

THE CO-OPTION OF HUMAN RIGHTS AND FEMINIST RHETORIC TO JUSTIFY THE WAR ON TERROR

Abstract

In the aftermath of 9/11, political leaders frequently invoked the language of human rights in order to justify the 'War on Terror'. In justifying the intervention in Afghanistan George Bush and Tony Blair frequently cited the human rights abuses of the Taliban and invoked images of oppressed Afghan women. Long-standing feminist campaigns that had championed and lobbied on behalf of Afghan women suddenly found their literature and campaign cited by the White House as a justification for war.

This paper argues that such co-option of feminist and human rights rhetoric is ultimately dangerous for the human rights and, in particular, women's rights movements as it invokes lazy and dangerous stereotypes, which obscures and prevents full, accurate and considered analysis of the interests of civilians. By justifying war on the basis of upholding or establishing human rights, the UK and US reduce the opportunity for debate by presenting military intervention as humanitarian. As such, this paper will outline how the justifications for military strikes in Afghanistan relied on a familiar narrative in which western soldiers are the heroes sent to liberate local women who have been reduced to passive victims by wicked men.

Introduction

On 11th September 2001 the world watched in horror as terrorists attacked the World Trade Centre in New York after hijacking several civilian airplanes. This audacious attack was orchestrated by the terrorist organisation Al Qaeda and its leader Osama Bin Laden. Bin Laden, who was already wanted by the US for masterminding terrorist attacks on US embassies in Africa, was known to be sheltering in Afghanistan, where Al Qaeda operated its terrorist training camps.

In 2001 the UN Human Development Index listed Afghanistan as one of the poorest and least developed countries in the world. As well as drought and natural disasters, the country had suffered the devastation of almost 25 years of continued civil war, which had left the infrastructure virtually non-existent. Since 1996, most of the country had been controlled by a group known as the Taliban. The Taliban were radical Islamists who had imposed their

fundamental interpretation of sharia law. They had welcomed Bin Laden (who was a veteran of the Afghan war against the USSR) and had refused to turn him over to the US, despite UN resolutions calling for them to do so. In view of this, in the days and weeks after 9/11 the Bush Administration began making plans for military strikes against Afghanistan, ostensibly to destroy Al Qaeda's terrorist capabilities. This was to be the first strike in a global War on Terror in which the US warned that those who harboured terrorists would not be distinguished from the terrorists.¹

On 7th October 2001, George W. Bush announced that the US and its allies had commenced military action against both Al Qaeda and the Taliban. This action was codenamed Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF). It commenced with an aerial bombing campaign, primarily targeted at anti-aircraft sites, military headquarters, terrorist camps, airfields and concentrations of Taliban tanks. However, while there was little doubt in the intelligence community that Al Qaeda was responsible for 9/11, there was little evidence to suggest that the Taliban had supported the attack or even known that it was planned.² Therefore the Whitehouse began a campaign to justify the aerial strikes on Afghanistan by demonising the Taliban through highlighting their abuse of human rights.

1. Highlighting the Taliban's Abuse of Women

On the 17th November 2001, First Lady Laura Bush delivered the President's address to the nation. She told the American public that women in Afghanistan must not be forgotten and how the 'brutal oppression of women was a goal of the terrorists'. Similarly, in the UK Cherie Booth (wife of Prime Minister Tony Blair) made a speech highlighting the plight of Afghan women. In the days and weeks that followed, the US Government released a document titled 'The Taliban's War Against Women'.³ This document emphasised that the War on Terror was also in part, on behalf of women and children. Furthermore, when the invasion of Afghanistan was imminent, George W. Bush stated that 'the fights against terrorism are also a fight for the rights and dignity of women.'⁴

¹ George W. Bush, Address to the Nation in Light of the Terrorist Attacks of September 11, 11/9/01 available at <http://www.nationalcenter.org/BushGW91101Address.html>

² The Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States (9/11 Commission Report) p.251.

³ Report on the Taliban's War Against Women, (Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, United States of America, Washington D.C., Nov. 17, 2001), <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/c4804.htm>.

⁴ C.A. Stabile and D. Kumar, 'Unveiling imperialism: media, gender and the war on Afghanistan' 27 Media, Culture & Society 765.

Before 2001 very few people outside of the human rights movement were familiar with the Taliban.⁵ Now this fundamentalist organisation that had imposed an orthodox interpretation of sharia law on a poor and war torn country was front-page news. The Taliban were derided as barbarous medieval monsters that hated women almost as much as they hated the west. Their treatment of Afghan women was soon a prominent discussion in many newspapers and on numerous TV shows. Depictions of Afghan women forced to wear the all-encompassing burqa ran alongside accounts of woman and girls prevented from attending school, accessing healthcare or leaving their homes unaccompanied.

Legitimizing the War on Terror

However, according to Michael Ferguson, highlighting women's rights was merely another strategy for further emphasising the barbarous and evil nature of the Taliban and so legitimating the attacks on Afghanistan.

After September 11, the recognition of women's rights is figured as a sign of respect for women. Civilised nations and civilised peoples respect women, and therefore treat them with dignity and recognise their rights. The United States clearly respects women since it has for almost a century now recognised women's rights. Afghanistan by contrast did not respect women under Taliban rule. Accordingly, Afghanistan was uncivilised and needed to be brought under control and domesticated...Those who respect their women are civilised, those who do not are barbarians.⁶

Similarly, Sonali Kolhatkar argues that Afghan women were simply utilised as a visual justification for the military action.⁷ She notes how the Taliban's appalling treatment of women was sensationalised and seized on by the western media in order to further amplify the narrative. She describes how Karen Hughes, a counsellor to President Bush, designed a publicity campaign for the White House which widely publicised the suffering of Afghan women. Hughes remarked

⁵ In the international arena, the UN SC passed several resolutions requiring the Taliban to act against terrorism, while the UN Commission on Human Rights reported on the Taliban's violation of Human rights throughout the 1990's.

⁶ M.L. Ferguson, "'W' Stands for Women: Feminism and Security Rhetoric in the Post-9/11 Bush Administration' 1 Politics & Gender 9, p.21.

⁷ S. Kolhatkar and J. Ingalls, *Bleeding Afghanistan: Washington, warlords, and the propaganda of silence* (Seven Stories Press 2010).

that she highlighted the women's plight merely to demonstrate the 'cruel and evil nature of the people we were up against' rather than as a rallying call to improve the women's lives.⁸ This suggests that Afghan women were merely a useful tool to be commoditised in further justifying a forthcoming use of force of dubious legality. Indeed Stabile and Kumar argue that:

The sudden media focus on women's liberation in Afghanistan was little more than a cynical ploy- it served as one of the pillars on which elites sought to sell the war to the US public.⁹

In fact, many scholars have analysed the rhetoric that championed Afghan women's rights and they conclude that even in the early days of 2001, the Bush Administration was never serious about women's rights.¹⁰

2. Perceptions of the Taliban Prior to 9/11

NGO's such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch had been warning and campaigning against the strict conditions imposed on women in Afghanistan both during and prior to the Taliban reign. The Feminist Majority Foundation (FMF), a prominent US feminist activist organisation, had been campaigning against the human rights abuses of Afghan women since 1996, though it had received little support or publicity.

The Clinton Administration paid no heed to these warnings and did not appear unduly concerned with the Taliban. This was in part due to the proposals by the oil company Unocal to build an oil pipeline through Afghanistan.¹¹ In order for the pipeline proposal to be successful the company required stability and a single administration that could control Afghanistan in order to protect the pipeline (and the company's profits).¹²

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Stabile and Kumar, 'Unveiling imperialism: media, gender and the war on Afghanistan'.

¹⁰ See S. Faludi, *The terror dream: What 9/11 revealed about America* (Atlantic Books 2008) ;Kolhatkar and Ingalls, *Bleeding Afghanistan: Washington, warlords, and the propaganda of silence* ;J. Lorber, *Presidential Address: Heroes, Warriors, and Burqas: A Feminist Sociologist's Reflections on September 11* (Springer 2002) ;H. Charlesworth and C. Chinkin, 'Sex, gender, and September 11' 96 *The American Journal of International Law* 600 ;D.L. Cloud, "'To veil the threat of terror': Afghan women and the (clash of civilizations) in the imagery of the US war on terrorism' 90 *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 285 ;M. Cooke, 'Gender and September 11: A Roundtable: Saving Brown Women' 28 *Signs* 468 ;Ferguson, "'W" Stands for Women: Feminism and Security Rhetoric in the Post-9/11 Bush Administration'.

¹¹ N.M. Ahmed, 'America and the Taliban: From Co-operation to War' 4 *Global Dialogue* 77.

¹² George Monbiot, 'America's Pipe Dream' *The Guardian* (London, 23 October).

As such Aramco (the US oil consortium) lobbied the US government to support or at least acquiesce to the Taliban.¹³ An American diplomat was famously quoted as saying: ‘the Taliban will probably develop like the Saudis did. There will be Aramco, pipelines, an emir, no parliament and lots of Sharia law. We can live with that.’¹⁴ Indeed, US State Department spokesperson Glyn Davies explained that the United States found ‘nothing objectionable’ in the Taliban’s takeover of Kabul in 1996.¹⁵ While, in testimony before a Senate Foreign Relations subcommittee in April 1999, US Representative Dana Rohrabacher said that the Clinton administration had conducted a ‘covert policy’ of supporting the Taliban ‘on the assumption that the Taliban would bring stability to Afghanistan and permit the building of oil pipelines from Central Asia through Afghanistan to Pakistan’ even though it was ‘the most anti-Western, anti-female, anti-human rights regime in the world’.¹⁶ Therefore, it is true that prior to 9/11, the US was well aware of the plight of Afghan women and the human rights abuses perpetrated by the Taliban. However any concerns were overridden by economic and strategic interests in the oil pipeline.¹⁷ Therefore, it is suspicious that the US chose to highlight the human rights abuse of women in Afghanistan only when it was considering military action.

3. Co-opting Feminist and Human Rights Rhetoric

After 9/11 the FMF, alongside other feminist and women’s organisations, was invited to the White House to brief the Administration on its longstanding campaign against the Taliban’s treatment of women. Suddenly the situation in Afghanistan and the Taliban’s treatment of women was receiving huge media exposure. Ayotte and Husain write that:

In the aftermath of 9/11 the circulation of images of veiled females reached epic proportions. US media quickly capitalised on the veil as a casual and linguistic signifier of Afghan women’s oppression. Burqa-clad figures, potent political symbols of the ‘evil’ of the Taliban, were suddenly everywhere.¹⁸

¹³ Ahmed, ‘America and the Taliban: From Co-operation to War’.

¹⁴ A. Rashid, *Taliban: militant Islam, oil and fundamentalism in Central Asia* (Yale University Press 2010) p.201.

¹⁵ Glyn Davies, on 27 September 1996. See also N.M. Ahmed, ‘Our terrorists’ *New Internationalist*, available at <http://www.newint.org/features/2009/10/01/blowback-extended-version/> 17.

¹⁶ Statement of Congressman Dana Rohrabacher: US Policy Towards Afghanistan (1999).

¹⁷ Ahmed, ‘America and the Taliban: From Co-operation to War’.

¹⁸ K.J. Ayotte and M.E. Husain, ‘Securing Afghan women: Neocolonialism, epistemic violence, and the rhetoric of the veil’ *NWSA Journal* 112, p.117.

However, Kolhatkar describes this misplaced solidarity as exploitation. She criticises the media's fascination with faceless Afghan women and the proliferation of, what she dubs, the blue burqa books- accounts of the struggles of Afghan women, mostly written by American liberal feminists and predominantly featuring images of burqa-clad Afghan women on the front covers. These strategies inevitably meant that the burqa became the single measure and visual representation of Afghan women's situations. By failing to consider social realities, liberal feminists were increasingly criticised for focussing on the burqa as the sole measure of Afghan women's liberation.¹⁹ Meanwhile Afghan women reported that they faced much more pressing issues than the burqa and they were dismayed that it was the focus of so much attention.

Various commentaries on the plight of Afghan women focussed on the horror of wearing the burqa. It was described as a 'body bag for the living'²⁰ while the women wearing the garment were often described as 'ghosts'. Such descriptions served to reinforce a picture of Afghan women as silent, passive victims needing to be uncovered and liberated by the West and acted as a rallying call for the public to support OEF and the War on Terror.

In addition to this, Ayotte and Husain write that 'there seems to be considerable agreement that the burqa has become the universal symbol of women's oppression in Afghanistan'.²¹ However, they also note that, while such symbolism is easy to understand, Afghan women's oppression did not start with the Taliban or their imposition of the burqa and conclude that 'in many cases, representations of the burqa have come to stand in for all of the other violence done to Afghan women by an either visual or linguistic synecdoche.'²² Concurring with this Lila Abu-Lughod points out that Taliban did not invent the burqa and describes how it had in fact come to represent the symbolic separation of the male and female spheres of society.²³

Indeed the western media's obsession with the burqa chose to exclude its utilization by Afghan feminists to smuggle schoolbooks and cameras to women's groups. In fact many Afghan

¹⁹ Kolhatkar and Ingalls, *Bleeding Afghanistan: Washington, warlords, and the propaganda of silence*.

²⁰ Richard Lacayo, *About Face for Afghan Women* (2001).

²¹ Ayotte and Husain, 'Securing Afghan women: Neocolonialism, epistemic violence, and the rhetoric of the veil' p.115.

²² Ibid.

²³ L. Abu - Lughod, 'Do Muslim women really need saving? Anthropological reflections on cultural relativism and its others' 104 *American anthropologist* 783, p.785.

activists spoke of the burqa allowing them freedom to continue their work.²⁴ The burqa could be said to give Afghan women a level of protection and a veneer of respectability when in public. Indeed, Billaud writes that ‘for many women, the *chadari* increased their mobility while guaranteeing their anonymity, a precious asset in a volatile security environment.’²⁵ She also found that despite its intended purpose of preventing adultery- the burqa in fact was commonly known to be favoured by Kabul’s sex workers who could offer their services to men whilst appearing anonymous.²⁶ However western feminists and the western media tended to dismiss the idea that such appropriation of this garment could be in any way empowering or normalised.²⁷

4. The Danger in Allowing Feminist and Human Rights Rhetoric to be Co-opted

It is well documented that the hypocrisy of the colonial protectionist narrative was that while imperial nations encouraged European women to champion liberation for native women, there was little support to challenging patriarchy back home. Indeed, encouraging Victorian women to support their victimised sisters abroad was one way of deflecting attention from the inequality they faced at home.

A similar criticism has also been made of the feminist support for the War on Terror. While the Bush Administration utilised the language of feminism and human rights to sell the War on Terror, the preoccupation with Afghan women’s rights allowed it to encroach on women’s rights in domestic politics.²⁸ Sensationalised reports of women treated no better than slaves or animals make those feminists who would highlight gender inequality in the west appear trite and dogmatic. Therefore, appearing to support women’s liberation abroad allowed the administration to appear sympathetic to women while at the same time curtailing the rights and freedoms of women at home. Gallagher writes how ‘in the post 9/11 era, American women experienced severe cutbacks in unemployment compensation, disability insurance, health benefits, and access to reproductive choice.’²⁹

²⁴ Ayotte and Husain, ‘Securing Afghan women: Neocolonialism, epistemic violence, and the rhetoric of the veil’ p.117.

²⁵ J. Billaud, ‘Visible under the Veil: Dissimulation, performance and agency in an Islamic public space’ 11 *Journal of International Women’s Studies* 120.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ Ayotte and Husain, ‘Securing Afghan women: Neocolonialism, epistemic violence, and the rhetoric of the veil’, p.117.

²⁸ N. Gallagher, ‘Liberating Afghan Women’ 21 *American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences* 70.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

Furthermore, the US is also one of only a handful of states that are not party to the CEDAW. According to Koh, failure to ratify this treaty further demonstrates America's hypocrisy in purportedly championing women's rights.³⁰ A further criticism of the Bush administration's co-opting of feminism is that while the language of women's rights appeals to women at home and so creates support for the War on Terror, there is in fact little concern for the rights of Afghan women either.

Embedded Feminism

Krista Hunt refers to this co-opting of feminist discourse by the White House as 'embedded feminism'.³¹ It is so called because in the same way that the US Department of Defence promoted the use of embedded journalists to 'sell' the war in Iraq to the public, so to, she argues, did the Bush Administration embed feminism in the war in Afghanistan to favourably shape public opinion and garner support.³² In supporting this articulation Hunt points to numerous historical examples of embedded feminism, specifically in nationalist or colonialist projects. Throughout history she claims feminists have been encouraged to support such militaristic projects with the assurance that women's liberation would flow once the project had been realised. However, as is the case with Afghanistan, 'feminists and their co-opted discourses end up serving the political project in which they are embedded rather than furthering women's rights.'³³ Instead the rhetoric of women's oppression and the appeal of liberation were utilised to justify the colonial project rather than further the struggle for women's rights. As such, western feminists 'focussed on the abuses of Other women by Other men, instead of on patriarchal western societies.'³⁴

Furthermore, as well as hindering the feminist cause in the west, embedded feminism also created a climate of resistance in colonised countries to women's rights' discourses which were perceived as imperial and western. The same was true in Afghanistan where the US intervention 'fuelled resentment, leading to the radicalisation and increased recruitment by politico-religious extremists'³⁵ that in turn impacted negatively on women's rights. This backlash against such

³⁰ H.H. Koh, 'Why America Should Ratify the Women's Rights Treaty (CEDAW)' 34 Case W Res J Int'l L 263.

³¹ Krista Hunt, 'Embedded Feminism' and the War on Terror' in K. Hunt and K. Rygiel (eds), *(En) gendering the war on terror: war stories and camouflaged politics* (Ashgate Publishing 2006), p.60.

³² *Ibid*, p.52.

³³ *Ibid*, p.53.

³⁴ *Ibid*, p.54.

³⁵ Women Living Under Muslim Laws (WLUML) (2002) Statement on the first Anniversary of September 11th, <http://www.wluml.org/node/920>.

neo-imperialist projects means that all western/American imports are at risk of rejection by conservatives who would see them as threatening local cultures and traditions, with women's rights being seen as 'a western attempt to undermine this Muslim country.'³⁶ Since the Bush Administration was particularly vocal about women's rights, it is understandable that human rights rhetoric then came to be viewed as hallmark of western imperialism. As such, Hunt argues that 'the War on Terror has created an environment in which those who oppose women's rights are strengthened.'³⁷

Furthermore, the co-option of feminist rhetoric is open to further accusations of hypocrisy as it is frequently noted that the west only appears to support the liberation of some oppressed women. Therefore while women in Afghanistan and those in Iran are considered victims of tyrannical regimes, western governments (particularly the US) are less vocal about the oppression of women in states such as Saudi Arabia or Pakistan.

Conclusion

The US and its coalition of the willing were well aware of the human rights situation in Afghanistan throughout the 1990s but there was little concern or attention given to actually improving the lives of the Afghan people. It was only after 9/11 when military action against Afghanistan was in the US's interest that the situation received any attention. The human rights abuses were highlighted and used as evidence to demonise the Taliban and therefore generate support for the War on Terror and make military strikes against Afghanistan appear justified. However there was little evidence of any real attempt to actually improve the lives of Afghan women. Instead it was the very image of Afghan women as helpless victims that would motivate people to support the War on Terror without any in depth analysis of the situation.

This approach was ultimately so successful that even those who opposed Operation Enduring Freedom on the basis that it would halt the supply of humanitarian aid to hundreds of thousands of sick and hungry Afghans, many of whom were children, were denounced. Evidently there was to be no other narrative than the one offered by the Bush Administration. 'When some of those concerned protested this outcome, they were chided for being soft on the Taliban. It seemed like

³⁶ K. Hunt and K. Rygiel, (*En*) *gendering the war on terror: war stories and camouflaged politics* (Ashgate Pub Co 2006), p.63.

³⁷ *Ibid*, p.65.

any attempt to widen the discussion beyond the admittedly brutal practices of the Taliban was doomed to be labelled as antithetical to women's interests.'³⁸

Therefore, the problem with this utilisation of human rights rhetoric is that it furthers support for military strikes by removing the need for any analysis of the wider advantages and disadvantages of such action. In the case of OEF and indeed the wider War on Terror, the opportunity for debate was lost because people were invited to see military action as a way to improve human rights and any discussion of the legalities or wider social issues were deemed redundant.

A further problem with this approach is that it disavows the language of human rights of any vestige of impartiality or universalism and instead attaches it to western military campaigns such as the War on Terror. The War on Terror came to be viewed with suspicion and as an imperialist campaign. Consequently, human rights rhetoric, particularly that which advocated women's rights, was rejected as western dogma. This in turn allows questionable regimes to further entrench human rights abuses in the name of upholding nationalism, culture or religion.

Finally, such co-option of human rights rhetoric to justify military strikes has allowed the west to view itself as heroic and make militarism appear benign. By reducing the argument for military action to a series of highly emotive images representing extreme human rights abuse, the west positions itself as the natural saviour of women. Again, this is dangerous because it reduces the scope for criticism of such military actions and diminishes any need for wider analysis. It also assumes that local people will be and continue to be grateful and welcoming to the western military.

³⁸ C. Hirschkind and S. Mahmood, 'Feminism, the Taliban, and politics of counter-insurgency' 75 *Anthropological Quarterly* 339 p.346.

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