<td>U.S. Department of Commerce</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>UNESCO (RAWA)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* While 20 percent literacy rate was also reported in the Post-Taliban era, this number was also disputed as too high. For this reason, this table uses the 18 percent literacy rate as it was more current and without dispute at the time of research completion.

** See References section for further information on the sources.
APPENDIX 3: ACCESS TO SCHOOLS FOR AFGHAN GIRLS

Figure 2: Percentage of Schools Available to Afghan Girls

Sources: Hafizullah Emadi, Education for All, and Human Rights Watch. See References section for further information on the sources.
APPENDIX 4: AFGHAN WOMEN’S LABOR FORCE STATISTICS IN THE THREE ERAS

*Table 2: Women’s Labor Force Statistics in the Three Eras*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ERA</th>
<th>PERCENTAGE OF AFGHAN WOMEN IN LABOR FORCE</th>
<th>PERCENTAGE OF AFGHAN WOMEN TEACHERS</th>
<th>PERCENTAGE OF AFGHAN WOMEN CIVIL SERVANTS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PRE-TALIBAN ERA</td>
<td>34 Percent (1990)</td>
<td>70 percent</td>
<td>50 percent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TALIBAN ERA</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>POST-TALIBAN ERA</td>
<td>35.8 percent (2007)</td>
<td>25 percent</td>
<td>22 percent</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**SOURCE:**
- Amiri et al. 2004
- Gender Entrepreneurship Markets (GEM)
- Human Rights Watch 2006
- United Nation’s Development Fund for Women
- Human Rights Watch 2006
- Women for Women International 2009

See References section for further information on the sources.
### Table 3: Afghan Women’s Life Expectancy in the Three Eras

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ERA</th>
<th>PRE-TALIBAN ERA</th>
<th>TALIBAN ERA</th>
<th>POST-TALIBAN ERA</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>YEAR</td>
<td>YEAR</td>
<td>YEAR</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIFE EXPECTANCY</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

See References section for further information on the sources.
APPENDIX 6: AFGHAN WOMEN’S REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH INDICATORS IN THE THREE ERAS

Table 4: Afghan Women’s Fertility Rate in the Three Eras

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ERA</th>
<th>PRE-TALIBAN ERA</th>
<th>TALIBAN ERA</th>
<th>POST-TALIBAN ERA</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>YEAR</td>
<td>YEAR</td>
<td>YEAR</td>
<td>YEAR</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FERTILITY RATE</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>6.9</td>
<td>6.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SOURCE:</td>
<td>Mogdaham</td>
<td>Emadi</td>
<td>U.S. Dept. of Commerce</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

See References section for further information on the sources.

Table 5: Infant Mortality Rate in the Three Eras

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ERA</th>
<th>PRE-TALIBAN ERA</th>
<th>TALIBAN ERA</th>
<th>POST-TALIBAN ERA</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>YEAR</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INFANT MORTALITY RATE</td>
<td>135 per 1000</td>
<td>152 per 1000</td>
<td>135 per 1000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SOURCE:</td>
<td>Mogdaham</td>
<td>Rasekh et al.</td>
<td>2007 Afghanistan Human Development Report</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

See References section for further information on the sources.