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Narratives of Agency: Women, Islam, and the Politics of Economic Participation in Afghanistan

By Farhana Rahman¹

Abstract

This paper analyzes Afghan businesswomen's experiences and their attempts at engaging in the economic sector, and the manner in which they have navigated political, social, and cultural impediments to build and sustain economic enterprises, to reclaim agency in the post-Taliban era. Through in-depth interviews with three Afghan businesswomen in conjunction with observations of their daily lives, this discussion explores how Afghan businesswomen negotiate between international discourses on women's employment and work, and hyper-conservative values of Afghan society that prevent women from accessing economic opportunities. The businesswomen highlighted in this paper legitimize their place in economic participation and employment, in many ways, by employing Islamic discourses through the Qur'an and teachings of the Prophet Muhammad.

Keywords: Afghanistan; agency; Muslim women; economic empowerment

Introduction

I always like to attend the local mosque in my neighbourhood when I can, but as soon as the mullah starts preaching that Afghan women should stay at home and not go out in public, I leave. And sometimes I challenge my male relatives when they start making comments that I should not work even though I have to provide for my family, because they think it makes me immodest. These mullahs do not even know the basic principles of Islam and they are preaching to others!

– Niloufar, aged 26, businesswoman

Sixteen years after the fall of the Taliban, there remains a substantial lack of current knowledge on the everyday lives and subjectivities of women in Afghanistan. The role and participation of women – specifically, Afghan businesswomen – in the economic sector of Afghanistan is an important but often overlooked area of research. This research project is set in Kabul, a city that has seen relatively slow but steady changes in recent years. But against cultural and political forces that govern women's lives, these changes are minimal and often temporary.

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However, there is anecdotal evidence to support a perceived increase in the female participation rate in the economic sphere in spite of significant barriers including heightened insecurity, lack of opportunities, and growing frustration with Western and international aid organizations. At a time when women's abilities to enter the public sphere continue to be limited within a hyper-conservative society such as Afghanistan, coupled with a visible but declining international presence, on-the-ground evidence supports that Afghan businesswomen are at the forefront of the fight to establish their rights.

Against this backdrop of competing discourses, the focus of this paper is on the balance employed by Afghan businesswomen that has enabled them to negotiate between international forces working to increase women's employment on the one hand through various development projects, as well as hyper-conservative values of Afghan society that prevent women from accessing economic opportunities on the other. The first section of the paper establishes the context for the present research, placing this project within the global discussions surrounding culture and honour, the view of Afghan women post-9/11, as well as the language of "human rights" and "women's rights" that characterizes much of the intervention programming from international aid agencies and NGOs. In the second section, the experiences of three Afghan businesswomen are highlighted to illustrate the manner in which women presently have to negotiate and re-negotiate between competing interests that seek to govern their lives.

***Afghaniyat* and the "Woman Question"**

Afghan culture is often defined as a "collectivist" culture, which houses a diverse repertoire of behaviours, thoughts, and feelings. In Afghanistan, like many Muslim societies, the interaction and intertwining of Afghan culture, religion, secularism, ethnicity, coupled with historical and social "mechanisms structure the lives of women" (Hofstede and Hofstede, 2005; Karlsson and Mansory, 2007). This collectivist identity is part of *Afghaniyat* – Afghanistan's national identity – where women play a significant role as a part of this collective (Abirafeh, 2009). As a strongly patriarchal and gender segregated society, Abirafeh (2009) notes that "gender roles in Afghanistan are shaped by socio-cultural factors largely based on women's role as keepers of the family honour" where men's control over women is central to *sharm* and *haya* (shame and honour, respectively), and these characteristics are primarily attached to their dominance of women (Rugh, 1984; Dupree, 1973; Abirafeh, 2009).

A further historical account of Afghanistan shows that throughout the four periods of Afghan history, the "woman's question" (Moghadam, 1994; Billaud, 2007) has been central to fashioning ideals defining her national identity within the nation-building project. Feminist scholars (Anthias and Yuval-Davis, 1989; Yuval-Davis, 1997; Kandiyoti, 2007) have discussed the ways gender and nation-building have been conceived of in modern history. Nira Yuval-Davis (1997) argues that gender discourse on nation-building reflects the way in which women's bodies, and their role as reproducers bear symbolic representation of the nation with social responsibilities to the culture in which they belong (Yuval-Davis, 1997; Billaud, 2007). She further notes that women are the "natural" biological reproducers in maintaining a "collective identity" which has particular significance in defining their position within the nation state. Thus, women as the biological reproducers of the next generation are particularly important in conservative societies, and are inextricably tied to nationalist symbolism as "reproducers of the nation" (Yuval-Davis, 1997: 29). The future of the nation is dependent on "women's identities" as the role of mother and wife, representing the possibilities for growth and stability (Yuval-Davis, 1997).

Nilufer Göle (1996) writes, “women are the touchstone of the Islamic order... the *trait d’union* between identity and community” (Göle, 1996: 21). The woman question expanded to work towards “remaking” women during the time of the Soviet occupation and at the time of the Taliban (Abu-Lughod, 1988). Both situations were distinct in policing the movement of women’s bodies in the public albeit in contradictory ways. During the time of the Soviet occupation the policies forced women to enter into the public sphere through unveiling, while during the reign of the Taliban women were forced under the veil away from the public eye (Dupree, 2001). A combination of “modernist methods” and “conservative reactions” affected women’s participation in Afghan society (Dupree, 2001).

Thus, the nation-building project in the history of Afghanistan was instrumental in making women’s “bodies” a figure in “asserting power” and becoming a symbolic marker of national sovereignty (Göle, 1996; Billaud, 2007). In understanding the ways in which the “woman question” was defined in the nation-building process prior to the fall of the Taliban, it is important to situate the discourse around the conceptualization of gender within the national discourse as well as women’s public visibility in the years during the Taliban rule (Moghadam, 1994). Understanding this nation-building project that centered on women is significant to establishing the historical context that influences the present discussion.

In the current “reconstruction” and “modernization” era following the fall of the Taliban in 2001, the expectations of women to preserve national identity continues to pervade the “modern” attempts at social change (Suhrke, 2007). Liberal discourses on the position and rights of women in Afghan society have reignited tensions surrounding culture, tradition, and religion. Similar to the case of Turkey under Kemal, Göle (1996) notes that women’s visibility and mobility in the public sphere symbolically formed a battle between the “modernists” and the “Islamists”, causing social anxiety (Göle, 1996). In the case of Afghanistan, Julie Billaud (2007) notes that the current reformulation of the Afghan nation in the post-war period has garnered similar concerns between Afghan culture and the “West”. Central to this discussion is the way in which the role of women has figured prominently into the attempts at “preserving culture” and maintaining *Afghanity* (Yuval-Davis, 1997; Billaud, 2007). She argues that the “moral panics” by the state at the “modernization” of Afghan women is as a result of globalization and the “anxiety” it creates about modernity and national identity in contemporary Afghanistan (Billaud, 2007).

Afghanistan and the Third World Muslim Woman

After September 11, 2001, gender and the status of women continued to pervade the Western view of Afghanistan and the “Muslim woman”. Part of this research is focused on critiquing how the “West” has traditionally fashioned an image of the “Third World” woman. Along with Radcliffe (1994), Ong (1988), and Minh-ha (1989), Chandra Mohanty (1991) discusses the power relations eschewed in how the “third world woman” was constructed and theorized as poor, illiterate, “oppressed” victims of “barbarous” societies. They critique Western feminist writers who have constructed the Third World woman as a monolithic identity ignoring the subjective dimension of women’s lives, and wholly misrepresenting individual experiences. By freezing the Third World woman in a distinct temporal, spatial, and historical frame, she is presumed to be without agency (Mohanty, 1991).

In the case of Afghanistan, the culturally essentialized image of the “Afghan women” that emerged post 9-11 was that of a fully veiled woman under flowing blue *burqas* (Abu-Lughod, 2002). Working under a gendered colonial gaze, the West attempted to “unveil” and “uncover” the

“oppressed” Afghan woman (Abu-Lughod, 2002). As Hirschkind and Mahmood (2002) argue, the Western feminist majority directly contributed to the Bush administration’s military campaign painting the Taliban as responsible for Afghanistan’s oppression of women, thereby “warranting invasion” of the country to save the “veiled Afghan woman”. They aptly note that:

Images of veiled women, so skillfully marshaled by organizations like the Feminist Majority, were explanation enough for what most Americans already knew: that Islam in a variety of its forms, and in particular so-called Islamic fundamentalism, is generally oppressive of women” (Hirschkind and Mahmood, 2002: 347).

This is similar to what Gayatri Spivak (1988: 93) coins as the notion of “white men saving brown women from brown men”. The status of women in Muslim countries, particularly in the case of Afghanistan, is painted as consistently inferior “to establish the moral superiority of imperial powers” (Ahmed, 1992; Mir, 2014: 48). Lila Abu-Lughod’s (2002) important piece *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* is significant in the way it problematizes analysis of women’s treatment through an Orientalist cultural frame and the manner in which “saving” the Afghan woman became a trope of cultural imperialism. Thus, it becomes necessary to recognize and assess women’s subjectivity by “listen[ing] to their own perceptions of reality and [acknowledging] their status as actors and agents no matter how ‘oppressive’ the circumstances”, rather than drawing inferences regarding women’s lives (Pandya, 2012: 20).

Scholars like Mohanty (1989) and Mahmood (2002) have further noted the complexities when Western, non-Muslim feminists interpret Muslim women’s lives. Feminist analyses provided by Mahmood (2002) in her study of Islamist women’s participation argue against depictions of agency in Western liberal discourse which universalizes the Muslim woman’s desire to be free from oppression, from the “shackles” of the patriarchal culture in which she lives. She touches on an important point of going beyond the idea of simple “liberation” as something to move towards or away from, or for a universalized desire for “freedom” from oppression. Sophia Pandya (2012), in her book *Muslim Women and Islamic Resurgence* echoes Mahmood (2002) as she notes: “Judging other women as moving toward “liberation” or away from “liberation” can blind a scholar to the fact that the concept of liberation itself is relative” (Pandya, 2012: 21). Mahmood’s (2002) conception of agency draws on Abu-Lughod’s (1990) conceptions of resistance, foregrounded in a Foucauldian notion of power, envisioning agency as not simply the resistance of norms but also the “multiple ways in which one ‘inhabits’ norms” (Mahmood, 2002: 15). Thus, she asserts, we must make a critical move to understand “agency” away from the “subordination/resistance” dichotomy (Mahmood, 2002). Understanding agency and subjectivity by taking into consideration the social positioning of culture that defines women’s possibilities for movement in Afghanistan is important in recognizing the agentic status of women in Afghanistan (Macleod, 1991).

The Language of “Human Rights”

After the entry of the United States into Afghanistan in 2001, major international organizations set up various funds geared towards creating employment opportunities for Afghan women and pushing them into the work force by advocating “women’s rights”, affecting women’s economic participation and mobility. But despite the withdrawal of American troops from

Afghanistan in 2014, resistance to Western-influenced “human rights” and “women’s rights” discourses and programs is still prevalent and unfortunately, has risen in recent years. In a study done by Nancy Hatch Dupree, Director of the Afghanistan Center at Kabul University, she found that most Afghans see the language of human rights with deep suspicion and as a way for the West to force its beliefs and ideologies on Afghanistan. And much of the behavior of extremists and the Taliban in the country to these Western ideals has been reactionary, particularly towards attempts to include women in the economic sphere – which is still a highly male-dominated space – causes “accusations of cultural imperialism or neoimperialism” (Hashim, 1999: 8). Thus, Afghan women have to negotiate this continuous “tug-of-war” between these two competing approaches that seek to govern women’s lives – international forces on the one hand, and hyper-conservative values of Afghan society on the other.

Methodology and Methods

This study is based on interviews carried out in 2015 with 20 businesswomen in Kabul, Afghanistan. The narrative analysis employed a qualitative research method that relied on in-depth interviews, coupled with participant observation of their daily lives, at home and in the workplace. A feminist epistemological framework informs this research, by placing the narratives of these businesswomen at the center of the discussion. The process undertaken echoes Sakai and Yasmeen (2016: 371), who argue that the importance of narratives in analyzing Muslim women’s experiences is crucial now more than ever as “Islam’s role in [our current] globalized world” shows that it has become “important to explore the extent to which Muslim women use or rely on narratives to portray their identities...” Of significance is the characterization of the interviewer as an ethnically South Asian, Muslim, western-raised woman which arguably cannot be abstracted from the research process. These businesswomen come from a variety of ethnic backgrounds, ages, and social classes. The personal stories of these women paint an interesting picture – of how despite competing narratives that directly impact and govern their lives, Afghan businesswomen are able to negotiate and navigate their entry into the economic sector by employing a moral framework that works to bridge the divide.

Out of the 20 interviews conducted, the focus of the present discussion centers on three individuals. These women exemplify women who are successfully running their businesses while negotiating the politics involved in doing so. While not all Afghan women have these same experiences or necessarily feel the same way as the women highlighted in this research, these stories nonetheless illustrate the importance of all the voices in the discussion on Afghan women. The experiences of these women are relayed in the following section.

Afghan Women: Negotiating Economic Participation

Roya is ethnically Tajik, a 36-year-old mother of three who started her own fabric shop in a busy market in the outskirts of Kabul. Her husband works in Iran as a labour migrant and visits Kabul frequently. As only one of two female shopkeepers in the bazaar, Roya has made her presence known in the male-dominated sphere where she has faced constant aggression from male shop owners for taking up a post that they believe would have been better suited for her eldest son who is only 13 years old. When we sat in her store one evening, Roya shared:

These men in the market are always looking at me like I am a dishonourable woman. But I don't care what they think. One time a man said I am becoming like a "Western woman". He cursed the Americans for bringing their ideology to our country. I mean, I do not agree with the West. I like my culture and religion, and I do not think that all women should have to work. But then look how men in this market treat me. The men in our country do not understand how to treat women. If they really understood Islam, they would not treat me like this.

Roya's comment is telling of the intricacies of these competing narratives. On the one hand, she is wary of the international human rights and women's rights discourses, and like many Afghans she holds a negative perception of the West, feeling that Western ideals about gender roles are imposed on her society. At the same time, she rejects the extremist and misconstrued readings of Islam that do not allow women to work. At one point in our conversation, a man walked into Roya's store and she hesitated to answer his question about one of the shirts on the wall. As soon as he left, Roya conveyed a sigh of relief and said:

This is the problem with working outside. I do not like to talk to men. But what can I do. Allah has given me this opportunity and it's something I have to do. I always say to myself, if Khadijah did it, I can as well.

Khadijah, the first wife of the Prophet Muhammad was a successful businesswoman and her example is well remembered and used as a reference to legitimize Roya's entry into the economic sector. Roya finds it difficult to negate the financial success of Khadija, and her example reminds Roya of this precedent of female entrepreneurship in Islam.

Khadijah is an example that Wajma also often cites. Wajma is a woman in her 50s, who has led a handicrafts store alongside her now deceased husband for the past 15 years. Though she now runs her business on a more managerial basis, she has been instrumental in speaking to mullahs and other religious leaders in her local neighbourhood on the importance of women's rights and education, which she is able to do with relative ease due to the respect she garners in her immediate community. Her primary goal for speaking on the importance of women's economic empowerment, education, and the value in allowing women to be more visible in the public sphere, she argues, comes from her innate belief that Islam had given rights to women long before a Western-influenced view on human rights. She mentioned that a few times, the mullahs and local men ask her why she is so interested in women's rights, what her purpose is for doing so, and specifically, on one occasion, "are the Americans influencing you?" At the time of the question, Wajma recalls to me, she was calm throughout the exchange as she had received this kind of aggression in the past, and her answer has always been the same. She said:

As you know, the reason we are not progressing as a country and society is because of the lack of understanding of Islam amongst our mullahs. The mullahs look suspiciously at us if we bring proof from the Qur'an and stories from the time of the Prophet of the powerful and successful Muslim female leaders we had in the past. They act as though what we are saying is a waste of time. But at the same time, I met some workers at Western NGOs and even they sometimes ask me why I keep using Islam to talk about education and women's rights. When these NGOs also tell me that I am wasting my time speaking to my local imams

about women right's in Islam, and they say it is not the right way to change mullahs' ideas about women's employment, it hurts me that they are not interested in what us Afghan women have to say. I want them to respect my beliefs, even if it is different from theirs. What they don't realize that Islam is the only way that men can be convinced and we should embrace the fact that in our country, Islam is the best thing we have. If they saw the real teachings of the religion, they would realize that Islam is not the issue, but the issue is that we are not using it effectively to fight for our rights.

Wajma has received backlash from local men with extremist views, who only see her as a product of Western imperialism. While on the other hand, the disinterest from international organizations based in Afghanistan on the importance of guaranteeing women's economic rights through an Islamic moral ideology, is what Wajma believes drives her to keep talking about these issues in her community. She relayed:

By the Grace of God, I have been working for many years, and I am proud to say that I got my inspiration to work and be a productive member of society from the Qur'an and the Sunnah [teachings of the Prophet Muhammad]. I believe Allah has given all of us women these rights. I want to share this knowledge with others. This is why I try my best to share my thoughts with my community. Even if it's just my neighbourhood, every little effort makes a big difference. I wish these mullahs would be open to hearing what we women have to say, then they could also help women fight for our rights and change the opinions of men in our country.

Rather than finding women's rights incompatible with Islam and the beliefs of the Afghan population, women like Wajma use the Qur'an and the teachings of the Prophet to legitimize their right to economic empowerment. This allows for a culturally sensitive approach that is less reactionary and more inclusive and understanding of the moral ethos within which the country works. Wajma's efforts to engage her local male leaders and share her knowledge and interest in women's education, economic participation, and the like, is an attempt to "incrementally normalize women's rights" through an acceptable existing framework (Hozyainoya, 2014: 4).

These incremental changes however, can only work when both sides – Western organizations and programs, as well as local religious leaders and mullahs – are willing to listen to women themselves, suggests Niloufar. Niloufar is a 29-year-old young entrepreneur who had worked with a leading international agency for two years before establishing her own business – a small business only recently established to sell homemade attire such as long dresses, skirts, and traditional wear, but also works towards providing opportunities to poor women, such as sewing and making handicrafts, thereby giving the women a sense of economic autonomy. As she sat in her home office one evening, she recalled:

I remember when I worked in the aid agency, it was very difficult for me sometimes because these international organizations always use concepts that mean nothing in this country. You cannot expect to change mindsets when you do not talk to the people in the language they understand – with words that they are familiar with. I tried many times to explain to them that they must change their

approach and speak to Afghans with knowledge of the local culture and religion. Many times, we got backlash from men in the communities we worked with for our programs, because the men felt like we were forcing their wives into the street by talking about women's economic opportunities. It was a matter of honour and pride for these men, and in the end, it negatively affected the women at home. Without important cultural awareness, international organizations cannot expect to bring change in Afghanistan. Both sides need to find a common language and ideology to work with, and most importantly, they must listen to what women want. I eventually left the organization because I did not agree with all of their approaches and ideologies for women's economic rights. So now I have started my own business – it is a small effort, but I think we, as women, can be the real change-makers in our society when we use the values and ideologies that work for us.

Conclusion

So, what do these stories really tell us about Afghan women's negotiations to participate in the economic sector? What emerges from the interviews is that in a context of opposing ideologies, they are able to legitimize their economic participation by employing Islamic discourses espoused through the Qur'an and teachings of the Prophet, and through an Islamic moral ethos, which plays a key role in moderating the two competing approaches that seek to govern their lives – international forces on the one hand, and hyper-conservative values of Afghan society on the other. Even within the male-dominated economic sphere with limited symbolic and material spaces for women, Afghan businesswomen successfully exert agency over their own experiences by using Islam.

This is what is evident with businesswomen like Roya, Wajma, and Niloufar. They have a unique awareness of the various – and at times contradictory morals – governing their society, and are able to employ an Islamic moral narrative to enable them to operate alongside their male counterparts in the economic sector. The experiences these businesswomen have are as a result of the fact that “economic empowerment is a higher priority for Afghan women than demanding human rights,” as argued by Huma Ahmed-Ghosh (2006). She further succinctly states that: “Afghan women want guaranteed rights, but they want those rights within Islam, rather than feeling forced on them as Western ideals.” Sitting at the crossroads of Western discourses of “women's rights” and extremist forces, Afghan businesswomen's narratives reveal a desire to frame their economic participation through the language, and moral and religious value-system that best articulates and informs their lives, which in these specific cases are through the Qur'an and teachings for the Prophet Muhammad. The implications of this on aid organizations and NGOs is crucial, as understanding this framework and employing it into programming can be useful for creating opportunities that can better improve Afghan women's lives by being attune to the Islamic identity that is very important to them. As Heather Odell (2016) writes: “...finding ways to use Islamic law and draw upon its credibility amongst Muslims to promote women's rights will hold more sway in Muslim communities than using a rights-based approach that is perceived as Western.”

The women who were interviewed all echoed similar sentiments though this is not necessarily reflective of the breadth and diversity of opinions of Afghan businesswomen across the country. It does, however, show the importance of employing a narrative analysis in exploring

the ways in which Muslim businesswomen in Afghanistan portray their lives through personal narratives and stories. These narratives further highlight Afghan women's agency in voicing the frameworks that define their experiences and identities. Because perhaps it is through increased dialogue and understanding of the value of different types of ideologies – in this case an Islamic one – that can help us to better appreciate this “difference” and ultimately recognize women's agency in a setting such as Afghanistan.

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