Decolonizing the Gender and Peacebuilding Agenda

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Introduction

The US military campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq are often justified by strong moral claims to transfer freedom, capitalism and democracy to these nations. Feminist researchers have sketched the contours of present day US imperialism by identifying the post-911 US invasion and occupation of Muslim-majority lands as an extension of American patriarchal capitalism and militarism (Eisenstein 2004; Enloe 2004), and a desire to reassert Western (white) supremacy over the non-Western Other (Mohanty 2006; Thobani 2007). Gregory (2004) rightly describes the continuity of colonial aggressions into the contemporary conflicts in Palestine, Afghanistan and Iraq as the 'colonial present'[1]. US aggression on the women of Afghanistan and Iraq has further demonstrated that the colonial present echoes a familiar imperialist campaign to 'rescue' women from the fetters of their 'barbaric' and 'uncivilized' societies.This paper attempts to unmask colonial and orientalist modalities, attitudes and relations that underpin modern peacebuilding operations broadly, and specifically in relation to the normative gender agenda that is attached to post-conflict interventions. In doing so, this paper argues for "delinking" the 'gender agenda' from dominant peacebuilding programming

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[1] I define colonialism as the forceful annexation of lands to not only directly rule over societies but to restructure the political and economic structures so as to extract wealth and fuel American and European capitalism (Loomba, 1998; Saurin, 2006; McEwan, 2009). The term colonial, therefore, is in reference to the continuity of techniques and strategies used to control and dominate others (Loomba, 2005). According to Saurin (2006), colonialism is often understood as a peculiar expression of imperialism or a derivative of it. Imperialism is the exercise of political control to spread and secure capitalist interest (Nederveen 1988), and as Ania Loomba (1998) remarks, Lenin predicted that the entire world would absorb European finance capitalism and that this global system of capitalist relations was called imperialism, which constituted the highest stage of capitalist development.

and offers instead an anti-colonial framework for supporting more equitable and just relations for gender programming in post-conflict contexts.

This paper offers a feminist, postcolonial analysis of gender and peacebuilding efforts, with a specific focus on Afghanistan. What demarcates a post-colonial analysis from other critical approaches is that it allows us to discuss eurocentrism, racism, culture and the exploitation as well as the (mis)representation of the non-west as central to the discourse and practice of humanitarian and development aid. Unlike other theoretical approaches (such as World Systems Theory, Dependency theory), postcolonial thought allows us also to highlight the often subtle tendency in the west to situate western civilization and western knowledge production as superior to other societies, and gives greater attention to the periphery that is often deemed inferior, uncivilized or barbaric (Young, 2001; Gruffydd, 2006; McEwan, 2009; Slater, 2004). This approach is critical to the study of international affairs and global politics generally because of the prevalence of structural eurocentrism that remains largely unquestioned and often goes unnoticed (Darby, 2006; Gruffydd, 2006; McEwan, 2009).

Before focusing on how the gender agenda in post-conflict peacebuilding is entangled into colonial and orientalist strategems, it is important to highlight that my work more broadly attempts to unmask the often hidden and undeclared continuities of colonial modalities and formations in modern peacebuilding interventions. As such, as I have argued elsewhere, I situate the widely recognized pattern of failed and faulty peacebuilding interventions as proofs of the continuity of entrenched colonial worldviews where failed, ambivalent and contradictious outcomes are anticipated outcomes in colonial or neocolonial encounters. Peacebuilding strategies fail primarily because they set out to construct an outwardly oriented state, carving spaces of familiarity, resemblance and authority for internationals to comfortably direct and navigate the country's political and economic terrain in their own 'image'. That is to say, no major paths for the recovery of Afghanistan, Iraq or any other Muslim country can begin in spaces of epistemic difference, political and cultural unfamiliarity, or that alienate internationals in terms of values, ideology and worldviews. My research reveals that the donor-driven process of

rebuilding Afghanistan, therefore, remains a peculiarly *distant* and inaccessible project for the majority of Afghanistan's traditional, non-western, non-English speaking and faith-centered population, whilst becoming a *proximate* and accessible opportunity for many internationals and western educated Afghan elite.

In this paper I insist that closer attention must be paid to the liberal rights agenda that underpins gender and peacebuilding initiatives promoted by UNIFEM and other major donor governments and international NGOs working in Afghanistan. I argue that feminists need to recognize the role of liberal political thought and ideas of democracy, freedom and women's rights in shaping imperialist relations with the Muslim world in the past, and hence to be cautious of these continuities in current post-conflict gender programming in Muslim majority countries. In this paper I aim to highlight two specific ways the normative gender agenda implemented in Afghanistan falls into imperialist trappings. First, I argue that gender reforms in the country are primarily framed to demonstrate an ideological defeat of western liberalism over Islamic cultures. That is to say, Afghan women become symbolic markers for liberty and progress and, therefore, program objectives specifically focus on facilitating this liberal 'performance' over the actual needs and priorities identified by Afghan women. Second, the 'gender discourse' in Afghanistan cements the expertise and authority of internationals (consultants, gender experts) over situating a more flexible and synthesized gender discourse that engages a wider community of Afghan women. I contend that the normative gender discourse carves spaces of familiarity and authority for internationals in ways that preclude an Afghan-centered model for women's rights to taken form. In situating these arguments I do not disavow many important inroads that have taken place for Afghan women and girls in the post-conflict period, especially around violence prevention, education, training and political participation. However, irrespective of good intentions and good work, I must echo Ilan Kapoor's (2008) important reminder that a postcolonial analysis helps reveal the ways that dominant discourses and hegemonic politics often masquerade as noble and altruistic intentions. These inequities are sometimes overt, but most often are hidden or reveal themselves in subtle forms of (neo) colonial exchanges and patterns of domination and exploitation, be they through as well as upon individuals and societies

and including how they operate as discursive practices in structures, processes and institutions.

Women's Rights as Liberal Performance

The project to free the world and declare liberal ideological triumph against competing worldviews and ideologies is a very familiar strategy, especially in post-conflict contexts. As discussed in Chapter One, the United States declared defeat over the Soviet Union at the end of the Cold War, hence the first wave of liberal, capitalist nation-building was implemented through the Marshall Plan (1948-1952), with the goal to "permit the emergence of political and social conditions in which free institutions can exist" (Mills, 2008, p. 22). Much like how the existing threat to peace and security is coached in the language of Islamic extremism today, the necessity of the Marshall Plan was framed around the need to contain the threat of Soviet expansion and was advocated, at least partially, on the grounds of Americans needing to 'save' western civilization. Similarly in the aftermath of 911, the invasion of Afghanistan was also positioned as a war between good and evil with the US having to once again shoulder the burden of saving western civilization, this time from Islamic extremism (Gregory, 2004). The ideological pillars of statebuilding in Afghanistan echo the efforts in Japan after World War 2, for example, where the objective was to transplant American democracy onto a foreign and strange society as a means to bring civilization and enlightenment to Japan. Or, as John Dower has argued, the aim was to convert the Asia/pacific region into an "American lake" against communism (as cited in Koikari, 2002, p. 26). The Marshall plan was the first moment in U.S history wherein the Monroe doctrine to support freedom and democracy was extended beyond North America and much like modern statebuilding today, it was premised on consolidating American hegemonic power and solidifying the confidence and triumph of American ideological victory (Mee, 1984).

One of the most visible markers of liberal victory is the status of Afghan women. The dominant narrative contends that the U.S singularly rescued and liberated Afghan women from the harsh dictates of Islamic rule enforced by the Taliban (Russo, 2006;

Stabile & Kumar, 2005; Ferguson & Marso, 2007; Chishti & Farhoumand-Simms, 2011). This western-liberal liberation positions the US and international institutions as the sole guarantors and overseers of freedom, democracy and gender equality, hinting to the irreconcilability of women's rights with any other framework that is not western, secular, or liberal (Russo, 2006; Chishti & Farhoumand-Simms, 2011; Zine, 2006). As Zine (2006) has argued, Muslim societies are constructed as anti-liberal, anti-democratic and staunchly traditionalist, and the project to rescue them from their barbaric cultures echoes the ideological rhetoric of the Crusades. The underlying objective is for the Muslim world to be aligned to western principles of freedom and liberty and the absence of these freedoms is a constructed threat to the national security of all democratic societies (Biswas, 2006; Thobani, 2007). In response, the US intentionally supported a 'low-intensity democracy' in Afghanistan, and this appears to be sufficient enough to claim the successful liberal makeover of Afghanistan's illiberal and staunchly Islamic polity. What is detectable in the writings of many western academics and politicians is that post-Taliban Afghanistan presented an opportunity for the west to cultivate western liberal democracy within one of the world's most peripheral, traditional and tightly religious states in the Muslim world. The opportunity for the west to finally 'see' itself in Afghanistan was not to be taken lightly, given the much discussed notion of 'Muslim exceptionalism', which is the widespread acknowledgment of the underrepresentation of Muslim states among the world's electoral democracies (Lakoff, 2004; Goldsmith, 2007).

Muslim exceptionalism is the dominant narrative in the western academy, media and political circles premised on the fundamental incompatibility between Islam and liberal rights, freedoms and democracy, promulgated by some influential academics such as Francis Fukuyama, Robert Kaplan, Samuel Huntington, and Bernard Lewis[2]. These writers have argued that the Muslim faith and civilization is resistant to, and in many ways incompatible with the goals of modernity and according to Bernard Lewis (2002), for example, unlike other parts of the world, Muslim lands have failed to make serious

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[2] There are a number of published writings that purport this thesis, such as Robert D. Kaplan's *The Coming Anarchy: Shattering the Dreams of the Post Cold War*; Samuel Huntington's *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*; Francis Fukuyama's *The End of History and the Last Man*; and Bernard Lewis' "Roots of Muslim Rage".

modern advances. The entire Muslim world is, as Lewis (2002) crudely, writes "limping in the rear" (p. 43). He argues that although many Muslim countries have experimented with democracy, with the exception of Turkey, the long quest for freedom has only left a "string of shabby tyrannies" across the Muslim world (p. 43).

Muslim exceptionalism can be understood as the belief that Muslim cultures have an intrinsic aversion to democracy and lack liberal democratic mores and values in comparison to other cultures (Huntington, 1993; Lewis, 2003; Goldsmith, 2007; Lakoff, 2004). These ideas were widely popularized by Samuel Huntington in his Clash of Civilizations thesis, and as Goldsmith (2007) notes, have encroached onto official U.S. foreign policy positions and in the analysis of democracy by influential international organizations such as the World Bank and the United Nations. This belief is substantiated by the empirical evidence that proves the comparative absence of democracy in the Muslim world vis-à-vis the rest of the world. According to the 2011 Freedom House survey, for example, out of the world's 194 countries 87 countries that are labeled 'free', that is, countries with a broad scope of political freedom, civil liberties, civic life and independent media, are almost exclusively in the western world. Those countries labeled as 'partly free' are mainly in Latin America and parts of Africa and include some Muslim countries such as Bangladesh, Turkey and Morocco. However, almost all Muslim majority countries, excluding a handful like Indonesia, are among those states labeled as 'not free'. Although it is not in the scope of this study to explore the relationship between Islam and liberal democracy (see Hashemi, 2009; Diamond et al., 2003) what is important to point out is that this dominant narrative correlates Muslim societies with the absence of democratic values, institutions, and practices and the most common understanding remains that Muslim societies are outside the fold of modernity, and are easily influenced by fanaticism, are staunchly anti-secular and closed to constructing a free and democratic, open society (Pasha, 2007; Lewis, 2002).

Therefore, taming the excesses of the Islamic world by universal values of liberty, freedom and democracy are critical to counter the surge of oppression, violence and irrationality of Muslim cultures that reside outside of modernity (Pasha, 2007). For Eisenstein (2007), it is not surprising that women are used as decoys of imperialist fantasy and that the agenda of women's rights and human rights has mystified and rationalized

the misogynist and racist undertones of U.S. global liberal and capitalist expansion. As I have argued elsewhere, the US and the international community have relied heavily on ideologically driven gender reforms which meant focusing on efforts that *most* prove Western liberal victory over the Taliban, rather than *actually* improving the lives of Afghan women (Chishti, 2010). Gender reforms were deliberately used as a counter-insurgency strategy to undo as well as challenge Islamic extremism and the Taliban's hold in society. In her detailed study on aid and gender in post-conflict Afghanistan, Abirafeh (2009) argues that at the level of rhetoric, Afghanistan can be seen as one of the largest gender focused interventions and that Afghan women have become the barometer to measure the success or failure of the liberal transformation. In the first few years after the US-led invasion, women's re-entry into the public realm was celebrated, especially their return to parliament, schools and jobs. This meant that Afghan women were visibly benefitting from their new found freedoms and opportunities, and thus became the symbol of defeat against an antiquated and extremist Islamist worldview (Chishti, 2010). Interestingly, Abirafeh (2009) reveals that the continuity of funding for women's programs in the country now rests on this very same assumption, that is, an understanding that the task of liberating Afghan women is incomplete and therefore more funds are needed to continue the struggle. In fact the following quote from the head of an aid organization interviewed in Abirafeh's (2009) study speaks volumes to how entrenched this worldview is:

> The world's image of Afghan women was that they were horribly oppressed and abused—the worst image of women anywhere in the world. This has continually fuelled programs attempting to help Afghan women. That bourka is the ultimate symbol of the backwardness of Afghanistan. Westerners gasp at its sight. There is nothing more reproachable in terms of the absence of women's rights. Even though the quantity of coverage [of Afghan women] has obviously reduced, the quality hasn't. It's still catchy to talk about how oppressed and wretched they are. (Abirafeh, 2009, p. 38)

It became clear very early on that the international community's commitment to women's rights was more "on paper" rather than substantively making a difference in the

lives of Afghan women (Rostami-Povey, 2007; Ferguson & Marso, 2007; Azarbaijani-Moghaddam, 2007; Abirafeh, 2009; Rawi, 2009; Reid & Human Rights Watch, 2009). Much of the initial groundwork to advance gender equality was welcomed by Afghan women, including the Afghan Constitution which promotes the advancement of women and gender equality; Afghanistan's ratification of the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW); Security Council Resolution 1325 and Afghanistan's National Development Framework (NDF) and National Development Strategy (ANDS) which stresses gender-sensitive programming. However, translating these commitments into meaningful improvements for women over the years has simply not happened. Rather, research engaging the perspectives of Afghan women on the topic of aid interventions has revealed that they perceive there to be an overemphasis on issues of culture, human rights and political rights, and far less attention to food security, employment, security and health (Rostami-Povey, 2007; Sinno, 2008; Ahmed-Ghosh, 2006). As one woman interviewed in Jalalabad noted, "they keep talking about women's rights and democracy but people are hungry and sick" (Rostami-Povey, 2007, p. 51). Afghan women have felt that their plight was manipulated and appropriated by western powers, mainly because of the meager efforts towards anti-poverty initiatives, women's health programs, human rights enforcement, local socio-economic development and other such initiatives that would reflect a more responsive commitment to women's needs and rights (Rostami-Povey, 2007; Abirafeh, 2009).

Gender and Modernity

Not engaging in an anti-imperialist critique, and paying little attention to the ways in which women's rights are appropriated by the US administration as it maintains neo-trusteeship authority in Afghanistan and Iraq, creates a context wherein the key culprit remains local patriarchy, and promoting women's rights is reduced to policies and programs that are predicated on the assumption that gender roles and relations can be positively transformed by outsiders. A focal point from an anti-imperialist feminist lens, therefore, is to detect and resist the varied sites and manifestations of imperial power in post-conflict settings, specifically in terms of how the women's rights agenda centrally

feeds into and perpetuates the broad 'civilizing' mission. This acute civilizing agenda is partially operationalized through gender programming implemented by external aid actors in Afghanistan and Iraq, underpinned by an expectation to facilitate a 'public makeover' of traditional, uneducated and politically strangled women in Muslim majority lands, a makeover into modern, industrious and politically active women *after* their encounter with Western assistance.

Feminist researchers have revealed the general distrust among Afghan women towards the aid community, accusing them of imposing an alien culture that shows very little respect to Afghan culture and is far removed from the lived realities of women (Abirafeh, 2009; Ahmed Ghosh, 2006; Rostami-Povey, 2007; and Alvi-Aziz, 2008). By most accounts, the current women's rights agenda echoes the westernization and modernization era of the 1920s, 1960s and 1970s when Afghan male elites were predominately implementing gender reforms based on western models on behalf of women. These efforts were largely unpopular among Afghan women because they were not only perceived to be foreign, but that they exacerbated the divide between urban and rural women and also the gap between formal political rights and the actual circumstances of women (Rostami-Povey 2007; Abirafeh 2009). The key difference in the current context appears to be that the women's rights agenda today is explicitly entangled in an ideological war, and the prevailing Orientalist tropes about the backwardness of Islam and Muslim women are the unchallenged axioms guiding aid intervention (Chishti & Farhoumand- Simms, 2011; Abirafeh 2009). As a result, initiatives by Afghan women that are non-secular, non-western, but articulating a pro-Islamic rights-based approach are simply bypassed by international donors in fear of affirming that which is most feared and despised (Abirafeh, 2009; Chishti & Farhoumand-Simms, 2011). As Abirafeh (2009) reveals in her study, contrary to the assumptions of the aid community, the majority of Afghan women interviewed did not identify sex as their most salient identity, but Islam. Hence, sidelining religious identity, or even the perception of it among Afghan women, undermines the impact of aid interventions. Although the Afghan women's movement has historically been both secular and faith-based, because the gender agenda rests exclusively on western ideological stilts, the international community has for the most part

amputated the hard work of many religiously oriented women's groups whose struggle for women's rights, especially under the Taliban regime, has been both effective and well received by women *precisely* because they were faith-centered (Chishti & Farhoumand-Simms, 2011). The women's rights agenda is, as Abirafeh (2009, p. 52) contends, under an "ideological occupation" and, therefore, the quest for rights and equality has become an "aid- induced myth", that has largely failed.

In my own work as a consultant in Afghanistan and having interviewed Afghan women leaders working with the international community, there is without doubt awkward silences and tensions between Afghan women and foreign gender consultants. My informal conversations with Afghan women from across Afghanistan further highlighted many concerns about foreign expatriates working in the country, specifically the tremendous privilege we exert in the country as westerners, having easy access to resources as well as the tremendous decision making power *we* hold. We are no doubt able to 'parachute' in the country and are able to begin conceptualizing, planning, implementing, supervising and evaluating programs without having to know the history, language, culture or religious contexts of Afghan women. Even though I was working in the field of gender and human rights, I was keenly aware of programs that were funded and supported by the international community that required no Afghan consultations or consent. Rather than internationals feeling 'awkward' and 'uncomfortable' in a foreign land, it is Afghan women that are forced to navigate through western discourses on gender, human rights, having to learn new terminologies and make connections to a discourse that has its origins elsewhere. In particular Afghan women, who did not read or speak English, did not speak or were able to write in proper 'donor language' or unable to write lengthy project proposals were sidelined from receiving funding. Their important work in rural settings mainly and working with Afghan women under the Taliban bore little importance because of rigid guidelines about the criteria for acceptable funding partners. What is particularly disturbing is the expectation that Afghan women be literate in English in order for them to run major gender programs in the country. Since Afghanistan was never formally colonized by the British, English was obviously never taught in schools nor an official language. Therefore it is absurd to assess the

capacities of Afghan women to lead, manage and implement programs in their own country based on proficiency of the English language. Furthermore, the discourse on absorptive capacities used to declare Afghans as incompetent in the running of their own affairs, rarely turns the table to identify or measure the lack of capacities on part of western gender experts that are neither evaluated on language skills or cultural competencies nor an understanding of basic demographics, such as the ethnic makeup, religious diversity or political history of the country they are working in. It is important to note that sidelining these informal women's groups meant privileging Afghan women who lived outside of the country, mainly Pakistani-based groups, that have had a long history executing development projects in Afghan refugee camps in Pakistan, hence forming strong relationships with donor agencies.

An Anti-Colonial Framework for Gender Programming

In mapping out the arguments above it is important to note that delinking the gender agenda from these imperialist strings is important and urgent work, however, by delinking from the normative gender agenda I am not suggesting that feminists disengage completely from working with Afghan women or other women residing in war-affected Muslim majority states. Rather, my commitment to feminist reconciliatory politics from within a postcolonial framework is principled on collectively confronting sites of imperialist domination and subjugation between women and transforming these relations through education, advocacy and resistance.

I propose the following feminist anti-colonial framework to help support greater equitable and just relations as well as outcomes in post-conflict gender programming. This framework is based on the following four guiding principles:

a)*Multivocality*: War-affected societies must exercise intellectual autonomy to imagine, conceive, debate and discuss the paths to their post-war recovery independently and quite possibly differently from international actors. The dominant approach to peacebuilding, however, is conformity and intellectual dependence on western powers as all ideas, frameworks, policies and programs are projected *out,* but nothing from outside the knowledge base of international power holders is ever accepted *in.* Multivocality entails a commitment to knowledge diversity; this means listening, learning and sharing ideas and experiences across cultural, political, ideological and epistemological boundaries. This shift will facilitate a greater movement and exchange of ideas from varied epistemological points of origin, and in doing so, will allow for the possibility of synthesized and hybrid knowledge formations.

b)*Reciprocity:* Peacebuilding requires greater reciprocity and a commitment to change on the part of both external and local actors. Reciprocity entails the practical application of multivocality, that is, knowledge should not just be exchanged but applied at the institutional level. This principle challenges the existing one-way relationship wherein only international institutions prescribe changes *onto* other states and societies but are seldom willing to make substantial changes themselves. A commitment to reciprocity will likely lead to a greater chance for success if shifts and transformations occur from both ends of the aid relationship, whether these are structural, policy or operational changes. This means international institutions must *also* be willing to reform, adapt and shift in ways that will support and strengthen mutually defined and agreed upon goals.

c) *Inclusivity*: International actors staunchly promote liberal-democratic principles of broad based political inclusion, participation and accountability, however, these principles are not practiced by peacebuilding institutions towards the beneficiary population. Policies are rarely discussed and debated openly in public forums; informed domestic consent is not a priority nor are international actors held to rigorous standards of accountability and transparency towards war-affected populations. Furthermore, decision-making bodies almost exclusively operate behind closed doors, excluding the voices of formal and non-

formal public groups and organizations. 'Democratizing' the aid establishment to become inclusive, non-hierarchal and a consent-driven process is necessary, and this entails de-centering the decision making process, gaining popular, informed consent and shifting accountability towards war-affected populations and not just to western governments and constituencies abroad.

d) Solidarity: Peacebuilding often superimposes a new structure over an existing network of local actors already working to support the well being of communities. International actors often bypass local initiatives because as outsiders they often do not 'see' them, either because they are small scale operations or they practice an alternative or a more traditional approach to helping communities. By rendering these efforts 'invisible', peacebuilders disavow existing spaces of local resilience, survival and ingenuity, often, inadvertently undermining them, or far worse, competing to replace these initiatives. Solidarity does not mean that the international community must expand or even support these local efforts – this may not be desired or even possible. Rather, a commitment to solidarity involves recognizing and acknowledging the important work that is already being done in communities, and this fundamentally means not obstructing local strategies but respecting the self-identified strengths, capacities, experiences and expertise of local actors.

Conclusion

This paper argued that the normative gender agenda associated with post-conflict peacebuilding in Afghanistan and elsewhere in the Muslim world is fraught with imperialist undertones that must be unmasked and interrogated by feminist practitioners and scholars in the field. By situating a feminist postcolonial analysis, this paper enabled us to detect the ways liberal political thought, ideas of modernity and progress as well as western ideology and culture are central to the foundation and workings of modern imperial formations that are underway in the Muslim world. The continuity of a colonial

worldview as idea and practice is central to a postcolonial analysis and this paper attempted to tease out how the liberal agenda for women's rights can be caught in imperialist trappings. This paper further offered a feminist anti-colonial approach to interrupt and help disrupt hegemonic and oppressive practices in supporting and promoting the well being of women in the aftermath of war and conflict.