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Sara N. Amin
University of the South Pacific

Nazifa Alizada
University of Gothenburg

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We would like to recognize here the excellent work and contributions of the research assistants to this project who were key in the data collection, transcription, translation and contextualization of the data: Mursal Juya, Zahra Rostami, Zainab Hassanpoor, Razia Rezaie and Nargis Hajran. Thank you also to our research colleagues in the larger project Dr. Varuni Ganepola, Dr. Faheem Hussain and Md. Shahidulla Kaiser. Finally, we are grateful for the generous funding and support from the Ford Foundation and the Asian University for Women in facilitating this research work.

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Alternative Forms of Resistance: Afghan Women Negotiating for Change

By Sara N. Amin¹ and Nazifa Alizada²

Abstract

In this paper we examine how Afghan women resist, strategize and negotiate family and societal constraints to take advantage of the expanding education and employment opportunities in the post-Taliban era. We focus on how these women exercise agency and what resources they mobilize to maximize their opportunities in the face of potential constraints. We argue that to understand women's agency and changing gendered power relations in the family, it is crucial to examine every day individual behaviors that deviate from prescribed dominant gender behavior and infuse altered meanings to dominant gendering discourses. Our research highlights that gendered power is partial, interrupted by situated emotions and relationships. Afghan women employ a range of resistance methods to overcome constraints placed in their way, and we discuss them through three thematic frameworks of resistance in acts of submission, sacrifice and situated agreement, resistance in acts of open defiance, and resistance in acts of negotiation. The analyses is based on in-depth interviews with 64 women from 40 households in Kabul, and illustrate the significance of the family as a site in which gendered power and subordination are disrupted, fragmented, negotiated, and interdependent, challenging assumptions of the family as a site of monolithic oppressive power against women.

Keywords: Resistance, Women, Afghanistan, Power, Empowerment, Agency

Introduction

In Afghanistan interventions directed towards changing women's status has had a history of being top-down and centralized. Struggles of authority between tribal patriarchal power located in rural areas and Kabul have played out in attempts at centralization, consolidation of the state, and 'modernization' from the center, where women's rights were often a major point of contestation (Ahmed-Ghosh, 2003). Ganesh (2013) highlighted that since the 1940s,

women's status has been linked to modernity and progress on the one hand and to the preservation of culture and identity on the other. In parallel, another key factor

¹ Sara N. Amin is Lecturer and Discipline Coordinator of Sociology at The University of the South Pacific. Her research areas focus on the intersection of identity, power and resistance in the context of social change. She is currently working on research related to changing gender relations in the family in South Asia, as well as sites of gendered insecurity in the Pacific. Previously her research has examined contestations of faith and citizenship among Muslim communities in North America and impact of international labour migration from South Asia to the MENA region on shifting gender, national and religious identities.

² Nazifa Alizada studies Master's in Global Studies at the University of Gothenburg, Sweden. She has a Bachelor of Arts in Politics, Philosophy and Economics with double minors in Asian Studies and Gender Studies from Asian University for Women, Bangladesh. Nazifa has earlier worked at the Swedish Secretariat for Gender Research and as a Research Assistant for the Family Empowerment Study at AUW.

used to validate or delegitimise successive regimes has been the 'the' Islamic frame of reference, and both gender and Islam have consistently been used to gain or maintain political influence, especially in the politically crucial provinces (p.4).

While during the Taliban regime (1996-2001), girls' and women's rights and access to education and employment were severely restricted, often attached with violent sanctions, women resisted their oppression through the running of underground schools (Povey, 2003). In the post-Taliban regime (post-2001), the place of girls' education, women's employment opportunities and women's status in society have taken a central position in both international discourse and aid, as well as domestic politics and policies. At the same time, to what extent interventions related to women's empowerment in Afghanistan are embedded in imperialistic and colonial processes have been raised (Abu-Lughod, 2002; Barakat and Wardell, 2002).

Numerous studies have documented the rapid growth of girls enrolling in schools and while efforts at increasing women's labour force participation faces larger barriers and challenges, the female employment rate in Afghanistan has been increasing. While these changes vary by women's ethnic, religious and socio-economic positionalities (Kabeer and Khan, 2014), the continuation of political violence in the country lead to women/girls' security as a major barrier to education and employment for women more broadly (Alvi-Aziz 2008; Kabeer and Khan 2014).

In this paper, we focus on the ways women in Kabul are negotiating and resisting the constraints they face from within and/or outside the family to attempt to take advantage of expanding opportunities in education and employment in the post-Taliban era. The question we ask is: In the face of constraints that may limit women's options (such as lack of security, family structures and authority, gender norms about women's place) and what is expected of them in the family (norms about their actions, futures, relationships), what forms of resistance, strategies and resources do women in Afghanistan use to negotiate these constraints and exercise agency? Based on in-depth interviews with 64 women from 40 households in Kabul, this paper details the findings on how women and their families negotiate and strategize for expanding opportunities of education and employment and the implications of these strategies for our understanding of power, resistance and empowerment. In particular, we argue that changing gendered power relations in the family is constituted by multiple and continuous 'ordinary' acts that chip away at power and what is normative. Thinking of these ordinary acts as sites of resistance have been critiqued through ideas of 'false consciousness', self-interested bargaining, and internalization of oppressive power, all evaluated as preventing change and reinforcing the status quo (Baker, 2008; Gutmann, 1993). Nevertheless, theorization of empowerment, resistance and women's agency suggests that we need to expand our understanding of what constitutes as resistance, paying attention to its contextualized and situated nature, which also highlights the partial and fragmented nature of power (Abu-Lughod, 1990; Agarwal, 1997; Kabeer, 2005; Kandiyoti, 2005).

By documenting the range of ways in which Afghan women resist attempts to control women's choices and aspirations, as well as how they overcome barriers placed in their way, our research is important in the following ways. Firstly, our study provides a counternarrative to the problematic representation of Afghan women as somehow uniformly oppressed by patriarchal and religious power. There have been important instances of such studies already. For example, Povey (2003) documented the ways women in Kabul organized under the Taliban regime to provide each other with social support and created opportunities for girls' education in secret. Kabeer and Khan (2014) detailed how Hazara women from poor households evaluated their lived experience of violence, change and gender in varied ways, highlighting the diversity of views and aspirations

women had for their country. Billaud (2015) explores the cultural, bodily, emotional and discursive practices of Afghan women as sites in which the political category of woman is contested by women and other institutional actors, including the state, religious leaders, aid donors and civil society organizations. Continuing to expand this body of literature is important, especially because in both making visible these strategies and diversities and seeing these actions as resistance, people's individual and collective agency are reaffirmed. While psychological studies have highlighted the therapeutic effect on the individual of being able to see how one has resisted violence, domination, control (Wade, 1989), feminist and post-colonial studies have argued that continued representation of a group as powerless victims can lead to actions which further limit or remove agency, even with the best intentions (hooks, 1994).

Secondly, while there is a growing body of work on how specific interventions in the post-Taliban era are impacting on expanding Afghan women's "choices, power, options and control" (Malhotra, Sidney & Boender, 2002), there is much less discussion about how women access these types of interventions. Existing research on Afghanistan has documented the multiple reasons girls/women continue to experience challenges to start, continue and complete their education, with insecurity and safety of girls usually being the most common and dominant reasons (Jackson, 2011; Hunte, 2006). Barriers to employment are more structured by access to resources, as well as strong oppositional attitudes about not only women's place but also men's role (Amin, 2016; Ganesh, 2013; Echavez, 2010). Nevertheless, across different classes, ethnicities and age groups, girls and women are increasingly persisting in going to schools, literacy classes, universities and participating in paid employment. As such, it is important to ask, how do these women and girls do so? Our study looks at women's strategies to take advantage of (new/expanding) opportunities in education and employment. In the context of Afghanistan, as elsewhere, the family often remains the most immediate institution in which one's aspirations are regulated or facilitated. As such, this study helps us understand how women come 'out of the home', so to speak. This is important because by understanding the challenges within the family, as well as the strategies being used and the types of relationships and resources they draw on, we will be able to better design support systems that facilitate women's agency.

Finally, and related to both of the above points, our study provides insights into the partial, situational and relational aspects of empowerment processes, explores the interdependent and contingent aspects of gendered power, as well as examines the complexity of resistance. Critical analysis of interventions aiming to empower women have underscored that for the status of women to change, gendered relations of power need to change at both macro and micro-levels through which gendered power is organized (Cornwall, 2016). However, the study of efforts to enact such changes have primarily focused on *moments* of change—policies, laws, protest event, marriage, divorce, entry into work, etc., reflecting in many ways a static conceptualization of power and how power is disrupted and reconstituted. Yet, important examinations of social change have underscored that power structures are neither monolithic nor uncontested and that in fact "power is *constantly* being fractured by the struggles of the subordinate (Haynes and Prakash, 1992, p.2, emphasis added)". In this paper we present the struggles and negotiations of women over the course of their lives to enable their agency. By doing so, our analyses illustrate the significance of the family as a site in which gendered power and subordination are disrupted, fragmented, negotiated, and interdependent, challenging assumptions of the family as a site of monolithic oppressive power against women, as well as providing insights into the way gendered power is being resisted in urban Afghanistan.

Conceptualizing resistance

Theorization of resistance has focused on 1) organized and collective state-oriented contentious politics, including that of revolution, social movements, guerrilla and civil warfare (Skocpol, 1979; Tarrow, 2013); 2) dispersed resistance, which includes a) everyday resistance that may be clandestine, disguised or involve apparently trivial shifts in practices that may not be directly presented as political acts (Scott, 1989; Butler, 1995) and b) ‘the “extraordinary [glaringly disruptive] individual/small-scale eruptions of activity not coupled with communicative networks, collective identities or sustained collective actions (Lilja and Vinthange, 2018, p. 216)”. These strands of theorization point to the relationship between resistance and power, highlighting in particular that the type of resistance enacted, and its impact depends on the form of power it is embedded in. There have been multiple efforts to give structure to the concept of resistance, to ensure its relevance and value. Drawing on the research and debates in resistance studies, Hollander and Einwohner (2004) attempted to organize and operationalize resistance to capture its multidimensionality and complexity through a typology of resistance based on three dimensions: intention of actor, recognition by the target of the act, and recognition by observer of the act. This produced a classification of resistance into: overt resistance, covert resistance, unwitting resistance, target-defined resistance, externally-defined resistance, missed resistance, attempted resistance and non-resistance. Hollander and Einwohner’s (2004) typology brings into focus the roles of intention, perception and recognition in understanding resistance. More recent conceptualization of resistance also highlights the significance of affect, agency, temporalities, spaces and other forms of resistance in understanding resistance (Lilja and Vinthagen, 2018). Specifically, resistance can be claims against repressive (power-over), sovereign power, directed against claims of elites and experiences of subordination (Iñiguez de Heredia, 2017), what Lilaj and Vinthange (2018) call counter-repressive resistance. Alternatively, resistance can also be directed at discursive and normative power, embedded in identity, language, symbolism and cultural processes and meaning-making practices (Baaz et al, 2017; Bleike, 2000; Törnberg, 2013), taking the form of Foucault’s techniques of the self. Arguing with Butler (1995), Lilaj and Vinthange (2018) suggest this kind of productive resistance chips away at the dominant discourse, transforming it slowly through “reiteration, rearticulation, and repetition of the dominant discourse with a slightly different meaning (p. 220)”. In this understanding of resistance,

resistance occurs within dominant discourses and systems, yet simultaneously as acts against domination. Thus, this is resistance that attempts to be governed a little bit less or not quite in the same way by employing techniques of counter conduct, reverse discourse and techniques of the self as outlined by Foucault, in which somewhat other ways of being are carved out from the discursive material and subjectivities that are made available. As such, this form of resistance recreates social institutions, communities, political subjectivity, and subjugated knowledge in ways that utilize and open up cracks and undermine domination, yet without achieving complete liberation (Lilaj and Vinthange, 2018, p.221)

Butler (1995) argued that gendered power is re-produced through the repeated performance of gender and that when these repeated performances and self-representations are altered (even slightly), change becomes possible. Post-colonial feminist critiques of resistance, agency and patriarchal power in post-colonial societies point to the importance of dispersed resistance, and in particular productive resistance. For example, Ali (2014), in her analysis of agency and resistance

in Pakistan, suggests that "negotiating, provoking, avoiding and enduring (125)" are alternative ways to accommodate and subvert power dynamics in contexts of 'overwhelming' patriarchal power. Ali (2014) notes that it is important to examine resistance to gendered power through a frame that sees women's lives as an ongoing negotiation, narrated through apparent victories, contradictions, assertions, regrets and re-evaluations. The discussion in this paper draws on these alternative conceptions of resistance to understand women's efforts to carve out a space for themselves and their aspirations in the face of the constraints they are embedded in.

Methodology

The data in this paper comes from a comparative study on the impact of women's education and employment on gender relations in the Muslim families in Afghanistan, Bangladesh, India and Pakistan. The analysis in this paper are based on 64 semi-structured in-depth interviews with women who had educational and/or employment experiences in Kabul, Afghanistan. The respondents were recruited through purposive snowball sampling (Creswell, 2009): Women who had some experience of education and/or employment were identified and two other adult members of her family, usually one male and one female, were interviewed. Participants were targeted to create ethnic, class, age and family structure diversity, which are key characteristics associated with differentiating gender dynamics and attitudes in Afghanistan (Kabeer and Khan, 2014).

Interview questions included understanding female participants' life stories in terms of accessing education and employment, as well as the experiences, attitudes and perceptions of education, employment and gender relations. Most interviews were conducted in the participants' homes, on a one-on-one basis, lasting about 2 hours and conducted in *Dari* (an Afghan national language). In some instances, interviews were conducted in the presence of other family members, in part because it was difficult to obtain a private space for conversation. Interviews were digitally recorded, transcribed, and translated into English and analysed by thematic analysis. Thematic analysis started with the typology of resistance developed by Hollander and Einwohner (2004). Coding of the data along these types of resistance led to multiple reiterations of thematizing to integrate more contextualized understanding of resistance and power as argued by Ali (2014) and Lilaj and Vinthange (2018). This frame led to re-examination of acts of apparent 'agreement'/'submission' as sites in which resistance could be embedded, by paying particular attention to whether action narratives reflected cognitive awareness and critique of power and how each woman's experience can accommodate actions that reflect both 'agreement' and 'resistance.'

Five women and two men research assistants conducted in-depth interviews with 40 Muslim families in Kabul between June-August 2014. Guided by a feminist research praxis emphasizing building community in the act of learning and research (Allen, Walker and Webb, 2002), the in-depth interviews were conducted by women and men who came from the same communities as the respondents. This approach influenced the research assistants in seeing their communities as sources of knowledge and in the process, building new relationships with their communities. As part of this process, research assistants were also invited to continue in the process of analysis and publication, and this paper itself is the product of such collaboration, with one of the authors of this paper having being one of the Research Assistants in this project.

There are some other key characteristics of our sample to keep in mind: The median age in our sample is 25-34 years, with 60% of the women having secondary or higher education. Ethnically, 42% of the participants identify as Hazara, who constitute the third largest ethnic group

in the country, are known to have more gender egalitarian attitudes relative to other ethnic groups in Afghanistan and have a history of being politically and economically marginalized (Kabeer and Khan, 2014). Among the respondents, 65% of the women were married or widowed, and the others were unmarried.

Gendered power relations in families impacted on the recruitment process. For example, during the recruitment process, sometimes even after a woman had agreed to participate, a male member (usually the husband) would ask her to withdraw her consent. At other moments, women would defer their consent to male members in the family, in which case, sometimes, men would agree to participate but would not want 'their women' to participate. These kinds of responses were the most common among potential participants that identified as Pashtun and might explain the over-representation of Hazara women in our sample. As such, our analysis is based on families where women had either the decision-making power to participate in this study and/or were not stopped from doing so. In the next three sections, we share these women's efforts to expand their options, act on their choices, gain control over their bodies and aspirations and enhance their power over resources.

Resistance in Acts of Submission, Sacrifice and Situated Agreement

Not all women of course, strategize, disagree or resist all dominant gender norms. There are women whose stated attitudes, aspirations and their practices seem to suggest agreement with the dominant gender norms of their society. They may agree that it is the man's absolute right to control and decide for all members of the family, both as a question of honor and what God has ordained. Feminist theorization has had to struggle with why women (actively) comply with and support patriarchy. Internalization of oppression (Jackins, 1983; Rowlands, 1995; Pheterson, 1986), the hidden nature of oppression (Hartsock, 1983), and patriarchal bargains (Kandiyoti, 1988) are all important answers to this question. As such, feminist action has often focused on action that facilitate consciousness raising.

Importantly, many women, whose actions and ideas may be resistant to some dominant gender norms, may continue to agree with other aspects of behaviors and aspirations that align with dominant gender norms. One consistent area here is in relation to who is responsible for the home, child-care and keeping the family together. For many women, these remain the woman's duty. There are other women who agree with the man's absolute right to control and decide for all members of the family, both as a question of honor and what God has ordained. These women usually also support the use of any means necessary to do so, but even they hold ideas that are not fully in line with some fixed idea of a woman's place.

The story of Nargis helps us see the situated nature of what has been understood as 'submission' or 'agreement' with or internalization of dominant gender ideologies. Nargis is a Hazara woman in her mid-40s and a widow, who used to previously do tailoring from home and now relies on her son as the only income-earner in the family. She also has four daughters and another son who live with her. She is acutely aware that her daughters have no decision-making authority at home, even while her two sons and she, herself, do. She clearly stated that "a woman's primary duty is within the house and keeping the family united." She also shared that she could not go to school because it was a shame for a girl to attend school back in her time. She mentions that her eldest daughter was also deprived of education because she is a girl. As a mother, she had at first denied her daughter from going to school—because of both security issues and because she thought it was not right. However, she changed her mind seeing how much her daughter wanted

to go to school and she also regrets that she lost the opportunity herself and could not get education in earlier times. She is happy that education is more normalized for women now. While she says that women who go out without their husband's permission are cursed by God, she also hopes her daughters will become a doctor, teacher or midwife. The regret she expresses about not having had the opportunity to further her education, the joy that she expresses at both her daughters' own interests in education and their ability to change her mind, despite security concerns, the hopes she has for them that would take them away from a 'woman's place in the home'—these point to how (gendered) power is partial, interrupted by situated emotions and relationships.

Even when women's behaviors and actions seem to indicate an apparent agreement with normative gender behavior and practices and suggest there is no resistance, women's narratives about how they feel about what has happened can indicate resistance. In feminist therapy research and practice (Wade, 1997), as well as in understandings of cognitive dimensions of empowerment, it has been underscored, that this kind of awareness is important and can be understood as a form of resistance, a refusal to acknowledge that what 'is,' is not right. There is often an acute awareness in these women that 'this is not right, it is wrong'. Often, we can hear this kind of awareness in narratives about what would happen if they had chosen otherwise: Ruined lives, conflict, and violence. The power of "people saying stuff" (as several respondents said) is indicated in these narratives often, highlighting how self-regulation occurs in the face of social regulation. While self-regulating behavior has often been understood as abiding by power or seen through the frame of effective social control, feminist theorization on gender consciousness points to the cognitive importance of *awareness* of that self-regulation as a part of empowerment (Stromquist, 2002). In addition, Wade (1997) and Scott (1990) claim that 'pretending to agree' and 'abiding' to avoid harm, can be an important site of personal resistance because hiding one's actual thoughts and intentions is an act of setting up a barrier of the threatened/subordinate person. As Wade (1997) writes: "In the most extreme cases of violence, where the victim has every reason to believe she will be killed or seriously harmed in some other way for even the slightest opposition, the only possibility for the realization of resistance may be in the privacy afforded by the mind (p.30)."

We had respondents who sometimes related how they gave up a role-resistant opportunity (such as education, working, etc.) and abided by dominant norms and roles. They will indicate often that the action is intended with a perception and understanding that one is giving up something important to oneself because the choice to continue to do the thing (work, study, etc.) would 'cost' too much or there are no *real* options or alternatives. They carry these 'lost opportunities' stories with them, often in silence. However, their admiration for other women in their lives who are able to take advantage of these opportunities, speak to their own refusal to accept that what happened was right.

For example, one Shia Hazara woman in her 80s (Zainab) clearly stated that,

If a woman does not obey the husband, and is not acting according to God's will, [she] should be beaten up by husband... if a woman commits a sin, and the man proves the sin, he has the right to beat her up until she returns to the right/correct way. According to Islam, a woman should stay home and does not go out unless she remains hungry and is economically poor.

This same woman also says that "There is nothing better than school for girls and they should study until they die." She also admires her daughter-in-law, Farzana, who is 33 years old and got educated until class 9 in Iran and married at 15. She admires her because Farzana works as a

teacher at a school and takes care of the family. Farzana self-identifies as the head of the household since the husband (the son of Zainab) has gone to Iran for medical treatments; her mother-in-law (Zainab) supports Farzana as the head of the household, even while other sons live in the same house. Zainab is losing her eyesight and many of her comments indicate a feeling of helplessness, in part narrated through the fact that before passing away, her husband divided up the land between her sons and did not leave her anything. She says this with regret and hints of anger. She also notes how under her, her own daughters learned to read the Quran (but did not go to school since there were no schools then), but “everything was over after they got married,” showing again a cognitive awareness of the repressive system in which women live and the losses they create.

These women’s narratives are indicative of many women’s relationship to “what should be”, highlighting the situated nature of what one agrees with, when one resists, how one strategizes to exercise agency, and how one feels about how things are. We are not suggesting that cognitive awareness of oppression, admiration, feelings/framings of sacrifice, mental acts of resistance are effective in stopping violence and oppression. However, these are sites of fractures in what may seem like absolute or overwhelming (patriarchal) power. Recognizing these as fractures in power can have both explanatory and transformative implications for how more direct acts of resistance (persuasion, mobilization) can be successful.

Resistance in Acts of Open Defiance

Open defiance or overt resistance is the classical understanding of resistance, in which in the face of opposition, one directly confronts the opposing actor and persists in achieving one’s goals. As Scott (1990) noted, this is the least common form of resistance and this was the case also among our participants. Among women who did use this strategy, they were able to do this by finding alternative resources to be able to persist in the opposition. The policy focus on women’s empowerment through employment has primarily emphasized the role of financial autonomy or access to independent sources of income as the resource that facilitates open defiance. Whereas financial autonomy or access to independent source of income were an important resource, it seems also that relational resources in the form of emotional or motivational support from a family member was crucial. This type of relational sources has been less studied. Although there were many instances of the crucial support from the father or the sister or the son or the daughter, the most common place women found support (when they did) were in their mothers: Mothers who fought for their daughters’ education against banned schools during the Taliban era, mothers who opposed family and community criticisms and sustained verbal abuse to ensure that their daughters (and their sons) were able to go to school, choose their partner, pursue a specific area of interest, continue to work. Nevertheless, overt resistance usually also means bearing consequences to the resistance in the form of verbal or physical abuse from the opposing actor, working long hours, “bearing hunger and troubles in the village,” listening to continuous questioning of “where she goes, what she does, why she goes out on weekend, why is she not getting married (Rabia).”

The story of Zahra captures well the way this kind of overt resistance plays out. Zahra, a 45 year old Pashtun woman, who is a school principal, fought all her life against her husband and her in-laws to be able to work, educate her daughters and support at least one of her daughter to marry the person of her own choice (despite her husband’s opposition). She studied up to class 12 in Afghanistan and then moved to Moscow for 6 years for her bachelors and masters studies in pedagogy and literature before she got married, supported by her father (although opposed in part

by her mother, especially in relation to travelling abroad for education). She is the main income earner in the family and works as the principal of a government school which has more than 10,000 students and 250 staff. Her husband has a bachelor's degree and works on temporary part-time jobs with the Ministry of Transportation. They got married 24 years ago and have 6 children. When they got married, her in-law's family and her husband were strongly opposed to her working, despite the fact that she already had a Masters-level education. As a result, upon marriage, she initially did not work. However, while as a refugee in Peshwar (Pakistan), she started to work from home by sewing and tailoring clothes. She shared:

My mother may God bless her. Once or twice, she came to Pakistan and saw me pregnant. She got so angry and told me that I am educated; I am sitting beside Tandoor and make tandoor (a metaphor for her big stomach during pregnancy). Before you wore gloves and used paper before touching the doorknob. She got so angry that she didn't sit with me, she returned to Afghanistan so fast. The second good thing she did was that she took away my sewing machine telling that my back would bend. She told me to put all the pressure on my husband My mother told me I won't forgive you, considering the time I breastfed you, if you sit beside Tandoor. I haven't sent you to study and get your master's to sit beside Tandoor.

This led Zahra to “force her husband to let her work.” This seems to have been a key moment in her life, because after this she worked in NGOs, with prisons, travelled for work to other countries and so on. She also decided to stop wearing the veil despite both family and societal opposition, asking her husband, “You have seen me back in time without veil and in sleeveless dresses. So, why should I wear it now?” She clearly indicates that she has been able to take control of decisions in the family, support her daughters' education and encourage them to make their own decisions, all in the face of opposition from her husband and/or his family. She also notes that sometimes she has not been able to achieve what she wanted for her daughters—especially for her eldest daughter, who was married due to the father's decision and that stopped her education, despite the fact that the mother (Zahra) wanted her to not get married at that point. She continues to try to support this daughter and encourage her to persist.

Overt resistance is not without consequences. Zahra makes clear that none of this has been easy: “sometimes my husband heard some rumors about me outside [while I am working] and retold them all to me with violence” and that he has also threatened divorce. She also indicates that his violence has come in different forms, physical and verbal and that sometimes she has had to give in, because “sometimes he [my husband] imposes his decisions using violence. I have to endure, endure, and endure.” The consequences women live with point to the partial nature of what individual overt resistance can achieve, pointing to structured power that necessitate women to ‘endure, endure and endure’. To overcome such consequences of overt resistance, collective action remains crucial (Cornwall, 2016; Stromquist, 2015; Kabeer, 2008).

Relational resources can come outside of relationships of family and friendships. Take the story of Hakima. She was widowed during the Afghan Civil War and although poor, has managed to make ends meet by being a small poultry farmer based in her house. When her husband died, keeping the house they had was difficult since her in-laws wanted to take it away and tried to force her to leave without her children. It was only through the support of a religious cleric that she was able to keep the house and her children.

While Hakima referred to a specific cleric helping her, many of the women in our study pointed to how Islam supports gender equality, women's right to education and women's right to be free from violence. They referred to specific parts of the Quran, as well as what they have heard some religious cleric say on TV and radio. These aid women in asserting themselves and exercising their agency in their own homes. For example, Mursal, an uneducated 49 years old Shia Hazara woman, is another example of how women use religious resources to resist. Mursal and her family moved to Kabul right after the fall of the Taliban, and she started weaving carpet at home to support her family. Initially, the primary respondent wanted her husband to buy a piece of land but the husband had no money at hand. Mursal says that she went to the owner of the carpet workshop, for whom she weaved carpet for, and borrowed money. She bought land with the money, where she established a mini-carpet shop and hired seven employees. Using the income, she later bought land, helped her children, as well as established a bakery shop. She even paid her husbands' debts using the incomes. During the time she established the carpet shop and worked at the bakery, Mursal had to deal with her son's and husband's disagreements. Her son has told her, "You go and bring the fabric from a Pashtun [man]? Go bring it from somewhere women are in charge." Her husband told her that, "People tell me that your wife works, and you are using your wife's money for your livelihood." Mursal resisted her husband saying, "God has given me the ability to work. Why shouldn't I work? Why should I sleep in a corner of the house jobless?"

What do the role of relational resources in women's overt resistance imply about power and resisting and changing power structures? We would argue that the networks of support that women can draw on to defy constraints and oppression point to important point that Arendt (1970) has made regarding power: power requires continuous consent of the group on which power functions. When fathers, brothers, husbands, mothers, sisters, in-laws, clergy, workplace supervisors and colleagues and so on provide relational support to women who act in defiance of gendered power, they participate in refusing to provide consent to gendered power. In fact, that relational support is key in taking the first step to resist openly, especially in a context where the consequences of resistance are violent. Some of the work on men as allies in feminist work and the role of men in gender and development literature recognize the ways men can be part of resisting gendered power. Connell (2005) and Flood (2015) have argued for the need to mobilize men's power as gatekeepers for feminist action. This is also related to a more contemporary questioning of the place of religious leaders and institutions in feminist action (Kapur 2015; Mahmood, 2005). In South Asia, women's movements have often self-identified themselves in alliance with both secularism and in opposition to religion (Jeffrey and Basu, 1999). Kapur (2015) suggests that this has left religious institutions to speak for the place of women in religion without feminist voices and without feminist claims in the workings of mainstream/dominant religious power. In the same way that men's power as gatekeepers in patriarchal power can be potentially mobilized for changing gendered power, religious leaders, actors and spaces can be (and are) also mobilized. Kissane (2012) makes this argument for Afghanistan, where she points out that Islamic ideology is too important in people's lives to exclude it in process of advocating for changing women's situation. Both pro-feminist religious actors and religious interpretations, as well as women's efforts to raise questions and concerns that resist women's normative place in religious spaces are actual sources of women's efforts to overtly resist and exercise agency. Recognizing this helps to again identify fractures in the pillars that hold up patriarchal power and how these cracks can be widened.

Resistance in Acts of Negotiations

In between acts of resistance located in the cognitive and acts that are open acts of resistance, are the range of acts that involve negotiations. Negotiation as resistance can take many forms—creating distance, persuasion, compromises, accepting trade-offs. Women often use these different forms of negotiation throughout their lives in efforts to exercise their agency. We will describe these first here and then provide examples of these.

Women created distance between oneself and the source of opposition (family members) to one's aspirations (for oneself or for their children) by various means, some explicitly intended (e.g. gaining financial autonomy by working to pay for daughters' education, moving away from an extended family), others through taking advantage of a change or adapting to a disruption in the 'normal' (migration-induced shifts and separations, death). Creating distance is similar to the idea of 'exodus'/'exile' that Lilja and Vinthagen (2018) discuss as a technique of productive resistance acts. This strategy usually implicates that the individual sees her action as a form of resistance, but it may not necessarily be seen as resistance by the target or by others. Often, since moving away can be seen as a dramatic form of overt resistance and therefore can provoke severe sanctions, creating distance as a successful strategy requires being able to divert the responsibility for the move to things 'beyond one's control', e.g., the opportunities for the husband are there, not here; financially this is better for the family; or using an opportunity (of separation due to migration or death) that may not be of one's making to take control. It is also important to note that the struggles faced and opportunities of resistance available to accessing education/employment vary for Afghan women living in Afghanistan vs. those that move away, even if temporarily: migration(s) continue to be part of a strategy for Afghan families, and women as a way to exercise autonomy and assert agency (Amin, 2018). Because of the nature of the migration process, embedded in structures of (patriarchal) states and borders, migration as 'creating distance' has to usually be a negotiated process. Like overt resistance, different instances of creating distance, including migration, often requires access to resources and support from some member of the family. When using persuasion, women will work to reason with the opposing actor and apply specific rhetorical tools to help the opposing actor come on their side. This is a very important strategy for women facing dominant structures of opposition. If those that oppose her can come to see things differently, the subsequent actions and consequences related to education, employment, etc, can be easier to manage and the state of support is potentially less fragile. Women in our study used this strategy the most often. In other situations, women may choose a strategy of accommodation, where they abide by some gendered social norms to access other opportunities, again for themselves, or for others. This is a technique of prioritization of which norms one resists/battles for vs. which she can give ground up on so that she can continue to act on what is 'more important.'

Consider Afsoon's story. Afsoon is a Tajik-Pashtun woman in her 40s who married into an Uzbek-Pashtun family was prevented from getting any form of education due to opposition from her in-laws' family. She speaks of the lack of education as the biggest challenge in her life. She shared that she did not fight to get an education for herself because the in-law's family would judge her and her immediate family negatively. To keep the name of her immediate family, she accepted not to go to school in her in-law's house. However, she found a way to move her family away from the in-law's house in Quondoos and move to Kabul to live as a nuclear family, so that her daughters would not suffer the same fate

I have a father in law who is 100 years old, he let all his sons to study but is telling that for his daughters, it is enough to know their prayer and that is all they need. If I live with them, I live [economically] comfortably but if for example, he tells my daughter not to go to school and then we don't accept his says, then he is an elder, is our father and that can't be. So, in order neither to burn the Kebab nor the grill, we live here [in Kabul]. We said that it is my husband's job here and he works here, that is why we live here. This way, my father-in-law is not upset, and we can educate our daughters.

Sometimes the creation of distance as a strategy requires long-term planning and accommodating short-term control. For example, Shugla, a school student with uneducated parents, says that she has to be home before sunset regardless of where she is to avoid any sort of troubles. She accommodates this requirement because she sees her education as a means to be able to move on without her family in the future. Masooma, a 20 years old Pashtun girl, and her sister have been "escorted" by their brothers to school for four years, every day, as their father did not allow their schooling otherwise. Masooma's mother mentions that she felt humiliated by that because her own daughters are escorted by her son to the same school in which she is the principal. However, both mother and daughters accommodated and applied this strategy as a way for the daughters to receive education in the face of their father's opposition. While for Afsoon, Shugla and Masooma these strategies are intentional; for other women distance is produced through external factors, including threats of violence, forced migration to Pakistan and Iran disrupted dominant norms and practices of gender relations, including women being the sole-income earner.

Yet the consequences of these disruptions are riddled with tensions and ambiguities, reflective of fragmented power and resistance. One of our respondents, Darya, a 37 Hazara woman with seven children and a cook for her husband's school is illustrative of this. Darya was uneducated when she got married at age 14 and described herself as "not knowing anything." Her husband and brothers-in-law were politically active, supporting the Hazara opposition in the Afghan civil war and the Iranian government "was after my husband and if they found him, they would hang him." His activities threatened his and his family members' lives in Afghanistan and so they moved to Pakistan as refugees. As refugees, her husband and brothers-in-law could not move freely outside the home and work of their political activities and so Darya was the only bread winner for four years, where she did embroidery for an NGO at home and her income supported the education of her brothers-in-law and her children, as well the publication of her husband's political articles. While through all of this, she really wanted to start getting an education, there were many obstacles at home which prevented her from getting education. She says that her mother-in-law was alone while doing the housework because at that time her other two brother in laws were not married. Afterwards, her sister-in-law was also studying and so Darya continued to do the housework. Later, with the support of her husband and her brother in law, she got enrolled in the literacy program in school. But then, seeing that her children were not studying properly, her husband told her it is up to her whether she wants to continue her own education or choose to take care of the children. Darya also shared how her father-in-law always asked her, what if her children were kidnapped or fell down the balcony while she was at school. So, she says she compromised, accommodated and she accepted to "bear the problems" and left school for her daughters' and children's education. Upon moving back to Afghanistan, her husband started a school and she thought 'I can't teach like other family members, but I can help it grow in a different way, by cooking and serving the guests in the school'. Initially, it made her happy to help the

school and her husband but now, as the school has become established and financially more secure, she has been pushing her husband to separate school work from house work and she is hoping that from next year, it will be separated. While in Pakistan her income supported the whole family, now she mentions that the money she gets from her cooking is only good for her personal expenses and does not help the family in any way anymore. Her daughters are all in university or school now. Her children and her husband see her as a role model. She is proud of what she has done, the “freedom” she says she has, how her husband values her, but Darya also knows that she continues to carry the burden of the whole family and has regrets the lack of her own education.

That Darya and many women like her have taken on gender-disruptive roles in the context of migrations, political violence and economic insecurities point to how patriarchal power is fragmented by the political economy of people’s lives. While for some women and their families, these disruptions remain temporary, for others, it becomes transformative of the relationships and practices within the family. The disruptive power of migration in particular, to shifting gendered norms in the family has been documented in other research on Afghan women (Amin, 2018). However, the actions and practices that are potentially disruptive of patriarchal power, including women accessing economic power, are simultaneously reined in by the gendering of insecurity in the political economy of violence. In particular, for almost all the women in our study, the reality of both every day and political violence (in Afghanistan, but also in the camps in Pakistan and Iran) reinforces the rationalization of women being vulnerable without *mahram*, of women working outside the home subjecting women’s honor to be questioned, and of women failing to protect their children if they are not with them.

Persuasion techniques, often through the use of Islamic narratives (“Didn’t the prophet Muhammad say educate your daughters?”), “Didn’t Ayesha, the prophet’s wife run her own business?”), accommodations, including ‘concerns’ about honor (“I wear the hijab and maintain my modesty when I am outside, our honor is safe”), creating distance and adapting to disruptions are responses by women to strategize against the rationalization of their subordination. Women’s efforts to negotiate out of and through patriarchal constraints on their aspirations and actions through these techniques can have important spill-over effects that fracture the power structures that uphold these constraints. In persuasion, one starts creating and expanding networks of support; in strategizing through trade-offs, new resources may be accessed that can produce alternative ways of acting; in creating distance, new/modified models of relationships and families are produced; in adaptations to disruptions, new/modified models and experiences gain legitimacy.

Implications and Conclusions

This paper discussed the negotiations, strategies and resources that Afghan women are drawing on to expand women’s and girls’ options, act on their choices, gain control over their bodies and aspirations and enhance their power over resources and power to act. Despite the workings of gendered power in contexts of political and economic insecurity where women’s choices are constrained and limited, the women in our study resist their subordination through a myriad of acts that allow them to assert themselves. We argue that to understand both the possibility of change, as well as the actual processes by which gendered power is transformed, it is crucial to examine every day and extraordinary instances of individual behaviors that deviate from prescribed dominant gender behavior, that exit from participation (through symbolic and material mobility) in dominant gendered power structures, and that infuse new/altered meanings to dominant gendering discourses. While the relationship between such individual resistance and

social change (of gendered power) is inevitably unclear, situated and dynamic, it is possible that “on an aggregate level, it might have profound effects (Lilaj and Vinthange, 2018, p.224)”. This is potentially the case when resistance is enacted by individuals across many seemingly unconnected spaces, from household to household, creating large enough fractures in power to shift its practice and meaning. The place of ‘disruptive migrations’, produced through violent and economic insecurities may also have a powerful impact in enlarging the fractures, as migratory experiences and resources become discursive and material means to resist through negotiations and perhaps even open defiance.

In addition to possibility of change through accumulated every day and repeated resistance, we also think the stories and experiences of these women have two important implications for how we can enhance more collective overt efforts for changing gender relations in Afghanistan (and more broadly). Firstly, emotions of regret and admiration are political emotions. Both regret (of having not fought/resisted/challenged) and admiration (of those who do things differently) implicate working with discursive material of dominant norms and ideas and narrating and creating new possibilities. Working with women (and men) on examining the political implications of these emotions, of what they regret, who and what they admire has the ability to not only unearth analytically how power structures are experienced (and resisted), but also how they can be mobilized for changing behavior. Our observation from both the research presented in this paper, and our own personal experiences of working with women from South Asia, we have found that while ‘venting’, ‘bitching’, ‘criticizing’ are part of conversations women have to express their dissatisfaction, they also speak more often about regrets and in these regrets we see an opportunity not only for re-imagining new possibilities, but already the beginnings of change. We have not found feminist theorizations of regret and admiration as material for enacting change. However, Price (2017) argues that regret is a political emotion and Sweetman et al (2013) point to how admiration can regulate social hierarchy. These arguments suggest that there is room for such theorization.

Secondly, contrary to the image that ‘dispersed’ resistance as an idea raises of individuals acting alone, the stories of these women highlight that they are often working with others, including family members, religious clerics, co-workers. These women are ‘not going at it alone’ but both find and create support in relationships that are often represented as negative, constraining or problematic. Instead these women have had mothers, fathers, mother-in-laws, husbands, sons, religious clerics, police officers who have worked with them, enabled their choices, and changed their behaviors. This highlights the relational dimension of resistance and change. Murphy-Graham (2010) has argued that in addition increasing gender consciousness and material resources in supporting egalitarian gender relations, social interventions need to also enhance relational resources. Drawing on Benjamin and Sullivan (1999), Murphy-Graham defines relational resources as the “combination of interpersonal and emotional skills and resources (2010, p. 322)”. Relational resources are an important intermediary mechanism by which gender consciousness and structural changes are linked at the level of intimate and other important relationships. By enhancing the ability of women and men to communicate effectively with each other, change-directed negotiation can occur. Murphy-Graham (2010) points out that in many cases social interventions focus on gender consciousness and material resources, while ignoring the relational resources that are needed to enact change in home (or in other sites); moreover, social interventions focus on women’s skills and resources, while ignoring the relations in which they are embedded when they ‘leave’ the intervention. She suggests that it is crucial that relational resources need to be enhanced for both men and women.

We believe the effectiveness with which the Afghan women in our study are able to use persuasion and the significance of others' support (especially husbands, fathers or mothers) in overt acts of resistance point to the potential power of investing in expanding relational resources to facilitate larger change. We think that as such there is a need for research on how relational resources are being acquired, how they may be gendered and how they are utilized in the context of negotiating for change in the family and workplaces. In particular, this kind of research can support the development of programs and interventions that enhance relational resources in an explicit, culturally sensitive and politically specific way.

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