Woman, War, and the Politics of Emancipation in Afghanistan

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ABSTRACT

During the twenty years of war in Afghanistan much attention was focussed on the issue of female human rights. The emancipation of women from the rule and legacies of the Taliban was a core objective of Western states. This article traces the resistance within communities and regions to these liberal endeavours and highlights the challenges of imposing rather than embedding values. We note that the Afghan state has always struggled to provide basic human rights for its population, especially for its women. Until those needs are addressed, full emancipation through education and representation of women in society is unlikely. As a case study the country provides an understanding of feminism from a female Afghan perspective as well as an opportunity to explore the human rights context for women generally. Hence, we explain how this war allowed females in Western military forces to operate with greater gender equality on the frontline. Further research has the potential to reveal useful lessons in how female emancipation may be facilitated through an improved understanding of cultural contexts and an appreciation of how basic human rights such as the right to life and security are a prerequisite for female emancipation.

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Both scholarly and practical interest in the women–security nexus deepened after the terrorist attacks of 9/11 and the wars that followed the assault on the US homeland. Specifically, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and the chronic instability in Pakistan caused in part, but not wholly, by the struggle with the Taliban, Al-Qaeda and TTP highlighted how issues of gender affects security locally, nationally, and globally [1]. The rhetorical and practical emphasis on the 'emancipation' of women in Afghanistan by Western leaders as well as developments such as the advent of female suicide bombers across the Middle East, in Afghanistan and in Africa have combined to sustain an academic and public curiosity about the woman and war question [2].

The withdrawal of Allied forces from Afghanistan in August 2021 has raised a number of concerns about the future and fate of women after the return of Taliban to power. In this piece we try to explain why attempts to bestow women with human rights have ultimately failed in the country: we point to the many misunderstandings of the cultural and tribal customs by those tasked with the task of liberation. But we also highlight the fraught local and regional politics which rested ultimately on the resistance to any usurping of traditional female roles.

During the recent Afghan campaign, much was made of the imperative to liberate women from the excesses of Taliban and ensure that public life was reordered to include females; their emancipation was deemed vital to the reconstruction of the state. While many of us fell into the trap of believing that this endeavour was somewhat novel, we are indebted to our colleague Nargis Nehan in her contribution for pointing out that the women's movement has been a site of constant battle between the liberals and conservatives in Afghanistan. It was always going to be both controversial and in her words for some women 'deadly'. As Rina Amiri has written 'We see that women have long been the pawns in a struggle between the elite modernists, usually defined as pro-Western, and the religious and tribal based traditionalists [3]. In this piece we wish to explore the complexities of emancipatory politics both for those women living in or deployed as female soldiers to Afghanistan.

RHETORIC

Representations/discourses of women were central to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Both conflicts were constructed as campaigns which would allow virtuous Western men (and women) to save the victimized Afghan (and Iraqi women) from the authoritarian and patriarchal structures which enslaved them. Such narrations were embraced not only by British and American politicians but also by many scholars studying these conflicts. Both wars were supposed to deliver for Iraqi and Afghan women a form of 'emancipation' which was usually couched through a lens of Western values and norms.

The seeming importance of women, both Afghan and non-Afghan, to all aspects of the war is striking. Not only was the woman issue highlighted by politicians, but issues of gender affected the very conduct of what, despite the original intent, became a counter-insurgency campaign. The debacle of the war in Iraq after 2003 for a while concentrated attention on that theatre as Western forces found themselves in the quagmire of what was both a complex civil war and a series of proxy wars. Yet in Afghanistan, after the initial success in toppling Taliban, the West had two missions. One was the hunt to find and kill Osama bin-Laden and eradicate Al-Qaeda within the neighbourhood and the other was to reconstruct the country, enforce human rights and build an effective Afghan security force. Nehan, again in this collection has argued that after the Western interventions there was a period in which gender and minority apartheid, social injustice, suppression, intimidation ......diminished to some extent. It appeared that women were attracting considerable attention and funding from the outside world.

Indeed, just after President George Bush declared a War on Terror, the first lady, Laura Bush in a radio address on 17 November 2001 argued that 'the fight against terrorism is also a fight for the rights and dignity of women' [4]. Time magazine followed with a report on the plight of Afghan women entitled 'Lifting the Veil' [5]. All seemed set fair for women in the country to be rescued from the influence of Taliban. Despite this interest in female human rights, Kim Barry has detailed the way the Bush Administration, after 9/11 conveniently ignored the US part in allowing Taliban to emerge as the dominant force in the county. When Taliban forces captured Kabul in 1996, there was a resounding silence despite reports of gross human rights

violations [6]. And to qualify Nehan's statement of progress somewhat respectfully there is also considerable evidence of the violence that was enacted against women as the US invaded the country [7], often by the warlords allied to the US cause.

REALITY

Many of the Afghan men who served as allies in the US led offensive against bin Laden and Taliban were controversial figures including Rashid Dostum who has been accused of torture, abduction, and rape as well as the infamous Dasht-i-Leili massacre. Dostum became a hugely controversial figure even before he served as Vice President in Ashraf Ghani's administration from 2014–2020. In 2018, the ICC was reported to be considering launching an inquiry into whether Dostum had committed a string of war crimes. Certainly, during the period of civil war and then in the period of the US invasion he had been a key figure in securing the north of the country.

Outside of Kabul and the protection of the International Security Force in the city, the national situation was one of insecurity as the warlords vied for control. In May 2002, Human Rights Watch reported accounts of gang rapes; he ethnic Pashtuns in the north of the country suffered multiple attacks after the fall of Taliban [7]. In the power struggles between the warlords, women for example in Mazar feared physical assault should they venture outside of the home. So, the rhetoric of emancipation did not easily fit with the reality of everyday life for women as war was waged around them. It is also the case that the US bombing campaign, widely lauded as successful in its initial stages, had profound consequences for those civilians living close to targets or the victims of the bombs that had gone astray. This difference between the reality on the ground and political rhetoric was in part created by the media, at least according to some informed female commentators [8]. The claim is that the western media ignored or underplayed rape and sexual abuse of women in the anarchy that followed the withdrawal of the Soviet Army from Afghanistan and in the abridgement of rights during the two decades of the US led occupation. Media stories in the West of the Afghan women football team are pointed to as evidence of the post-Taliban emancipation of the female but allegations of abuse of these players by the team's male managers and staff is not reported to anything like the same extent. One way to approach the issue is to ask the question, that if abuse is being reported in a group of women such as the football players under the gaze of the international spotlight, then what levels of abuse may exist in remote communities ruled by thuggish warlords? Afghan feminists and their western counterparts have differing accounts of female emancipation depending upon whether their accounts privilege a commitment to female safety from abuse or the prospects of female social and economic opportunities.

CULTURAL PERSPECTIVES

There is another issue in terms of perspective. Some Western feminists take the issue of female security largely as a given norm. Rape and abuse, when it occurs, is regarded as a crime against the individual female [9]. Afghan social custom regards rape as a crime against the woman's collective identity – that is her family and her tribe. The Pashtunwali (social code), while providing a prominent role for males was, in its own way, protective of an interpretation of female dignity and it was mainly women who perpetuated its gender values through the upbringing of their male offspring. There was an in-built prohibition against rape or kidnapping as these were considered a capital crime resulting in a blood feud between rival tribes or families. Therefore, by empowering non-traditional elites in the form of warlords the consequences of invasions by both of the superpowers worsened, rather than improved, female empowerment and safety. (The prevalence of rape, beatings and kidnappings had also occurred with the emergence of warlords following the US-backed insurgency of the Mujahedeen against the Soviet invasion.) In the most recent war, it was at the point of invasion that the Afghan social equilibrium of roles and order between men and women was upset.

There is irony in Western justification of the war against the Taliban on the grounds of female emancipation when sexual abuse had been a significant factor both in the establishment and rise of that group. In 1994 an Afghan warlord raped and killed three women. Mullah Omar and his Taliban provided swift justice by executing the warlord for his crimes, assuaging the

indignation and outrage of local people [10]. The Taliban, which had come into existence a year earlier by opposing the abuse of boys, became even stronger by delivering justice for female victims of 'sexual abuse'.

There was therefore a serious question to be asked about the nature of who controlled what outside of Kabul in this early period of supposed emancipation of women from Taliban. One key question was who or what could control and influence the warlords? We should note here that part of the Soviet strategy in its own ill-fated Afghan war after 1979, was to instrumentalize the role of women in public life – precisely to break up tribal allegiances and local power. This strategy had provided some advances under Soviet occupation when women for example almost equalled the number of men attending university. Earlier in the century the Soviet leadership had committed itself to the modernization of the women issue in Central Asia precisely to emancipate Muslim women [11].

INVASION AND EMANCIPATION

In retrospect, the pre-war analysis of the prospects of success in either Iraq or Afghanistan seems at best naïve and at worst delusional. The hope that Western forces would be welcomed had gained some traction, for example, in the justifications of war made by politicians such as Tony Blair or George Bush. In societal terms in Afghanistan the reaction to the US led invasion was not what had been expected. This should and could have been predicted. Historically when external powers have infringed on national culture and religious beliefs, extremist ideologies emerge in reaction. We saw this in many instances throughout the 19th Century when for example the British introduced legislation for example banning Hindu practices of Sati (that is the burning of a widow on her husband's funeral pyre) and in the practice of child marriage [12 p17] This in turn led to the appearance of the Arya Samaj, a forerunner of the RSS (the world's largest extremist movement, and responsible for Gandhi's assassination) and its mainstream affiliate the BJP, India's current ruling party.

According to Sir Olaf, the 19th Century Wazirstan Masood tribe sought to "*at all costs to resist subjection and to preserve their own peculiar way of life. To attain this end they were always prepared to make use of adventitious aids such as appeals with a pan-Islamic flavour*" [10]. In other words, whenever Pushtun tradition is threatened by the West, it has sought to defend its local cultural identity by appealing to a wider Islamic identity and constituency; this factor was greatly helped by the US sanctioned appeals by Saudi Arabia to declare a jihad against the Soviets and to send Islamist militants to fight in Afghanistan. As we described above a catalyst for the emergence of the Taliban was Mullah Omer's repulsion at the increasing practice of male child abuse by the warlords. The practice of sexual abuse of young boys, known as bacha bazi, was a trigger for Mullah Omar to declare opposition to such practices [13].

The use of the women question was not therefore just confined to the US and its Western allies. So too did Taliban utilize the issue. For elements of that group, control of the female population, the symbolic importance of rituals and repression was and remains in part a drive to create an idealized society. This is an authoritarian response, that is a fear of uncertainty caused by an assault on traditional values and structures. We see this reaction playing out not just in Afghanistan but also in the USA albeit for different social reasons [14].

But our concern here is to highlight those Western practices and policy did not take fully into account the local gendered politics and all the sensitivities that lay deep within Afghan culture. In this respect, it is worth considering why on the whole we have and continue to separate out the question of women or perhaps place the issue in isolation from the successes or failures of other initiatives undertaken in for example the military, political and economic spheres. Here we are keenly aware of the endemic corruption within Afghan institutions and how this had a considerable impact, destroying any real chance of political transformation.

So, to take the example of Rashid Dostum who benefitted financially from US support for his part in ousting the Soviet Army, but his corruption and debauchery reached new heights under the recent Afghan government. The Taliban define themselves largely as standing against the character, values and power of such people [15]. So, can any improvement in female rights be advanced without first developing a system of justice in society? According to the 11th century Muslim philosopher Ghazali, the answer is no. In his predecessor to Machiavelli's "The Prince",

Book of Counsel for Kings, he observed "*Whenever Sultans rule oppressively, insecurity appears. And however, much prosperity there may be, this will not suit the subjects if accompanied by insecurity.*" Western leaders may be forgiven for their ignorance of what may appear to be obscure Eastern political thinkers but in 2009, ISAF's own anticorruption team wrote that, "*the international community has enabled and encouraged bad governance through agreement and silence, and often active partnership*" with corrupt and abusive warlords. It identified this as a "*key factor feeding negative security trends*" and went on to point out that this had resulted in acute disappointment within Afghan society and had "*contributed to permissiveness towards or collusion with*" the Taliban [16].

One query that lurks unanswered is if the west was at all serious about supporting female rights, then why did it not begin by uprooting the prominent abusers of those rights? It is certainly not because this was an unknown issue. Malalai Joya (named after a 19th-century Afghan female warrior) warned at the outset of the misogyny of the previous Afghan government and the warlords involved. She posed the question "Why would you allow criminals to be present? Warlords responsible for our country's situation … The most anti-women people in the society who brought our country to this state, and they intend to do the same again" [17]. Her questions remain unanswered as do the claims of Kathy Gannon who pointed out the many atrocities and crimes committed by the Northern Alliance and other warlords selected as partners for the Western intervention. She points out that "in one grizzly attack five women of the Hazara ethnic group were scalped. The attackers were not Taliban; this was two years before that radical Islamic militia took Kabul" [18]. She made pragmatic recommendations on how to remove these men from positions of influence and power, but these were not enacted. It would be reasonable to assume that when there is a choice between the certainties and short-term benefits of power politics and the uncertainties and long-term nature of ethical policy, Western political culture favours the former. Almost by definition, women and other weak members of society will always sadly be victims of power politics.[1]

It would be somewhat misleading though to consider the plight of women as being somehow particular to the Afghans rather than at least in part a consequence of ill-judged external interventions. Here we want to look at how the military campaign itself used the issue of women in a very specific manner. There are two aspects to this. The first is how counter-insurgency developed an emphasis upon women and their roles in the community and the second theme is that military service in Afghanistan opened up possibilities for Western women which had hitherto been closed to them. The irony here is of course that while Afghan women have been returned to Taliban rule, we must consider the possibility that Western female soldiers benefited from service in the country.

FEMALE COUNTER-INSURGENCY: THE ROLE OF WESTERN WOMEN SOLDIERS

Laleh Khalili [19] has argued that the gendered nature of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan were patently obvious when soldiers encountered the local population. In these interactions, women in the community were typically perceived as civilians while men—that is all males over the age of fourteen—were 'coded' as combatants. As a consequence, men were targeted as potential enemies both by combat units and by drones. (Under President Obama the armed drone became his weapon of choice with 563 strikes carried out either in signature strikes, where the individual's identity is unknown, or in precision strikes on a named individual) Women, usually were not the actual target of such strikes but were part and parcel of the collateral damage which inevitably accompanied aerial assaults.[2]

In Iraq, US forces had initially largely ignored the female population, in part because of the sensitivities of engaging with women in a traditional society. Insurgents in turn took advantage of these cultural sensitivities by disguising themselves in the all-enveloping female clothing to avoid detection whilst perhaps plotting or perpetrating attacks. (This was not a new tactic as

1   We should note here the valuable contributions made by feminist scholars in alerting us to the multiple issues of gender and power. See Jacqui True, 'Gender Mainstreaming in Global Public Policy' International Feminist Journal of Politics 5. No.3.2003. pp 368–96.

2   There has been a 'Shocking Disregard for Civilians as US drone strike adds to death toll.' See Amnesty International. *http//www.amnesty.org>latest>news>2019>09*).

during the 1966 Algerian conflict for example, insurgents cognizant to the ideas of the French army would dress in Burqas and easily cross through checkpoints which were usually closed to men but open for women [20].

This disguise as we may term it in turn forced Western forces to deploy women soldiers at checkpoints precisely to be able to search females without causing offence. During the presidency of George W. Bush, the mission to emancipate Afghan women led to the recruitment of more women into the Armed Services. Following the election of Obama, the focus shifted somewhat. The drive for equality in the armed forces became of paramount importance. This was coupled with new peacebuilding approaches which eventually led to a revaluation of the role of female service members in war zones [21] and active deployment of females on the front line in the post-9/11 operations.

Ironically, given the substance of this essay, the Afghan theatre provided Western military women with opportunities which had been long denied to them in terms of front-line operations [22]. Deployment in Afghanistan opened up opportunities in field artillery, combat arms positions and special operations. From 2009 there was a need for American women to accompany American troops on patrol, especially after the military 'surge' and the parallel civilian surge to extend reach into Afghan civilian populations. All of this spearheaded a significant shift in American policy eventually leading to the lifting of the embargo on women in combat.

THE FEMINIZATION OF COIN

The US developed two programmes to enable military forces to make contact with Afghan women: the Female Engagement Teams (FETs) and the Cultural Support Teams (CST). It is worth discussing the reasons for this innovation. Some of those who provided briefings to senior commanders deploying to Afghanistan on cultural intelligence and psychological operations have noted that central to Pustunwali is the concept of Nang (honour). Three important factors contribute to Pushtun Honour: Zar (Gold or wealth), Zan (women and girls) and Zamin (land or property) [23]. Despite these efforts though, any cultural appraisal and sensitivity collided with a typical western military operation which involved breaking down doors, storming into property and even intruding into female quarters. All this proved counterproductive. Such a single operation could offend all three cultural taboos. It was partly to mitigate such affects that female soldiers were introduced. It at least meant that the handling and interrogation of women could be carried out without the offence that would be keenly felt if men engaged with females. (It is worth remembering that even in recent times, 'we' for example in the UK no longer think it appropriate for male policeman or soldiers to handle females in our own cultural context).

When the training of Western women soldiers is scrutinized it becomes apparent that the military mission or some form of intelligence gathering took priority over any cultural sensitivities. In other words, killing insurgents was more important than protecting and winning over the hearts and minds of the female population. As such, and whatever the good intentions, female soldiers perpetuated rather than refined the ill-fated counter insurgency practice put in place by their male comrades.

The issue was that in their kill/capture missions the US used a variety of tactics, including precision strikes and night raids on the homes of Afghans suspected of colluding with terrorist groups. These night raids (as described above) caused widespread upset amongst the Afghan community [24] and also caused considerable friction between President Karzai and his allies. Civilians were killed but the domestic space was also violated and what became apparent is that the cultural 'sanctity' of the home was not well understood by many Westerners.

Female soldiers were meant to reassure the local women during night raids that they as women would protect the wife, the mother, and the children of the household even as the raid was conducted. This occurred even as the men of the household, the husbands, brothers, fathers and sons were hunted down. Accounts by those female soldiers who served in this capacity have related instances of removing their helmets to show their faces and demonstrate to the household that they too were women and protectors.

The mission was to build relationships with the women even as soldiers collected 'intelligence' and information on the home. There is scant evidence that this type of relationship building with local women actually worked and there have been numerous stories of the inconsistencies in what and how local women were meant to respond as homes and communities were invaded and men folk removed. The detention of men raising questions about how the family could be supported without the presence and activity of male breadwinners. Despite these inconsistencies or perhaps because of them a need for women soldiers was also demanded by the Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) which were established from 2005 by the US and its allies. This meant military and civilians experts working in conjunction with local Afghan leaders to provide development funding for local projects to try and win 'hearts and minds.'

These engagements though also provided intelligence-gathering opportunities [25]. Despite controversy over this intelligence role, and as noted above, the embedding of all female cultural teams alongside special operations forces was regarded as successful in enabling access to the 50 per cent of the population usually side-lined in the business of war. One male veteran I interviewed told me that in his two tours of the country and when engaging with local communities he never encountered a woman. They were always in his words secluded in the back of the compound and unlikely to engage with any men outside of the family. But this is not the whole story. While Western women were quite literally on the frontline, the emergence of an Afghan National Army co-opted women into the armed services.

FEMALE MARTYRS

In this complex theatre, women, unusually for a traditional society, were also resorting to violence as in the phenomenon of suicide bombers. In Afghanistan there was, at least initially, a prohibition against the use of female 'martyrs. However, for a multiplicity of reasons, we have witnessed an increase in female suicide bombers since 2009. This followed an open letter issued by Umayama al-Zawahiri (the wife of Al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri) urging her sisters to assist the terrorist groups through suicide missions. The use of females created the conditions for surprise attacks but had the added 'bonus' of creating an additional pool of resources.

The experiences of women in the conflict have been represented in the oral tradition of Landays, traditional short verses which reflect the impact of drones strikes, military occupation, and suicide. These verses might speak of the glory of war but also provide telling accounts of what it means to be female. Violent images abound, as in this rhyme:

> Embrace me in a Suicide Vest
> but don't say I won't give you a kiss [26]

Martin Van Creveld, the military historian, has argued that women are only ever used in battle/conflict when men are not available, or are reluctant to take part [27]. Indeed, even in supporting roles such as fighter ferry pilots, women in the RAF were used during the Second World War but then excluded from flying aircraft until virtually the end of the last century. They were allowed to fly transport aircraft in the late 1980s and only in the late 1990s where they are permitted to qualify for combat roles. This Western example provides valuable insights into how wartime strategic necessity and peacetime social change work on different timescales. Female emancipation is a social project which in the West has taken over a century and is advancing as part of wider societal changes, by learning from failures of policy and practice. In war women in all societies are invited to fill any gaps left by men in traditionally male roles. Once war ends, progress on female emancipation returns to its usual social speed which can be accelerated or decelerated by the economic and social changes brought about by that war. The return of the Taliban may well accelerate progress against rape and other forms of sexual abuse. It will certainly decelerate progress in wider education and in the workplace for women.

These questions point to issues that need some attention. The Afghan conflict and what occurs now is a rich seam of further research and debate on the place of women in society. But there are challenges to any study: any comparison of women's rights under the Western backed government and the Taliban is problematic partly because reporting and analysis are skewed by an apparent bias in favour of the norms espoused by the West. And here we must acknowledge

that there were significant improvements in terms of women's health through intervention. Female life expectancy rose from 56 years in 2001 to 66 years in 2017. Mortality in childbirth also improved from 1,100 per 100,000 deaths in 2000 to 396 per 100,000 in 2015 [28].

Those were just some of the gains made for women. There were others made in terms politics and representation. But any future western analysis would need to address the subtle issue of perceptions shaped by power politics, the consequence of which is that Taliban abuse of women's rights appears to have been mostly overt and criticized whereas abuse of women's rights under the previous regime was largely covert and ignored. There is also an issue of which rights are more important: the right to work or the right to life.

URBAN VERSUS RURAL

We must also unpack the category of Afghan women. There is a significant distinction between urban and rural life. Many of the political gains for women were made in the cities; although it is true that the Taliban had issued some of its most severe edicts in Kabul concerning female apparel, behaviour, and work [29]. Rural women in Afghanistan have, when asked, declared that the right to life was/is the crucial issue. Most Western analysts operate at the pinnacle of Maslow's hierarchy of needs where education and work are understandable priorities. The conditions in Afghanistan are near the bottom of this hierarchy where the right to life and security (against rape etc) is of most importance. It is unsurprising, therefore, that the Taliban rose to power initially on a crusade to stop sexual abuse and managed to reduce the threat to life and rape for more women and girls (and boys) than was the case under the previous regime. These points can partly explain the failure of the Western backed mission in Afghanistan.

Another issue is that Western analysts employ different timescales and conditions to judge female emancipation between the experience of the West and places such as Iraq Afghanistan. What took decades in the West is in our view unreasonably expected to take place in just a few years in Afghanistan. For example, the US insisted that parties standing for the January 2005 Iraqi Transitional Government elections should field at least 25% female candidates [30]. In 2005, the UK Parliament had around 20% female representation – over 100 years after Nancy Astor was elected in 1919 as the first female MP. The Iraqis were being asked to achieve a level of female political representation in just over two years which the West had failed to achieve in 100 years. Similar attitudes were employed on the female issue in Afghanistan. Western attempts to impose the norms that took so long to develop in a different cultural context, while experiencing the societal equivalent of post-traumatic stress disorder was ill judged. This accounts for some of the policy and strategy failures we see today.

Afghanistan, therefore offers a rich case study to understand feminism from the perspective of not just Afghan women but also from the relative standpoint it offers to revaluate female emancipation in the West. It also provides excellent examples of how feminism has been weaponized for power politics and how issues of societal and economic development gave way to the idea that counter insurgency had priority. Finally, Afghanistan has allowed females in Western forces to operate with greater equality on the frontline, principally to extract intelligence from women in Afghan villages. Their oevrall performance is difficult to judge due to a lack of independent research, but any successes that may have been achieved took place at the tactical level obviously failing to translate into a strategic victory.

PROSPECTS FOR WOMEN IN AFGHANISTAN

Since the takeover by the Taliban, Afghanistan's military has effectively been disbanded along with the return of its female members to the private sphere. If the Taliban remain in power the prospect of female soldiers being part of any future Afghan military is extremely unlikely. The issue of female participation in wider public life, especially in education and the workplace, is an issue on which the Taliban appear to be divided. Several statements indicating the desire to allow women to be educated and work have been made, but they come alongside indications that all of this will be delayed for a variety of reasons. These include an argument that Taliban members are not trained or equipped to deal with women in a public or civic setting.

There are also claims that women are being harassed or positively hunted down as punishment for speaking out on other activities in public. Most of these claims are denied by the Taliban.

It is thus difficult to verify or find truth here. There is always a strong possibility that many of the individuals accused of harassing females may well be either criminals posing as Taliban or more likely tribal or other social relations who consider that the women involved have brought dishonour to their traditional codes of behaviour through these public activities.

Equally relevant is the fragmentary nature of Taliban policy arising out of the diversity of backgrounds and experiences in its leadership. Some in this group are traditional hard-liners who have spent little time outside of their tight social circles. A small number who have spent time abroad, particularly in Qatar where the Taliban had a headquarters, have indicated a somewhat more liberal approach. Qatar's example would have been particularly inspiring for the Taliban because it is a society which has to a large degree managed successfully to blend highly conservative ideas on female dress codes with remarkable degrees of empowerment of women through education and leadership in the workplace.

According to statistics, Qatari women lead the world in studying STEM subjects with 57% of Qatari women choosing these subjects compared to 35% in the USA [31, 32]. Less well-known is the fact that these women can go on to lead organisations in cybersecurity or Fintech to a degree which is rarely seen in western society. It is likely that exposure to this model of successfully combining strict religious interpretations with liberal ideas about female equality of opportunity will have influenced some of the Taliban leadership. Less certain is whether that leadership can come to a united vision of the future. Whatever progress may be made in this area, it is likely to take time because social cultural change inevitably takes time to evolve.

One significant factor in discussing the future is the issue, already highlighted, of the political will to restore female rights. The priority, for the Taliban is to provide the necessities for its population in terms of food and fuel necessary for survival. Currently, it is failing to do so partly because of its own inaptitude but largely because of the failure of the international community to coordinate a suitable post-conflict settlement allowing the release of funding and the agreements on trade and aid necessary to help the country establish a sustainable economy. If the West wishes to support female emancipation to allow women to receive an education and have equal opportunities in the workplace it must do all it can to support the basic needs of Afghan society in terms of food shelter and fuel. Only then is there any hope for progress on the higher ideals of female emancipation.

There is much to be gained by studying this topic in detail. In the meantime, it is safe to conclude that geopolitical involvement in Afghanistan has put back rather than advanced the cause of female emancipation. These wars caused instability by deliberately disrupting the delicate power structures of traditional society through the empowerment of alternative leaderships: they were motivated by parochial gains achieved through perpetuating insecurity. Evidence suggests that female emancipation is always culturally contextualised, and advances are best advocated through a complex and probably long drawn out evolutionary socially led process. The Afghan case study highlights the importance of considering the thorny issue that some of the human rights which underpin female emancipation are a precondition for others, that is, the right to life and security over the right to education and equality of opportunity and inclusion. Security, stability and a form of justice in society were considered a prerequisite for social development according to both the values of the region and the findings of some ISAF studies and it seems sadly that in the turmoil of war these were lost.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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